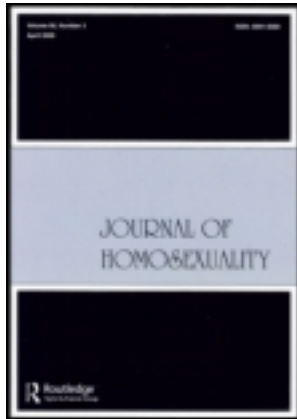


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### Will the Real Robert Neville Please, Come Out? Vampirism, the Ethics of Queer Monstrosity, and Capitalism in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*?

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## **Will the Real Robert Neville Please, Come Out? Vampirism, the Ethics of Queer Monstrosity, and Capitalism in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*?**

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*In this article, I argue that Richard Matheson's (1954) vampire novella, I Am Legend, encodes the protagonist's, Robert Neville, traumatic recognition of his queer sexuality in its monstrosity (the unspeakability of male penetrability). Neville's identification with and desire for his undead neighbor, Ben Cortman, are symbolically codified through three different registers: intertextual references to vampiric conventions and codes, the semiotics of queer subculture, and a structure of doubling that links Neville to the queer vampire. Although Neville avoids encountering his unspeakable queer desire, which could be represented only at the level of the Lacanian Real, he must still confront Cortman's obsessive exhortations for him to come out. Only when he symbolically codifies his abnormality in its own monstrosity, by viewing himself through mutant vampires' eyes, can Neville reconfigure the ethical relationship between self and other, humans and mutant humans-vampires. However progressive Matheson's novella is in its advocacy of minority sexual rights, it still renders capitalism's problematic relationship with queer subjectivity invisible. Although capitalism overdetermines every aspect of the social field and makes Neville's daily life possible in its surplus enjoyment, the fundamental antagonism (class struggle) in capitalism is obscured by the assertion of identity politics.*

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The vampire was real. It was only that his true story had never been told.  
(Matheson, 1954, p. 88)

The critical reception of Richard Matheson's (1954) suburban, supernatural horror novel, *I Am Legend*, has centered on the speculative apocalyptic last-man-on-earth topos. The protagonist, Robert Neville, is the sole survivor of the bio-catastrophe that produced a cataclysmic vampire pandemic, which has turned many humans into undead vampires and left many others contaminated with the vampire virus, now under control with pills. After three years of the catastrophe, to which he lost his wife and daughter, the military veteran Neville not only struggles for survival against predatory vampires, but, more importantly, struggles with his loss of companionship and sociality in a world of existential solitude and sexual frustration. Critics such as Bernice Murphy (2009), for example, read Neville's sexual frustration and desire for sociality in the context of the crisis of postwar suburban masculinity in the 1950s, with its subtext of racial anxieties and cold war politics. Murphy argues that this narrative is a horrific parody of typical middle-class male experience of self-imposed barricade in a fortified suburban home, remarking that "one need not be a Freudian to see something in the fact that a protagonist so desperate for *female* company spends much of his day at a lathe sharpening stakes" (p. 30; italics added). Although Murphy is correct about Neville's misogyny and matricidal tendencies (but for different reasons that will soon become obvious), she can only frame her analysis of Neville's crisis of postwar suburban masculinity within dominant heterosexual gender ideology and heteronormative politics that identify his object of desire simply as female.

Neville's articulation of his own sexuality and the gender as well as the sex of his object of desire is, nonetheless, far more fluid and polymorphous than critics such as Murphy (2009) wish to admit. When he was trying to gain the stray dog's trust, for example, Neville reflects on his burning desire for company, stating: "For always, in spite of reason, he had clung to the hope that someday he would find someone *like himself*—a *man*, a woman, a child, *it didn't matter*" (Matheson, 1954, p. 101; italics added). Matheson's language here is ambiguously coded to surpass and subvert the heteronormative ideals of suburban masculinity: the phrase "like himself" could mean, among other things, a man like himself or a human being like himself, rendering, thus, the coordinates of his masculinity in their oscillation between identification and desire on a continuum of desire for other men. However hard he tries to pin down the precise location of his desire on the continuum

or dissimulate the object of his queer sexual desire, the fact that he identifies man as the primary object of sociality in his short list clears a space for reconfiguring his sexuality within the parameters of same-sex bonding and homoerotic desire.

In this article, I argue that Neville's masculinity crisis, his emergent ambiguous sexuality along this continuum of desire for and identification with other men, should be read more specifically as the crisis of post-war suburban queer subjectivity, which functions as a site for interrogating the abjectification that constitutes the heterosexual-queer and the normal-abnormal binaries. With the increasing politicization of gay sexuality during the Cold War and McCarthyism, as will be demonstrated below, conformity to middle-class heteronormative ideals was standardized, policed, and reinforced, in a way that completely foreclosed the fulfillment of the homoerotic desires of a seemingly heterosexual man like Neville. Especially, for a military veteran like Neville, this crisis becomes imbued with national significance, exacerbating the social management and surveillance of his sexuality, ending up in his execution.

This violent closure, I argue, cannot be attributed simply, as Murphy (2009) suggests, to his realization that in his psychopathic impulses he is the source of terror for the mutant humans-vampires, but to his sudden recognition of his own "abnormality" (Matheson, 1954, p. 169)—that he is the queer subject in the newly established norms of the mutant human-vampire society. It is not simply that the vampires view him now as an other, but that he begins to see himself at that point through their eyes as an other—that is, he internalizes their (mis)representation of his otherness as an existential threat to their being. Indeed, the true horror does not lie outside in the world of others, normal or monstrous, because for Neville "the word 'horror' has become obsolete," adding that "[a] surfeiting of terror soon made terror a cliché" (Matheson, p. 154, pp. 145–146). Rather, the terror exists somewhere else, inside.<sup>1</sup> In the context of vampire fiction, in particular, the fluidity of male-male desire, "the constant fuzziness of the boundaries separating the homosocial from the homosexual, the homophobic from the homoerotic" (Gelder, 1994, p. 60), has been recognized as perhaps the true origin of not simply anxiety, as Gelder argues after Copjec (1991), but its ultimate source of terror.

In what follows, I will, thus, first, examine Neville's homosocial bonds with and homoerotic desire for the undead Cortman in relation to what Sedgwick (1990) calls the homosocial continuum and "male homosexual panic" (p. 19). Matheson encodes Neville's sexuality as queer, by constructing the relationship between Neville and Cortman within the homosociality-homoeroticism continuum, which oscillates between structures of identification and forms of male bonding that are usually mediated through the presence, or absence, of women, on the one hand, and erotic desire for other men, on the other. Neville's ambiguous positionality along

the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum, I will, thus, demonstrate, are symbolically codified through three different registers in the text: a system of intertextuality, the semiotics of queer subculture, and a structure of doubling that links the alleged heterosexual male to the queer vampire. To this extent, Matheson, I claim, invokes vampirism as a metaphor to embody the unspeakability of forbidden queer sexual desire (the displacement of male penetrability in anal sex on the vampire's potential penetration of Neville's body by the fangs and the bacteria). Moreover, I identify Neville's ambiguous location within the rupture in the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum as a symptom of the sociohistorical tension between two discrepant contemporary discourses, namely, the medical pathologization of queer sexuality as a disease or sickness and the multicultural recognition of the status of gays and lesbians as an oppressed minority entitled to equal rights under the law. Bio-politics, that is, emerges as the site where queer sexuality is negotiated, contested, and disavowed, even though Neville tries his best to repress his queer desire.

Second, I will demonstrate that, however hard Neville tries to de-scribe his queer sexuality, he ultimately comes to recognize it in its monstrosity. As he barricades himself in his fortified suburban home, which serves as a metaphor for the closet, which he calls "a shell" (Matheson, 1954, p. 19), Neville must still confront the obsessive exhortations of Ben Cortman, who compulsively returns to haunt Neville, urging him to come out. Cortman's incessant circumnavigation around Neville's home, or closet, compels the latter to recognize his homoerotic desire as that which cannot be named or refuses to be represented—or to use Lacan's term, the Real. Reinscribing his homoerotic desire within the register of the Real allows Neville not only to see his own monstrosity the way the mutant vampires see him, but also to reconfigure the ethical relationship between self and other, humans and mutant humans-vampires.

Circling back to the bio-political dimension in the production of queer sexuality, I will finally argue that a critical understanding of bio-politics in Matheson's (1954) *I Am Legend* requires an interrogation of the relationship between queer subjectivity and capitalism. Although capitalism overdetermines every aspect of the social field and makes Neville's daily life possible in its surplus enjoyment, capitalism remains invisible in this text. Matheson's advocacy of a minority status for queer subjects within the multiculturalist politics of difference, mutual recognition, and respect, therefore, seems to obscure the ways in which capitalism has not only historically been antagonistic and hostile towards sexual minorities, but it has also defined its relation to sexual difference within capitalist modes of commodification and exploitation. While as a work of fantasy, it resolves the bio-political contradictions through the containment of Neville and the undead vampires, including Cortman, the novella still displaces the antagonism (class struggle) underpinning capitalist relations of production. As such, the novella denies

the specific conditions of its production, generating gaps, silences, and omissions that it fails to render visible. In this Marxist reading, the absent presence of capitalism constitutes the main gap of the text, its repressed unconscious, or as Macherey (1978) says, what the text “does not say,” and even what he thinks is not as important namely, “the careless notation what [the text] refuses to say” (p. 87).

### ENCODING QUEER DESIRE: VAMPIRIC INTERTEXTUALITY, PATHOLOGIZATION, AND MINORITY RIGHTS

Men are of two kinds, and he/was of the kind I'd like to be. Edgar Guest,  
*A Real Man* (Ward, 2008, p. 16)

In *Between Men*, Sedgwick (1985) argues that male homosocial desire, including a wide range of male bonding experiences such as “friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homo-sexuality” (p. 1), constitutes a contradictory site that codifies the social bonds between men in Western culture as simultaneously the most compulsory and the most prohibited. Between the middle of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, according to Sedgwick, queer sexuality underwent a process of redefinition, transposing it from the realm of theology to the domain of secular culture. In response to these modern changes that inscribed the threat of potential queer sexuality and desire at the center of the heteronormative power structure, heterosexual or closeted gay men developed what she refers to as “male homosexual panic,” which she views as “the most private and psychologized form [of reaction] in which many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail” (p. 89). Sedgwick, thus, maintains that this queer panic informs and shapes the entire range of male homosocial bonds that underwrite the totality of the heteronormative social structure, because, unlike women’s love for other women, men’s love and desire for other men is socially constructed as incongruent and discontinuous with men’s promotion of the interests of men. In what follows, I will discuss three strategies by which Matheson (1954) depicts Neville’s ambiguous positionality along the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum, which Sedgwick locates at the center of the Western male experience, in his relationship with his former Jewish neighbor turned undead vampire, Ben Cortman. These strategies include intertextual references to the conventions of vampire literature, the semiotics of queer subculture, and doubling techniques.

Before I elucidate these strategies, however, I’d like to point out that Matheson’s (1954) ambivalent codification of Neville’s polymorphous and fluid sexuality should not come as a surprise. After all, it was only six years prior to the publication of his novella that Alfred Kinsey released his



controversial study on male sexuality. In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948/1975) maintained not only that men's sexual practices are incongruent with the culturally sanctioned sexual mores in the United States, but also that they are so diverse that they cannot be reduced to the heterosexuality-queer sexuality dichotomy. Instead, they argued that men's quotidian sexuality constitutes a continuum from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive queer sexuality, along a scale that emphasized the wide range and fluidity of sexual behavior. Kinsey and his colleagues, thus, wrote:

Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex. (p. 639)

Disavowing the pathologization of homoeroticism in homophobic psychoanalytic and legalistic discourses, Kinsey et al. (1948/1975) called for the tolerance of and compassion for sexual difference, asserting that queers were indistinguishable from heterosexuals and could easily pass for one. Despite their good intentions, the authors of the Kinsey report may only have further fueled the hysteria over gay sexuality in the public imagination and state discourse. Drawing on the Kinsey report, for example, the Senate Investigations Subcommittee of the Committee on Expenditure in the Executive Department referred to gays and lesbians as "diseased individuals," who "were everywhere and, worse yet, [who] could not be detected by any physical features" (Engel, 2002, p. 381).

One of the major strategies Matheson (1954) deploys in depicting Neville's polymorphous sexuality is his invocation of vampirism as a metaphor to embody the unspeakability of forbidden queer sexual desire. Neville's military past constitutes one of the most important missing links between vampirism and queer sexuality. As Neville explains to Ruth, the mutant human who was sent to spy on him, he was bitten by a bat while he was stationed in Panama during the war, and he suspects that the bat "had previously encountered a true vampire and acquired the *vampiris* germ" (Matheson, 1954, p. 144). As historians of sexuality have shown, wars, including World War II, which ended six years prior to the publication of Matheson's novella, afforded many men the opportunity to discover their own queer sexuality, by "removing them from the supervision of their families and small-town neighborhoods and placing them in a single-sex environment," and consequently increasing the "chances that they would encounter self-identified gay men and explore their homosexual

interests" (Chauncey, 1994, p. 145). Although his presumably first homoerotic encounter was mediated, not a direct experience, it does not alter the fact that Neville is now infected. To this extent, Matheson's text as a product of its time codifies homoeroticism in the rhetoric of epidemiology and pathology, rendering homoeroticism as a virus or a disease.

Underlying Matheson's (1954) representation of vampirism, here, is the prevailing consensus in the medical and psychiatric institutions of the time that to be gay meant to be sick, maladjusted, mentally ill, or emotionally disturbed. In its first official catalogue of mental disorders of 1952, in fact, the American Psychiatric Association classified queer sexuality among the "sociopathic personality disturbances" (Miller, 1995, p. 249). The medical pathologization of queer sexuality as a disease or sickness exists in tension with Matheson's appeal for gay rights within the multicultural recognition of the status of gays and lesbians as an oppressed minority entitled to equal rights. Early on in the novella, as the vampires wait for him outside, Neville sits in his daughter Kathy's room, drinking whiskey, listening to Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 2, "The Age of Anxiety," and thinking of Cortman. In his inebriation, Neville thinks out loud:

Friends, I come before you to discuss the vampire: a minority element if there ever was one, and there was one.

But to concision: I will sketch out the basis for my thesis . . . : Vampires are prejudiced against.

The keynote of minority prejudice is this: They are loathed because they are feared . . .

At one time . . . the vampire's power was great, the fear of him tremendous. He was anathema and still remains anathema.

Society hates him without ration.

But are his needs any more shocking than the needs of other animals and men? Are his deeds more outrageous than the deeds of the parent who drained the spirit from his child? . . .

Really, now, search your soul; love-is the vampire so bad? *All he does is drink blood*. Why, then, this unkind prejudice, this thoughtless bias? Why cannot the vampire live where he chooses? Why must he seek out *hiding places* where none can find him out? Why do you wish him destroyed?

Ah, see, you have turned the poor guileless innocent into a haunted animal. He has no means of support, no measures for proper education, he has not the voting franchise. No wonder he is compelled to seek out a *predatory nocturnal existence*.

Robert Neville grunted a surly grunt. Sure, sure, he thought, but would you let your sister marry one? (Matheson, 1954, pp. 31–32; italics added)



What is striking about this passage is the ways in which it subtly, maybe unconsciously, draws on a hallucinatory assemblage or collage of major discursive formations such as anti-Semitism (after all, Cortman is Jewish), residential segregation, the franchise, and miscegenation that have emerged in the history of the struggle for minority civil rights and liberties in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, there are specific textual, genre, and contextual clues that confirm the link between the vampire and the identity of the minority in question as queer, while at the same time masking or concealing that link. First, it is important to recall the context of the scene in which Neville addresses his imaginary friends: He is listening “The Age of Anxiety” and thinking of Cortman. Based on W. H. Auden’s poem of the same name, which deals with the search for love and identity in a world of loneliness and rootlessness, or as Randall Jarell (2005) states, a “world in which everything is dying away into a senseless dream” (p. 62), the symphony is thematically connected to Bernstein’s gay escapades before and after his marriage to Felicia Montealegre; these escapades continued even after her death. Understanding Neville’s ramblings in relation to Auden’s poem foregrounds the question of Neville’s hidden motives—his quest for both a new identity as he reconstructs his subject position as a bachelor and for alternative forms of love and desire outside the box of heteronormativity. Indeed, the passage reads as a self-addressed monologue in which Neville tries to sublimate his homoerotic panic toward Cortman, by repackaging it as a sympathetic political defense of his right to exist.

Second, the passage encodes various literary tropes, signifiers, and conventions that exclusively link vampires to queer sexuality: In the economy of fluid exchange that underwrites vampire fiction, for example, blood stands for semen. (On the link between blood and semen, see Stevenson (1988); see Craft (1997) for one of the most influential discussions of queer vampirism.

Moreover, the persecution of these vampires forces them to seek out hiding places, not simply segregated neighborhoods or ghettos, but closets. Last, the vampire’s ontology, its nocturnal existence, has been intimately connected with queer modes of living.

Finally, the passage attributes prejudice against the vampire to society’s irrational fear and loathing. Read in the context of Cold War politics and the homo-hunting of passable “pinko fags” under McCarthyism, it is not difficult to see why gays and lesbians can be seen as the primary target of the irrational fascist scapegoating in that era. Indeed, the consolidation of Cold War politics and the institutionalization of McCarthyism produced a climate of paranoia in which gays and lesbians were perceived as subversive and anti-American fellow travelers. As such, a direct link was established in public discourse between the homosexual menace and the Communist threat, prompting the federal government to launch its brutal campaign of homo-hunting and scapegoating of pinko fags. In an interview with the *New York Post* in December 1950, for example, Republican Senator Kenneth Wherry

of Nebraska maintained that gays can hardly be separated from subversives, adding that “they are all tied up together” (as cited in Johnson, 2004, pp. 37–38). As Robert Corber (1997) convincingly argues, queer sexuality was constructed as a national security risk, because it was “understood as a form of psychopathology that undermined the nation’s defenses against Communist infiltration” (p. 3).

Historians attribute this overlap between the Red Scare and queer sexuality to the Whittaker Chambers scandal, a highly sensationalized case that unfolded in 1948 in which a former Communist Party member not only accused Alger Hiss, head of the Carnegie Endowment, of Soviet espionage, but also made an unequivocal causal relationship between political affiliation and sexual orientation, confessing to the FBI that he ceased his queer sexual activities once he deserted the Communist Party (excellent discussion of these issues, see D’Emilio, 1983, pp. 40–127). Nonetheless, the gay Communist activist Harry Hay, the founder of the Mattachine Foundation (later Society), and widely considered to be the founding figure of the modern gay liberation movement, offered a more compelling explanation for the fascist scapegoating of gays under McCarthy: In one of his interviews, he argued that since the federal government could scapegoat neither the Jews, with the Holocaust still fresh on everyone’s mind, nor Blacks, who were already making headways in their struggle for civil rights, queers were exposed in their vulnerability as the ultimate victim and scapegoat for the country’s Cold War paranoia (Katz, 1976). No wonder the novella is set in Los Angeles, where the modern organizations for gay civil rights which led to the formation of the homophile movement emerged in the early 1950s (White, 2009).

In relation to the emergent gay liberation politics of the early 1950s, moreover, it would be impossible to miss the homology between Neville’s politics and Hay’s 1951 political platform for the Mattachine Society as well as Donald Webster Cory’s (1951; pseudonym for Edward Sagarin), *The Homosexual in America*, all of which appealed for the status of gays as an oppressed minority akin, in Hay’s words, to “our fellow minorities—the Negro, Mexican, and Jewish peoples” (as cited in Katz, 1976, p. 412). Like Matheson, moreover, they framed their defense of queer rights within a liberal defense of privacy and equal rights. As Cory (1951) wrote: “We who are homosexual are a minority, not only numerically, but as a result of a caste-like status in society . . . . Our minority status is similar, in a variety of respects, to that of national, religious, and other ethnic groups: in the denial of civil liberties; in the legal, extra-legal, and quasi-legal discrimination; in the assignment of an inferior social position; in the exclusion from the mainstream of life and culture” (pp. 3, 13–14).

The discrepancy between the pathologization of queer sexuality and the multicultural plea for the status of the vampires as a minority allows Matheson (1954) to redefine Neville’s location within the ambiguity of the

break in the homosociality-homoeroticism continuum, clearing a space for him to repress his homoeroticism and reinvent his social status within the heteronormative structure of sexual privilege. After living in the “world of monotonous horror” (p. 111) for three years, Neville forgets not only his wife and child, but also his “past life” (p. 139). To this extent, he now lives a “hermit life” (p. 120), reconsidering himself as a “bachelor” (p. 139).

For Sedgwick (1990), the bachelor in Victorian fiction constitutes a new “character taxonomy” that was disassociated from “concerns with a discourse of genital sexuality” (p. 190), and, in this sense, Neville’s bachelorhood becomes the condition of possibility for reconfiguring his sexual identity and for renegotiating his sexual choices on the continuum between homosociality and homoeroticism. Indeed, for this “last man in the world” (Matheson, 1954, p. 83), as he says about the poet Edgar Guest, perhaps in a veiled reference to Guest’s poem “A Real Man,” the problem is not only that he cannot yet be the type of man his object of desire is, for Cortman is “of the kind I’d like to be,” but also living two kinds of lies about his life, “The kind you live,” as Guest says, and “the ones you tell” (Ward, 2008, p. 108).

As such, this couple’s relationship cannot be confined, as the critics suggest, within the heteronormative structures of suburban neighborly rivalry (Murphy, 2009). Murphy (2009), for instance, states that their “once-friendly neighborhood rivalry has become a deadly clash of wits, with the closeness formerly experienced by both parties now transformed into fiercely competitive loathing” (p. 31). Although Neville finds hunting down the imaginative undead Cortman to be the most productive and intriguing recreational activity in which he can be engaged, the relationship between the two cannot simply be reduced to rivalry and loathing alone. The rupture in their relationship along the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum is, thus, a symbolic representation of a displacement that substitutes rivalry for friendship, violence for sympathy, and hatred for love. The tragedy that Matheson (1954) seems to capture through this suburban neighborly drama is the extent to which Neville, a military veteran and a seemingly heterosexual male, has to live all his life in the closet within the heteronormative sexual ideology of the 1950s, while his object of desire, who lives next door to him, remains out of reach. As he states, “To die . . . never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one’s embrace. To sink into that hideous coma, to sink then into death and, perhaps, return to sterile, awful wanderings. All without knowing what it was to love and be loved. That was a tragedy more terrible than becoming a vampire” (pp. 78–79).

In the context of the structural conventions of vampire fiction, furthermore, Neville’s ambiguous positionality within the break of the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum is articulated through misogynistic practices, which foreground the misogynistic subtext of his “homosexual panic” (see Moretti [1997] and Roth [1997] on the misogynistic subtext of vampire fiction). Although Sedgwick (1985) notes that homosexual panic must

be understood in relation not only to women but also to the gender system as a whole, she does not identify misogynistic discourses and practices as precisely symptomatic—that is, the in/direct expression of this male homosexual panic. Since women mediate the homosocial relations between or among already bonded men in vampire fiction, the misogynistic dispatching of women through excessive acts of violence becomes a precondition for the reproduction of this homosexual panic. Unlike the typical erotic triangle plot in canonical vampire fiction, Matheson (1954) thus de-inscribes women altogether as objects of exchange between Neville and Cortman. These men's significant female others are lost to the vampire pandemic early on in the story, clearing the way for them to reconfigure their relationship anew along the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum, and Neville spends most of his time and energy throughout the novella exterminating female vampires, even though he is obsessed with sexualizing them and with concocting elaborate violent rape fantasies with them. But engaging in genital intercourse is the only thing he does not seem to be capable of doing. Even when Ruth, the mutant vampire, who seems to like him and more than willing to engage in sexual intercourse with him, despite the fact that he had killed her husband, Neville can only drum up far-fetched excuses, be it his celibacy, his diminished sexual drive, or his abhorrence of human smell, to rationalize his reluctance to engage in any genital intercourse with her or other women. What's more, Neville's obsession with finding the truth about Ruth's blood is in itself a sublimation of his wish to prove Ruth a victim of the vampire virus, so that he will have to get rid of her, because if she stayed, as he ponders, "they had to establish a relationship, perhaps become husband and wife, have children . . ." and for Neville, "that was more terrifying" (p. 139).

Although critics such as Patterson (2005) have correctly pointed out Neville's "practiced form of misogyny," noting how "he violates the bodies of female vampires every way *but* sexually" (emphasis added, p. 22), she reads this as a sign of Neville's predatory (White male) racist gaze. Her reading of this novella as an allegory of racial relations, in which miscegenation remains prohibited, is predicated upon a universal and ahistorical codification of Black female sexuality as an abject other. Such a reading, therefore, fails to account for the fact that the Black female body was historically made available and accessible, despite miscegenation laws, for both White and Black men precisely because they were deemed expendable.

As Wriggins (1983) makes clear in the race-based cases of rape during slavery, "the rape of Black women by [W]hite men or Black men . . . was legal; indictments were sometimes dismissed for failing to allege that the victim was [W]hite" (p. 106). Wriggins also notes that the de jure status of these rape cases did not change after the Civil War: "Black women raped by [W]hite or Black men had no hope of recourse through the legal system," adding that even White victims of rape by White men "faced traditional common-law barriers that protected most rapists from prosecution" (p. 106). Neville, that

is, will not engage in heterosexual intercourse with these vampire women not because of their abject otherness, but because the bio-catastrophe had cleared a space for him to reimagine, in Case's (1991) words, "new forms of being, or beings . . . through desire" (p. 384). Since he still represses his queer sexuality, Neville cannot yet actualize these private forms of desire and pleasure within the break of the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum.

The ambiguity of Neville's position along the homosociality–homoeroticism continuum, his identification with and erotic desire for Cortman, is also symbolically encoded both within the semiotics of queer subculture and through a structure of doubling that links the alleged heterosexual male to the queer vampire. After Cortman calls on him to come out for the fifth time, Neville thinks:

Be right out, Benny . . . soon as I get my tuxedo on. He shuddered and gritted his teeth edges together. Be right out. Well, why not? Why *not* go out? It was a sure way to be free of them. Be one of them. He chuckled at the simplicity of it, then showed himself up and walked crookedly to the bar. Why not? His mind plodded on. Why go through all this complexity when a flung-open door and a few steps would end it all? (p. 29; italics in the original)

This passage encodes his ambivalence about his queer sexuality in a way that highlights both the homoerotic, his idea about going out in a tuxedo, which links the event of coming out to the semiotics of matrimonial celebrations, and the dynamics of identification—assimilating and acculturating himself into the queer subculture. Unsurprisingly, he walks right away to the bar, another coded reference to the salient role of the bar in the gay subculture of the 1950s, which Dr. Evelyn Hooker recognized as the site where a gay person would come out "publicly for the first time as a homosexual, in the presence of other homosexuals, by his appearance in a bar" (as cited in in Tamashiro, 2005). (See D'Emilio [1983] for a discussion of the evolution of the bar subculture among gays and lesbians in the nation's largest cities from the 1930s onward.)

The last strategy Matheson's (1954) deploys in codifying Neville's homoerotic desire for Cortman is his use of an elaborate structure of doubling that links Neville, Cortman, and the other undead vampires together via tropes of alienness and insanity. Although he considers Cortman to be an "alien" (p. 65) as a part of his past life, Neville also recognizes something alien about himself as well. Amid his most vicious fanatic homicidal vendetta, for example, Neville suspects "his mind of harboring an alien" (p. 61), that there is an otherness to himself of which he was not previously cognizant, and realizes that the vampires, whom he calls people, "were the same as he" (p. 39). Moreover, one of the first things that strikes Neville about the undead Cortman is the qualitative transformation that Cortman had undergone after

he was infected with the virus. Reminiscent of the way in which the Crew of Light responded to Lucy's transformation in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Neville believes that Cortman now has a "zest for life," adding that sometimes he thought Cortman was "happier now than he ever had been before" (p. 119). In this reading, hence, the undead Cortman's contentment or enjoyment can be considered as a function of his public disclosure of his queer subjectivity, his coming out, and, although Neville is clearly envious of Cortman's disclosure of this secret of enjoyment, he is still unwilling to admit it even to himself.

Neville's envy of Cortman's secret of enjoyment animates his homosexual panic toward his former neighbor. While it is common for subjects who presume that the other possesses or has dispossessed them of their secret of enjoyment to annihilate that other (Žižek 1986), Neville does not, or rather, cannot destroy him. This queer panic can also be attributed to his unresolved Oedipal complex, his loathing for his father, Fritz, who "died denying the vampire violently to the last" (Matheson, 1954, p. 27). In response to his father's denial of his son's queer sexuality, that is, Neville projects his "raw, unqualified hatred" not on himself, otherwise he will prove his father right, but on Cortman (Matheson, 1954, p. 30). Even though Neville spends most of his time pursuing Cortman—watching him, anticipating his moves, and hunting him down—he continuously defers completing his homicidal plan, rationalizing his inaction as the enjoyment he gains from his recreational engagement with Cortman's superior imagination within the economy of pursuit and hunt established between them. In his projective displacement of his own anxiety about the hunt onto Cortman, Neville states that Cortman knew he was "singled out for capture" and that he "relished the peril of it" (p. 110). Nonetheless, he makes a point of disavowing that his postponement of Cortman's death can be attributed to any feelings he may have for the undead vampire, or as he says, "it wasn't that he felt anything toward Cortman" (p. 120). However hard Neville tries to suppress or deny his homoerotic feelings for Cortman, the mere need to repeat the lack of such a feeling to himself, to assure himself that he has no feelings for him, betrays his true homoerotic desire. Hence, Neville spends most of his time inebriated, because alcohol seems to be the only mechanism, or glue, that can stabilize the symbolic efficiency of his heteronormative positionality within the symbolic order, but that effect does not last for a long time.

Neville's repression of his erotic desire for Cortman evokes, therefore, painful memories of the past that clearly take on a traumatic dimension, intensifying his panic and terror toward his own sexuality and reopening as he says "old wounds . . . with every thought" (Matheson, 1954, p. 59). In his ambiguous relationship with Cortman along the break in homosociality–homoeroticism continuum, that is, Neville can be said, to paraphrase Žižek (2010), to enjoy his suffering (*trauma* is the German word for wound) and suffer his enjoyment. Much of what Neville painfully remembers about



Cortman involves sensuous details about the latter's life, including his corpulent body and the smell of cologne that he was wearing "each morning when he picked up Neville to drive to the plant" (Matheson, 1954, p. 65). When he sees Cortman at one point in the story, moreover, Neville represses a memory of a person, of whom Cortman reminded him: "He'd felt for some time that Cortman reminded him of somebody, but for the life of him he couldn't think who" (p. 65). Shortly after he shoots Cortman, without disposing of him of course, Neville suddenly realizes that Cortman reminded him of Oliver Hardy: "Cortman was almost a dead ringer for the roly-poly comedian. A little less plump, that was all. Even the mustache was there now" (p. 66).

The fact that Neville repressed the link between Cortman and Ollie "Babe" Hardy right after he tried to shoot him affirms the symbolic displacement that substitutes rivalry for friendship, hatred for love, and death for life in the rupture that typifies the homosociality-homoeroticism continuum. Hardy, the comedian with the scully cap and push broom mustache, was nicknamed Babe and Fatty. As Cullen (2006) states, "He was a shy man, guarded and not at home, as they say, in his skin. All his life, he despised his corpulence, yet it was part of his talent, his fame, and his ability to earn a decent living" (p. 662). Effeminate and fat, Ollie was treated in his town with contempt; the insinuation here is that he was gay. Ollie's feminization and his implicit queer sexuality haunted his acting career with Stan Laurel (who was married to a Virginia Ruth—the name appears in *I Am Legend* in reference to both Neville's dead wife, Virginia, and the new woman, Ruth, who briefly appeared in his life).

Laurel and Hardy, whose 1947 program billing was "Hollywood's Greatest Comedy Couple," were usually referred to as Stan and Babe, and their act embodied the perfect sissy-buddy relationship. In their movies, Stan and Babe twisted stereotypical male-female scenarios to fit their male-male relationships, and one constant stock structural strategy in their films involved them winding up in bed together (Bryant, 1997). Indeed, in *The Boys: The Cinematic World of Laurel and Hardy*, Nollen (1989) claims that there are clear homosexual overtones to the duo's performances. In their film, *Their First Mistake* (1932), in particular, the duo acts as a couple who adopts a baby, with Ollie parodying the position of the besmirched girl (Gehring, 1990, p. 62). When Stan decides to desert him, Ollie complains that Stan wanted him to have the baby in the first place only to "leave him flat" now. When Stan asks Ollie what is bothering his wife, Ollie answers: "She says I think of you more than I do of her," to which Stan teasingly responds, "Well. You do, don't you?" Hence, Wayne Bryant argues that this film can easily be read as the love of the bisexual Ollie Babe for his gay neighbor Stan. In this sense, then, Matheson (1954) discursively employs other same-sex couples, Hollywood celebrities nonetheless, to mirror and double Neville's relationship with Cortman: Ollie is to Stan what Cortman is to

Neville, clearing a space for rereading Ruth, the mutant human, as none other than Virginia, his wife whom he dispatched after she turned into an undead vampire. Her return, after killing his former heterosexual self, is meant, thus, to reinforce his reconfiguration of his sexual orientation. His inability to have sex with her, then, affirms the change in the symbolic efficiency of his position within the heteronormative structure. As such, Cortman could be said to function as a symptom of Neville's queer sexuality, simultaneously conferring consistency upon and threatening it.

This doubling strategy also pervades Neville's reaction to Cortman's violent death. In one of the most excessively violent scenes in the novel, Neville records how the "dark-suited" members of the new society brutally slaughtered seven vampires in "methodical butchery" (Matheson, 1954, p. 158). As he looks around for Cortman, he shudders violently because Cortman is nowhere to be seen. At this moment, Neville registers his feeling of sympathy for and identification with the undead vampire: "He didn't want them to get Cortman, he realized he didn't want them to destroy Cortman like that. With a sense of *inward shock* he could not analyze in the rush of the moment, he realized that he *felt more deeply toward the vampire* than he did toward the executioner" (p. 158; italics added). The inward shock he experiences at this moment eludes language, but he understands more than ever now that he is more like the vampire. As such, Neville could not, as he says, "repress his feelings" (p. 159), condemning the mutant humans-vampires for trying to dispose of Cortman, who "was *not theirs* to put to rest" (p. 159; italics added). If anyone has the right to dispatch Cortman, he seems to suggest, it should not be these brutal strangers but he himself, his friend and object of desire.

As the dark men capture Cortman and attack him, Neville describes not only Cortman's "wriggling body" as it jerked under the bullets, but also the way he felt his own body jerk with "convulsive shudders," as if the bullets had pierced "his own flesh" (Matheson, 1954, p. 159). At that moment, Neville starts crying, but as he confesses, "he didn't even feel the tears running down his cheeks" (pp. 159–60), and when the men start kicking Cortman's "writhing body with their pikes," Neville "closed his eyes and his nails dug furrows in the flesh of his palms" (p. 160). The doubling of their bodily movement (the jerky movements of their bodies) produces more than just an identificatory effect between the men: It rather subjects them both equally to the penetrative power of the phallic bullets, while Neville's convulsive shudders accentuate the erotic nature of his reaction to the violence of Cortman's death. Compared to the description of the scene of Neville's own death, the scene of Cortman's death is very excessive in its violence. Reminiscent of the death of the writhing thing that was called Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Cortman's writhing body registers, in Žižek's (1991) words, the "desperate resistance of the Thing, of enjoyment fighting not to be evacuated from the body" (p. 220). Cortman died without renouncing his fidelity to his newly discovered enjoyment, while Neville

dies without the possibility of avowing that enjoyment. In this sense, to paraphrase Žižek, as a living dead Cortman was “far more alive” than Neville, who is so helplessly embedded in the symbolic order, in which he will be forever “condemned to vegetate” (p. 221).

#### THE “BEAST IN THE CLOSET”: UNSPEAKABLE DESIRE, THE REAL, AND THE ETHICS OF QUEER MONSTROSITY

What does the homosexual want? The question cannot be answered . . .  
(Cory, 1951, p 225)

However pervasive is the textual inscription of Neville’s queer desire for Cortman, Neville himself insists on avoiding a direct encounter with his (closeted) queer subjectivity, by simply repressing his feelings or displacing them through misogyny. Nonetheless, Cortman’s compulsive return to Neville’s barricaded closet, his “shell” as he says (Matheson, 1954, p. 19), exhorting him to come out, produces the conditions of possibility for him to recognize his queer sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the novella, Cortman returns about 10 times to that originary site of trauma, the closet, calling on Neville to come out but to no avail, because Cortman’s address is centered around an unspeakable desire that has no name (anal sex or male penetrability) and, consequently, it can never reach its destination. That unspeakable desire haunts Neville’s thoughts, stating that “no one ever got the chance to know it,” adding that “they knew it was something, but it couldn’t be that—not *that*” (p. 29; italics in original). Cortman’s recursive exhortations must thus be read as performative utterances that construct Neville’s queer sexuality, conferring consistency and symbolic efficiency on it within what Sedgwick (1990) refers to as the “epistemology of the closet.” For Sedgwick, “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech acts of silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (p. 3). As such, Cortman does not merely invoke some secret knowledge about Neville’s sexual history that he insists on disclosing, but he is also conferring an identity on him by asking him to do something as well—to come out.

This performativity, it is important here to note, involves a dialogic dimension that establishes, to use Judith Butler’s words, a scene of address between the two, offering Neville a space to engage in a “reflexive activity, thinking about and reconstructing” (Butler, 2005, p. 50) the self and to establish a relation to the other in language. Nonetheless, this reconstructive process is fraught with difficulties, because any subject in Neville’s position would find himself or herself in a permanent impasse, as Sedgwick claims, between essentialist and constructivist conceptions of sexual orientation, making it less likely for Neville in the context of post-war politics and

McCarthyism therefore to maintain any symbolic efficiency, or coherence, regarding his queer subjectivity.

Neville's indefinite deferral of coming out, furthermore, foregrounds the fragility and precariousness of queer sexuality within the complex dialectic of the private and the public, secrecy and disclosure, liberation and alienation, that is bound up in the heteronormative production of the closet. In other words, the closet would never disappear from a queer subject's life, because, as Sedgwick states (1990), "all gay people, no matter how openly out they are, will eventually find themselves in the closet with someone who is close to them either personally, professionally, or economically" (p. 68). Since these others may lack the knowledge of the secret, or the open wound, coming out and the exhortation to come out will always have to be repeated.

Moreover, this scene of address highlights the fundamental challenge to Neville's "epistemic authority," as Sedgwick (1990, p. 17) says, over his queer subjectivity—that he knows that he is gay, and could also illuminate the source of his queer panic. His own knowledge of his sexuality is publicly interrogated and the only thing he does is sit it out in an atmosphere of sheer terror and rage. The second time Cortman calls on him to come out, Neville's reaction evokes these feelings of rage and terror that characterize his response: "With a stiffening rage, he wrenched up the record and snapped it over his right knee. . . . Then he stood in the dark kitchen, eyes tightly shut, teeth clenched, hands clamped over his ears. Leave me alone, leave me alone, *leave me alone!*" (Matheson, 1954, p. 21; italics in original). This terror arises from his inability to provide an answer to the question, "Che vuoi?", that is, "What do you want from me?", or as Cory asks, "What does the homosexual want?" (Cory, 1951, p. 225), since Neville cannot account for his own subjectivity in response to Cortman's suggestion that he is in fact gay—that is, he pretends he cannot be sure why he is what Cortman says he is. Like the anti-Semite, as Žižek (1986) explains, who thinks the Jews want something from him to fulfill their hidden agendas, whether it is money or world domination, Neville can never be sure what Cortman really wants from him. Therefore, he concocts his own fantasy, that Cortman wants him dead, in order to fill out the void generated by the question itself, while, in fact, he wants Cortman dead so he will not have to confront his repressed queer sexual desire. Nonetheless, this fantasy cannot maintain complete symbolic efficiency, failing to provide the full answers for what Cortman really wants from him, because the void that is opened up in the closet is structured by an impossible and unspeakable sexual desire. Indeed, as Cory pointed out, "the question cannot be answered . . ." (p. 225).

As the embodiment of an unnamable sexual desire, therefore, the closet resists symbolization and can only be inhabited by an aberrant monstrosity, the thing in itself, or in Lacanese, the Real. Existing in excess of the symbolic, this monstrosity produces an uncanny effect in the subject that unravels the subject's inability to know itself fully. Since the symbolic and the Real are

bound up with each other, as Žižek (1992) explains, this monstrosity cannot be simply repressed or negated in the symbolic, but must rather be incorporated by the symbolic and managed as that which it is not, its abjected other. Hence, Copjec (1991) surmises that the Real can be managed through repetition: “The signifier’s difference from itself, its radical inability to signify itself, causes it to turn in circles around the real that is lacking in it. It is in this way—in the circumscription of the real—that its nonexistence or its negation is signified within the symbolic” (p. 28). Nonetheless, this abstract Lacanian reading of monstrosity as the Real must be situated within the specific structures of the heteronormative production of the closet that precludes and forecloses Neville’s act of coming out. In other words, the reason that Cortman must compulsively circle around Neville’s closet, endlessly exhorting him to come out, so that Neville can finally begin to see his unspeakable queer desire and give it some meaning, is the heteronormative limits that define the experiences of a closeted gay man like Neville. While up to that point he projected his own monstrosity on the undead vampires and the mutant humans-vampires, Neville can now recognize his own queer monstrosity. Coming too close to the source of terror (the unspeakable anal sex), nonetheless, threatens to desubjectivize and annihilate him. His knowledge thus remains incomplete, and he still needs to be dragged out, or outed, foreclosing his attempt at signifying the unspeakable. Indeed, as Copjec maintains, the Real will resist symbolization no matter how many times the symbolic circles and repeats itself around it.

The failure of signification notwithstanding, an ethical dimension is opened up for reconfiguring the relationship between the self and the other, human and vampire, grounded in the specific conditions of exposure, or vulnerability, and the opacity of one’s own monstrosity. Margrit Shildrik makes clear this link between vulnerability, in general, and monstrosity, locating in both the common impetus to dismantle boundaries and render them permeable. However, the singularity of the vulnerability consequent upon the unspeakability of anal sex intensifies the contingency and collapsibility of the binary structures of the heteronormative logos, signaling even more forcefully “a transformation of the relation between self and other such that the encounter with the strange is not a discrete event but the constant condition of becoming” (Shildrik, 2002, p. 1). As long as this process of becoming is framed within the Deleuzian disavowal of the other’s desire in its negativity as lack, the relationship to the other will always be defined through repression. But if the other’s desire is reconfigured through Lacan’s understanding of desire in its slippages as simultaneously both a lack and an excess that eludes signification, it would be possible to dismantle the asymmetrical binaries of heteronormative social coding, namely human over vampire, and affect a paradigm shift in the perception of the self through the eyes and desire of the other in its otherness within a relational, posthuman ethical perspective. This is how Neville, in fact, comes to view himself as legend for

these vampiric others and realize that they, or at least Ruth, actually sympathize with him, since they “know now that [he was] just as much forced into [his] situation as [they] were forced into [theirs]” (Matheson, 1954, p. 154).

This posthuman perspectival shift brings about a transformation in Neville’s ethics from a position of ethical egoism, in which he “was his own ethic” (Matheson, 1954, p. 62), to a position of ethical relationality, not relativism, that not only disavows the elevation of his own self-interest and perspective over others, but reconsiders his own interest and desire in relation to and through the other’s legitimate perspective. It is important to note that this ethical shift was not sudden or spontaneous, but it rather developed in his conversations with Ruth, who forced him, as she questioned his methods and motives, to “find himself vaguely on the defensive for what yesterday was accepted necessity” (p. 146). When he wonders whether she thinks he is wrong, moreover, Ruth insists on suspending her judgment—“It’s not for me to say,” she responds (p. 147). Indeed, Neville himself feels that his morality stands on shaky grounds, for he “still had to convince himself he was doing the right thing” (p. 26). Thus, before he is dragged out from his own home or closet, it dawns on him “what they felt and [he] did not hate them” (p. 169); at that point, Neville can be said not simply to have figured out the true humanity of these mutant vampires, that they are simply infected humans who are trying to live with their disease, but to have access to his own abnormality, his own queer monstrosity, in its abnormality. Indeed, he seems to understand completely that he had become legend, the stuff of superstition, for these mutant humans-vampires.

Matheson’s (1954) title, therefore, inverts the anthropocentric mythologization of the vampiric other as legend, transvaluing humanity into legendary monstrosity precisely from the perspective of that supposedly alleged monstrous other. This posthumanist inversion of the relationship between self and other, human and vampire, affirms an ethics grounded in an understanding of the radical otherness of the other as recognizable in its difference. No longer will the self consider the not-self, the other, in terms of the self or self-same, the way the Hegelian politics of recognition is resolved, but will consider the not-self as a self that is always already radically other in its own right. Matheson’s relational, posthumanist ethics, thus, manages to disclose the monster within, but without diminishing the terror of that disclosure, for it still exists in excess of the symbolic.

Matheson’s (1954) relational, posthuman ethics can, thus, be said to anticipate the radical multiculturalist politics of multiplicity and difference that regulates the intricacies of identity politics through mutual recognition and respect. This celebration of difference and diversity does not only constitute an advocacy of minority status and rights for the vampire, as discussed above, but also interrogates the Eurocentric and Christian myths that pertain to vampire legends within a multiculturalist understanding of diversity. In Neville’s multicultural world, Christian apotropaics have become



meaningless: The traditional religious iconography associated with vampire legends such as the cross have been evacuated from their legendary powers. Indeed, these indexes of faith have become completely facultative, even dysfunctional, when it came to non-Christian vampires. Thus, Neville wonders what a Muslim, “Mohammedan,” vampire would do “if faced with a cross” (p. 64), but he gets his answer from Cortman, the Jewish vampire, who laughed in his face when he showed him the cross (p. 140). Nonetheless, Cortman was still susceptible to the religious iconography of his own faith: Neville was able to get rid of Cortman only by using the Torah (p. 140). Moreover, Neville attributes the power of the cross to a specific cultural context, explaining that “since the legend came into its own in Europe, a continent predominantly Catholic, the cross would naturally become the symbol of defense against powers of darkness” (p. 141).

Although Matheson avows the power of each religious tradition in its specificity, he still disavows any universal narrative or certainty about the ability of religious belief and faith to offer any salvation or redemption whatsoever. In fact, the fundamentalist revivalists, those who are expected to have found solace and a final resting place, a home as it were, in death are the ones who actually die in fear: “In a typical desperation for quick answers, easily understood, people had turned to primitive worship as the solution. With less than success [*sic*]. Not only had they died as quickly as the rest of the people, but they had died with terror in their hearts, with a mortal dread flowing in their very veins” (Matheson, 1954, p. 115). This is not to say that Matheson reinscribes the superior rationality of the Enlightenment and modernity over the primitive supernaturalism of religion; rather, he is fully aware that the supernatural is completely bound up together with modern structures of rationality. For instance, after he is done reading Ruth’s letter, which made him realize the obvious scientific fact that germs can mutate, Neville feels “as if all the security of reason were ebbing away from him. The framework of his life was collapsing and it frightened him” (pp. 155–156).

To this extent, Matheson’s novella stands in sharp contrast to the unethical violence toward the other reproduced in Francis Lawrence’s (2007) celluloid adaptation of the novella starring Will Smith. Reading the film as a symptom of the global ideological regression into religious fundamentalism, Žižek (2010) notes that the film turns Neville’s legendary status for the vampires into a legendary status for other humans who survived the apocalypse by virtue of his heroism and sacrifice. Žižek, thus, contends that the film’s investment in Christian myths of sacrifice and redemption cancels out Matheson’s original politics of multiculturalism and tolerance.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the problem with this film’s adaptation starts with a grammatical sleight of hand: By reducing Matheson’s (1954) multiculturalist politics into a valorization of Christian mythos and a re-centering of anthropocentrism, the film misinterprets the original title, inserting an indefinite article that remains invisible before the predicate—not *I Am Legend*, as the last remnant of a

vanishing human race to those vampiric others, the way the text seems to imply, but *I Am a Legend* to those humans who will forever be indebted of Neville's heroism and sacrifice. This subtle shift in the interpretation of the film's title is predicated on a projective displacement of the inhumanity of humans that is much feared by the vampires themselves onto the nonrecognizability and incomprehensibility of the vampiric other. Consequently, the only possible ethics envisioned by the film to regulate the relations between self and other must be framed within the unethical destruction of the other.

### DEMYSTIFYING CAPITALISM: QUEER SUBJECTIVITY, COMMODITY FETISHISM, AND THE FUTURE OF CLASS STRUGGLE

In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem. (D'Emilio, 1993, p. 474)

Despite its multiculturalist politics of recognition, no matter how progressive it was for its time, Matheson's *I Am Legend* is as interpellated as Lawrence's (2007) film within capitalist ideology, in that they both translate "antagonism into difference" (Žižek, 2006, p. 362), substituting sexual difference for the importance of class struggle. Transvaluing the antagonism (class struggle) underpinning capitalist relations of production into the politics of identity and difference obscures the problematic relationship between capitalism and queer subjectivity. Indeed, the text establishes neoliberal capitalism as an absent presence, by reproducing the ultimate capitalist fantasy of commodity fetishism, while at the same time eliding the extent to which capitalism commodifies and exploits queer sexuality. In other words, neoliberal capitalism is invested with the power to assert itself as the end of history, to the extent that it has subtracted itself from public discourse to become a completely invisible signifier around which everything revolves but that refuses to be named. As D'Emilio (1993) memorably states in his article on capitalism and gay identity, "In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem" (p. 474).

The absent presence of capitalism as the transcendent signifier especially, for sexual minorities, constitutes the ultimate site for their doing and undoing. For D'Emilio (1993), sexual minorities inhabit an ambivalent position within the neoliberal capitalist system, since it facilitates both their emergence as consumers and producers, allowing, thus, their integration into the labor market as well as their exploitation to benefit corporate interests, and the homophobic backlash against them.<sup>5</sup> He attributes this ambivalence to the contradictory position that the nuclear family occupies in the capitalist system: Capitalism, he argues, has not only subverted the material basis of heteronormative families, allowing family members to live outside of the family structure, but has also enshrined these families for their reproductive value as the only functional model of intimate and personal relationships.

He thus states, “in divesting the family of its economic independence and fostering separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex” (pp. 473–474).

Moreover, capitalism has provided the conditions for commodifying sexuality and erotic desire as a matter of choice outside the parameters of procreative sexual economy. As long as such erotic choices are coopted and contained as a “form of play, positive and self-enhancing,” in D’Emilio’s (1993) words (p. 474), sexual identity can be evacuated from its excessive threats and history of struggle, only to circulate as a fetish of erotic pleasure. To this extent, sexual identity becomes then the grounds for collective organization that, nonetheless, substitutes consumption for production. Not all forms of queer transgression, that is, are necessarily subversive, until the proliferation of the semiotics of queer identity is understood in relation to the larger social inequalities (Taylor, 2009, p. 201). While capitalism continues to undermine the fabric of social relations, moreover, queer communities have been paradoxically blamed for the social ills and instabilities of the capitalist system. As such, capitalism as the name of the social totality is left untouched and invisible.

Similarly, Matheson’s (1954) text naturalizes and normalizes capitalism and its social relations, by disavowing the need for recognizing class struggle in “its terrifying dimension” (Žižek, 1986, p. 5). As a work of fantasy, that is, Matheson’s novella tries to deny the specific conflicts that embody the capitalist conditions of its production: What the power of the hegemonic capitalist ideology will not have disclosed, in short, is the presence of capitalism itself. Throughout the text, therefore, Neville takes for granted the free commodities he consumes, be it the lathe from Sears, the gasoline, and the water bottles, allowing him to push a shopping cart, what he calls “the metal wagon,” “up and own the silent dust-thick aisles” (Matheson, 1954, p. 26), clinging as much as he can to the norms of his bourgeois suburban life as if nothing happened around him. Indeed, Neville lives the pure fantasy of commodity fetishism that does not only offer him the opportunity to fulfill his fantasy of living in a world of abundant free commodities and surplus enjoyment (which for the last man on earth can indeed be considered infinite—he would have to live many more lives to be able to exhaust all these resources), but also to kill the undead owners of the store in which he was shopping, and, thus, foreclose the question of labor altogether.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Neville’s death operates as a nostalgic affirmation of neoliberal capitalism. After all, it is only when he can no longer maintain his sovereignty over his private property that the vampires could intrude upon it; in its absent presence, neoliberal capitalism could at least guarantee his safety inside of his private property.

This critique of capitalism in Matheson can also be supplemented by an attention to the ways in which Matheson (1954) represents revolutionary societies and forms of enjoyment, and more specifically, the Soviet Union

with its spies, collaborators, and purges. Since this new vampire society is specifically structured by the same violent forms of enjoyment embodied in revolutionary movements, I contend that Matheson's alleged subversion of the us-them binary of Cold War politics constitutes, in fact, both a thinly disguised liberal critique of Stalinist terror and a nostalgic affirmation of neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, it is worth pointing out, Matheson's representation of revolutionary society blends and obscures in an Arendtian fashion, as Žižek (1986) would say, the distinction between fascism and Stalinism in their differential relations to class struggle. (For a very useful and clear discussion of Žižek's political views, see Dean [2006, pp. 45–94].) While fascists neutralize class struggle and displace it on a racialized other such as the case of the Jews in Nazi Germany, as Žižek contends, Stalinism abolishes the class struggle and reenacts the capitalist fantasy of unbridled production and consumption without adhering nonetheless to the constraints of the capitalist form (private property).

For Matheson (1954), recognizing the monstrosity of one's own non-normative desire facilitates the relational understanding of the dialectical relationship between the self and the other, in a way that reinscribes them both within a democratic site of multicultural exchange and tolerance. Nonetheless, the belief in the legitimacy of sexual rights is maintained without rethinking its ramifications in relation to the ability of the capitalist system to coopt and contain any threat that may be embedded in queer sexuality. Identity politics, therefore, cannot effectively serve as the basis for a genuine politics of gay liberation. Only acknowledging class struggle, as the fundamental gap that constitutes the totality of the social field, can render the absence and invisibility of capitalism present, by clearing a space for a radical reconfiguration of the ethical relationship to the other, and recharting alternative forms of solidarity, beyond identity politics, that can struggle with other oppressed constituencies in order to dismantle and reimagine the neoliberal capitalist system itself.

## NOTES

1. Monstrosity has long been identified as a major trope, a metaphor or allegory, through which queer sexuality is externalized and subjected to different forms of marginalization, exclusion, and suppression (Benshoff, 1997; Saunders, 1998). I'm interested here more in the imminent dimension of monstrosity that a queer subject confronts inwardly.

2. See Patterson (2005) for a reading of this passage in the context of the history of African American struggle for civil liberties. My reservations about Patterson's reading stem from the fact that she, first, reduces the novella (in general) and the vampire (in particular) to an allegory of history, specifically, the African American civil rights struggle. This treatment of literature as history can only be one part of such a reading; a critic must also complement such an interpretation with an attention to the repressed unconscious of a literary work—that is, to the specific conflicts that embody the conditions of its production (Macherey, 1978). Second, even though Patterson begins her essay with a survey of the anti-Semitic subtext of canonical vampire fiction, she completely overlooks the significance of Cortman's Jewishness for her interpretation.

3. The phrase “coming out,” which appropriates the vocabulary of the debutante ball, is by no means a recent term. As Tamashiro (2005) point out, the term could be traced back to the early twentieth century, when “gay men used the term to describe their acculturation into the gay subculture.” Tamashiro also notes (2005) that the term was introduced to the academic community in the 1950s, by the gay activist and sociologist Dr. Evelyn Hooker. Although the term has clearly been one of the fundamental topoi in the queer experience, it is astonishing that no critic, to my knowledge, has deemed Cortman’s recurrent exhortation to Neville to come out as important enough or relevant for reconsidering Matheson’s sexual politics.

4. It is interesting to note how Time Warner exploited prevalent fundamentalist structures of faith and belief to promote this film in the United States, creating a site, which they called “god still loves us,” to peddle the film. As Boyle (2005) observes, “The site contains a photography contest in which entrants submit pictures that display the ‘God Still Loves Us’ logo in various settings. One grand prize winner receives a MacBook Pro 15,” which is significant because Apple’s products are predominantly placed in the film. The site also contains message boards on theological and philosophical issues and a newsfeed to stories on current events with specific emphasis on disasters.”

5. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) interrogates the ways in which capitalism made possible the formation of nonnormative sexual identity. He maintains that the rise of the capitalist economy provided the context for the proliferation of “an entire glittering sexual array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstination of powers, and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure” (p. 72). Through the interplay of incitement and repression in the multiple discursive constructions of sexuality, Foucault surmises, the subject of nonnormative sexuality transpired as a privileged object of knowledge, control, and discipline. Indeed, as he states, “bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society, call it what you will—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal or recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing discourses concerning it” (p. 69).

6. Boyle (2009) makes a similar case about Lawrence’s (2007) film adaptation, but, as he correctly shows, the obfuscation of capitalism as absent presence in the film is much more fundamental. If Matheson (1954) mentions Sears once, Lawrence litters his film with innumerable signs and placement, or anamorphic, advertisements for multinational corporations such as XM Satellite Radio, Staples, and Hyatt. Moreover, as Boyle argues, *I Am Legend* creates a capitalist utopia, in which Neville exists as “a consumer and not a producer,” because “labor does not exist in the consumerist fantasyland of the Last Men.” Indeed, as Boyle states, “Everything Neville needs or wants is simply there for the picking.” As such, the film makes it clear that “the world is more likely to end before capitalism does.”

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