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MAKING *E.T.* PERFECTLY QUEER: THE ALIEN OTHER AND THE SCIENCE FICTION OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Brooke M. Beloso

In the wake of E.T.'s 1982 debut, film critics Marina Heung and Vivian Sobchack established that the enduring appeal of E.T. inheres in the dissolution of the nuclear heterosexual family over the latter half of the twentieth century and the film's "fairy tale" stand-in for the "mythology of family relations" that Dana Cloud terms "conservative familialism." As Carl Plantinga puts it, E.T. offers a "virtual solution . . . to [a] traumatic problem." Despite this, however, E.T. remains for many an insoluble tragedy. Approaching E.T. from the perspective of the queer child who grows "more sideways than up," in the real absence of a fairy tale solution to the traumatic problem of conservative familialism, I here seek to identify and celebrate E.T.'s "complex range of queerness" that has until now remained largely closeted.

KEYWORDS queer studies; sex/gender/sexuality; film studies; psychoanalysis; *E.T.*

***E.T.*, Redux**

The year 2002 marked the twentieth anniversary of the Steven Spielberg film *E.T.* First released in 1982, *E.T.* won four Oscars and grossed more than US\$399 million at US box-offices (not including merchandise licensing or video/DVD sales), making the movie the most profitable ever in the science fiction genre (and in all genres until *Titanic*)—especially surprising for a film with no stars and a low budget (Thomson 2002, 2; Parish and Pitts 1990, 141). *E.T.* is still the fourth biggest movie of all time (Rowles 2010). No doubt, Disney and Columbia Pictures still regret turning the film down. *E.T.* received rave reviews. After its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival on May 26, 1982, and its wide release on June 11, 1982, Kael wrote in *The New Yorker*: "It is bathed in warmth and seems to clear all the bad thoughts out of your head" (1991). Ebert, in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, wrote: "This movie made my heart glad" (2002). And *Variety's* McCarthy called *E.T.* "the best Disney film Disney never made" (1982). Evidently, *E.T.* moved the American public in 1982, and continues to move us decades later—as demonstrated by the fanfare of 2002's re-release, accompanied by such advertising campaigns as that of Toyota, who hoped that *E.T.* would "move" us to buy their minivans.

As film critics Heung (1983) and Sobchack (1986) have established, the enduring appeal of *E.T.* inheres in the dissolution of the nuclear heterosexual family over the latter half of the twentieth century and the concomitant threat posed by this disintegration to

many believers in the nuclear heterosexual family's powerful (and presumably positive) effect on child development. In the face of soaring divorce rates (which more than doubled between 1970 and 1980) and widespread invocations to sustain marriages at all costs "in the best interests of the children" (Arendell 1987, 126), *E.T.* showed us that a child of divorce could not only survive, but also thrive, in the wake of his father's physical abandonment and his mother's emotional collapse. This "odd little love story between an alien and a child," as Thomson of *The Guardian* described the film, clears those "bad thoughts" (2002) triggered by the psychological foundering of its child protagonist, Elliott, in the throes of his parents' divorce; instead, *E.T.* makes hearts glad to see that Elliott can successfully navigate the treacherous waters of adolescence—despite the absence and/or unavailability of his nuclear family of origin. As Plantinga puts it, *E.T.* offers a "virtual solution . . . to [a] traumatic problem" (2009, 226).

But for many of us, *E.T.* is decidedly not a feel-good film; instead, *E.T.* is an inconsolable tragedy. Rowles is far from the only spectator whose child self "wept uncontrollably [. . .] on the way home in the car, and for several hours following the movie" (2010), or who was so "traumatized by the last third of the movie" that he has not seen it again since (Craig cited in Rowles 2010). According to Steven Spielberg, who screened the film at the White House, even Nancy Reagan "was crying toward the end" (Calio 1982). And on the 1982 audio-book version of *E.T.*, one hears Michael Jackson weeping as he narrates *E.T.*'s "death." Many, many of us left the film bereft, traumatized by the forcible, bitter exchange of passionate, fantastical romance and a love object of one's own choosing—no matter how alien it may seem to others—for the "safe bet," heteronormative version of love that the film itself suggests may not in actuality be a safe bet (after all, Elliott's parents are divorcing). Many spectators strongly identify with young Elliott as a character who feels alone, emotionally isolated, different, misunderstood, and unseen (the arguably universal experience of "the child within us all"). But those of us who live and love on the queer spectrum—those who, as Stockton puts it, grow "sideways more than up" (2009, 37)¹—often relate to Elliott in a different register, one born of a lived experience wherein there is not (or was not) anyone to mirror the *queer* child within, much less anyone to openly "love" as we navigate the treacherous waters of adolescence. Attention to this register, I propose, opens a queer reading² of *E.T.* that works to isolate and elaborate upon the tragedy not averted but in fact consolidated by the "fairy tale" stand-in for the "mythology of family relations" (Sobchack 1991, 6) that Cloud terms "conservative familialism." According to Cloud,

Conservative familialism scapegoats and vilifies "unconventional" families—such as those of gays and lesbians as well as of single parents—whose arrangements challenge the model nuclear family ideal necessary to the reproduction of labor under capitalism. In addition, conservative familialism encourages people to see their intimate, domestic relations as both the source of their most difficult problems and the site of those problems' resolution—even if there are external, social, structural causes of personal crisis. (2001, 71)

A queer reading that isolates and elaborates upon the tragic element of *E.T.* resonates with, builds upon, and revises Sobchack's reading of *E.T.* as a conservative film, in that it "resolves[s] narratively the contemporary weakening of patriarchal authority, and the glaring contradictions which exist between the mythology of family relations and their actual social practice" (1991, 6). For Sobchack, *E.T.*'s feel-good appeal derives from the film's shoring up of a status quo in jeopardy. But some of us did and do understand the fairy tale

“solution” the film offers as a tragic *non sequitur* that “removes the queer child [Elliott] from its present desires and projects it into a future where those desires will not have been” (Bruhm and Hurley 2004, xxx)—even as we identify and celebrate many of the queer possibilities the film offers *en route* to its disappointing denouement. I revisit *E.T.* these years later in order to adopt “reception positions that can be considered ‘queer’ in some way,” reception positions that Heung and Sobchack did not consider (Doty 1993, xi). Moreover, I want to offer a queer reimagining of *E.T.* that “uncover[s] and deconstruct[s]” its embedded heteronormative discourses (De Ridder, Dhaenens, and Van Bauwel 2011, 198) in order to reveal the “unresolved contradictions,” “gaps,” and “fissures” that generate queer “meaning potential” (Fiske 1986, 392, 398, 402, 394). Approaching the diegetic world of *E.T.* “from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature [film] wishes to keep hidden” (Fetterley 1978, xx), I seek to identify and celebrate *E.T.*’s “complex range of queerness” (Doty 1993, 16) that has until now remained largely closeted.

Freudian Foundations

Explaining *E.T.*’s appeal requires a careful consideration of the constellation of beliefs that falls apart—principally, a belief in the power of the heterosexual nuclear family to shelter and shape child psyches—and the way in which *E.T.* ostensibly rescues Elliott (and spectators) from the crucible of this disintegration. To this end, I examine Elliott’s coming-of-age story against Freud’s famous Oedipus complex. While this may at first blush seem a bizarre and/or antiquated choice, there is a way in which Freud’s Oedipus complex and Spielberg’s *E.T.* speak to each other, provocatively opening new spaces for critical analysis. The Oedipal positioning of the child as an impotent, jealous, and polymorphously perverse lover in the heterosexual nuclear family triangle complicates the hegemonic readings of Heung and Sobchack that cast *E.T.* as simply a surrogate father. Such readings of the film leave aside the “very intense emotional processes” (Freud [1916] 1965, 416–18) both precipitating and facilitating what we might today consider to be consummately queer practices and possibilities that Freud so astutely detected in the stage of child development in which we find Elliott immersed. Inasmuch as the little alien’s sex, gender, and sexual identities—or, as we shall soon see, lack thereof—highlight Freud’s original observation that the form and function of these identities within and without the Oedipus complex is *not*, in point of fact, fixed so much as fluid, *E.T.* underscores a certain constitutional “queerity” of the Oedipus complex. Reading *E.T.* against the Oedipus complex, I want to subject to close scrutiny the way in which, in *E.T.*, science fiction takes over where the heterosexual family leaves off, delivering the promised psychosexual maturity of a resolved Oedipus complex through the introjection of an evanescent, idealized extra-terrestrial. When the parents fall out of the Oedipal family equation, we plug in the alien. And while Freud’s model stages a developmental trajectory from childhood polymorphous perversity to adult heterosexual desire, *E.T.* helps us to see that taking sexual difference to be the means and the end of the Oedipus complex is, in “reality,” illusory. Reading *E.T.* against the Oedipus complex thus makes explicit what Freud implicitly suggested, so long ago: [that] “the child is always already queer and must therefore quickly be converted to a protoheterosexual by being pushed through a series of maturational models of growth that project the child as the future and the future as heterosexual” (Halberstam 2011, 73). Curiously (and symptomatically), however, it is precisely this illusion of sexual difference as

the means and the end of the Oedipus complex that sends some spectators home from theaters “bathed in warmth” (Kael 1991) and certain, like Elliott’s mother, that all “could be well again if children believed in fairy-tales” (*E.T.* 1982).

E.T.: Oedipus, in media res

E.T. opens on a nuclear heterosexual family in crisis, among whom numbers a boy struggling to effect the resolution of the Oedipus complex:

(Mother and her three children seated around the kitchen table.)

MOTHER: “Maybe you just probably imagined it.” (*referring to Elliott’s first E.T. sighting*)

MIKE: “Maybe it was a pervert or a deformed kid or something!”

ELLIOTT: (*agitatedly rising*) “It was nothing like that, penis breath!”

MOTHER: (*laughing nervously*) “Elliott! Sit down!”

ELLIOTT: “Dad would believe me.”

MOTHER: “Maybe you oughtta call your father and tell him about it.”

ELLIOTT: “I can’t. He’s in Mexico with Sally.”

(Gertie and Mike stare in horror at Elliott.)

MIKE: (*under his breath*) “I’m gonna kill you!”

MOTHER: “It’s your turn to do the dishes, fellas.”

(Children bicker, until they notice Mary crying.)

MARY: “He hates Mexico!” (*Exits.*)

MIKE: (*to Elliott*) “Damn it, why don’t you grow up?” (*E.T.* 1982)

Here we see a boy in danger. The father whom Elliott loved and trusted has abandoned him. His mother, also abandoned, is having a nervous breakdown, effecting her emotional, if not physical, abandonment of her child, and his older brother—facing the same crisis as he—can only hurl death threats and order him to age prematurely. We encounter Elliott on the precarious cusp of puberty, enmeshed in some “very intense emotional processes” (Freud [1916] 1965, 416–18), indeed. Where, according to Freud, Elliott should now be engaged in the complicated process of abandoning his mother as a libidinal-cathexis³ and vigorously and favorably identifying with his father, he is, to all intents and purposes, alone at this critical juncture in his childhood. His successful navigation of the rite of passage to psychic maturity is thus seriously in jeopardy—at least, according to the Freudian model of child development. One might consider Elliott to be an important test case for the Oedipus complex: what if, during this critical time, a boy’s father runs away to Mexico with Sally? How will this boy resolve the Oedipus complex? How will Elliott conduct this complicated business of libidinal transfers, introjections, and identifications? How important is the heterosexual parental dyad to child development?

In order to answer these questions through the test case of Elliott, we must first examine the film’s treatment of the gender binary—without which heterosexuality (and, by proxy, the Oedipus complex) could not exist. Elliott, asked by his toddler sister, Gertie, of his newfound alien companion, “Is it a boy or a girl?”—the one question whose answer, at least according to Butler, humanizes an infant, constituting that “mark of gender [that] appears

to ‘qualify’ bodies as human bodies” (1990, 111)—unhesitatingly replies, “He’s a boy, like me.” From the very first time he sees *E.T.*, Elliott anthropomorphizes the alien by using masculine pronouns—the same pronouns the children later use to resist scientific attempts to “dehumanize” *E.T.* by using neuter pronouns. The first communication the two share is kinetic—a mute variety of the game “Simon Says,” whereby Elliott touches his nose and the alien touches his⁴ nose; Elliott touches his finger to his lips and the alien touches his finger to his lips; Elliott scratches his cheek and the alien scratches his cheek; and so on, until *E.T.* begins to fall asleep—which state Elliott quickly reaches, too.⁵ When invasive scientific testing and homesickness enfeeble *E.T.* to the brink of death, Elliott, too, falls ill, announcing, “We’re sick. I think we’re dying.” Perhaps most tellingly, when scientists ask Elliott’s older brother to describe the nature of the relationship between the boy and the alien, Mike says, “Elliott feels his feelings.” And upon *E.T.*’s “death” (prior to his miraculous recovery), Elliott says blankly, “He must be dead, because I don’t know how to feel.” As the very similarity of their names suggests, “*E.T.* is Elliott” (Schelde 1993, 109).

Somehow, it is this mutually-reflective, symbiotic relationship between Elliott and *E.T.*—in which the two are one—that initiates the resolution of the boy’s Oedipus complex, precipitating the successful routing of his narcissistic libido onto an object outside the Oedipal triangle.⁶ Beginning with his designation of *E.T.* as a boy, Elliott introjects and increasingly identifies with this odd little extra-terrestrial who, like Elliott, wanders lost and far from home. *E.T.* appears on the scene as Elliott is on the verge of puberty, just in time to help Elliott channel that object libido directed toward each member of his heterosexual parental dyad back into narcissistic libido. With the arrival of *E.T.*, Elliott enters a phase of secondary narcissism.⁷ All Elliott needs now in order to successfully consolidate his masculinity, according to Freud, is to cast this narcissistic libido back out again, into the cathexis of an object outside the Oedipal triangle; should this not occur, Elliott runs the risk of remaining narcissistically fixated on himself (again, according to Freud).

Clearly, as we gather from the above-mentioned scenes, *E.T.* occupies no small part of Elliott’s psychic landscape. Precisely what part/s *E.T.* plays in this landscape, however, is not so clear. Indeed, as we shall soon see, *E.T.* proves quite the slippery character, shifting from the object of Elliott’s narcissistic libido to that of his object libido and back again: at one moment (as Heung and Sobchack argue), *E.T.* is a surrogate father whom Elliott can introject and with whom he can identify; but the next, *E.T.* is an example of that development of the Freudian ego ideal, whereby, “As a child grows up, the role of the father is carried on by teachers and others in authority” (Freud [1923a] 1989, 37); another moment, *E.T.* is a surrogate *mother* whom Elliott must decaethet; and at yet another moment, *E.T.* is an entirely new libidinal cathexis who will unseat Elliott’s mother as the object of his sexual desire. But is *E.T.* always at once all of the above, or is *E.T.* simply a wild card in this Oedipal deck?

***E.T.*: Hello Mother, Hello Father**

First, let’s try to “sex the alien.” Interestingly enough, we never definitively learn *E.T.*’s anatomical sex. *E.T.* appears to have no sexual “parts” and does not offer any culturally intelligible signs of one sex to the exclusion of another. Though “he” moves about—“in that endearing side-to-side shuffle⁸ that makes *E.T.* look like nothing so much as an old man, still spry despite his pot belly . . . with a child’s wide-eyed stare and the rolls of a middle-aged man’s gut”—bald and shirtless, actress Debra Winger and Pat Welsh, a sixty-five-year-old chain-smoking housewife not wearing her dentures, provided “her” voice (Ronge 2002;

Taylor 2002). As sound designer Ben Burtt proudly declared, “You can’t tell whether it’s a male or a female” (Calio 1982). While such sensory indices strongly resonate with Wittig’s observation that “Sex is taken as an ‘immediate given,’ a ‘sensible given,’ ‘physical features,’ belonging to a natural order,” the film offers a number of perspectives from which one might code E.T.’s sex/gender configuration in very different ways—corresponding with Wittig’s “corrected” definition of sex:

But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as others but marked by a social system), through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (1981, 48)

Left alone with E.T., Gertie joyfully dresses the little alien up in a wig, make-up, jewelry, and a skirt. While E.T. and Gertie seem perfectly content to consider E.T. a girl, her brothers are outraged upon the discovery of what, in their eyes, constitutes a gender transgression. They immediately admonish Gertie to “Give him his dignity back.” In this scene, E.T. is at once a girl—constructed and interpreted as such by Gertie—and a boy in drag—interpreted as such by Mike and Elliott. Throughout the film, E.T. allows children to “play gender” on an unsexed body. Thus, like Foucault’s Herculine Barbin, E.T.

[...] is neither here nor there, but neither is she in some discrete third place. She is an amalgamation of binary opposites, a particular configuration and conflation of male and female ... [who] does not transcend sex as much as she confuses it. (Butler 1987, 139)

But perhaps E.T. is, in point of fact, “in some discrete third space” (Butler 1987, 139). Given these permutations, E.T. refuses easy categorization as mother figure or father figure by these children cathecting the alien with both narcissistic and object libido.

The scene in which Elliott kisses a schoolgirl for the first time provides additional clues as to the nature of the relationship between E.T. and Elliott. In this scene, we see clips of E.T. at home, dressed in the absent father’s clothing, drinking beer and watching television. Meanwhile, Elliott is at school, sitting through a biology class, about to dissect frogs for the first time. We see E.T. stumble about, thoroughly intoxicated; the film then cuts to Elliott about to fall out of his desk, equally affected by the over-imbibition. E.T., watching television, sees some animals on the verge of pain and begins to feel anxious; Elliott begins to free the frogs. In the midst of the frog-freeing hullabaloo, E.T. changes channels, landing upon a classic film in which the leading male and female protagonists passionately kiss; Elliott, finding himself face-to-face with a female classmate, passionately kisses her. So doing, it seems, Elliott bats a home run, sending object libido out of the Oedipal park. But the fact that what at first appears to be a representation of “real” desire is, in effect, *a representation of a representation* complicates matters considerably. Here, none other than *television* effects the rerouting of libidinal object-cathexis from mother to non-Oedipal other; television destabilizes the ostensibly fixed position of the heterosexual parental dyad as sole or even primary winnower of sexual difference and desire from childhood polymorphous perversity, underscoring Butler’s observation (in her reading of Kristeva) that “either (a) drives and their representations are coextensive or (b) representations preexist the drives themselves” (1990, 88). Thus, in marked contrast to traditional readings of the Oedipus complex, *E.T.* offers a model of child development⁹ wherein a boy acts out sexual desire that not only comes to him through an alien, but is also, in fact, alien to him. The moves, and not the origin of these moves, make the man and, at least in this scenario,

television successfully pinch hits for the Freudian ego ideal, whereby Elliott—vis-à-vis E.T.—“recognizes them [cultural and ethical ideas] as a standard for himself and submits to the claims they make on him” (Freud [1914] 1989, 557).

A Lacanian reading of the work of the Freudian ego ideal in the dissolution of the Oedipus complex may be useful here. According to Lacan, human subjectivity is born of one’s inscription—even before birth and after death—in the symbolic order. In the attempt to satisfy his desire, which is by definition “the Other’s desire,” a child finds his place in a “signifying chain” including both the Other and her desire (for Lacan, the initial Other is the mother) (Lacan 2006, 525, 861). In other words, the child must figure out what his mother wants, because what he wants is both to be, and to give her, what she wants. In setting the frogs free and kissing his classmate, then, Elliott animates an image of himself that he feels will sufficiently satisfy E.T.’s desire; however, as we all know, E.T. *still wants to phone home*. No matter what Elliott does, from acting out the heteronormative kiss scene that so captivates E.T. (that shared by John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara in the 1952 film *The Quiet Man*) to running away from home and camping out in the freezing cold to help E.T. construct a satellite dish, E.T.’s desire eludes Elliott’s ability to either fully satisfy or maintain it, leaving Elliott—as most children—to wrestle with the enigma of difference (sexual and otherwise) and the excess of the m/Other’s desire. Ultimately, Elliott will use this introjection of E.T. as ego ideal—including but not limited to the desires that consolidate Elliott’s gender identity—to find a place in the symbolic order after E.T. goes home (Lacan 1988, 141).¹⁰ (Indeed, one hopes with Dean, who in his essay “Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness” [2001] elegantly and incisively cautions against limiting one’s understanding of the scope of the Other’s insatiable desire to the enigma of *sexual* difference, that Elliott will have learned much more, and other than, gender, from E.T.)¹¹

Such scenes highlight E.T.’s at once polymorphous and vacuous sexual identity and repeatedly hint at an open sexual fluidity in the minds of these children. They are less than willing and/or able to inhabit the “you” Freud posits as universal in his 1933 “Femininity”: “When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or female?’ and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty” (Freud [1933] 1959, 113). This reluctance/incapacity positions the child’s concept of sex between a genealogical past and a sci-fi future, an “in-between” state characterized by Sobchack as one in which children:

Not yet having been subjected to the lessons of experience and history . . . signify the subject of an experience and history yet to be enacted and inscribed. In this way, the child becomes the signifier of the “future.” But the child also simultaneously becomes the signified of the “past.” Its familiar identity and family resemblance are produced as visible traces of the past’s presence in a future safely contained and constrained by tradition and history. (1986, 11)

This conflation of sexual fluidity with the place of the child against a longer temporal backdrop invites deeper consideration of Elliott’s intense relationship with the alien as one that both fits into and deviates from the Oedipus complex as traditionally understood. E.T. may be Elliott’s imago and/or surrogate parent, but E.T. also—inasmuch as Elliott keeps his relationship with the alien secret from his mother—puts considerable distance between Elliott and his mother, effecting the boy’s surrender of his mother as libidinal cathexis. As such, E.T. may also be read as a repository for Elliott’s redirected object libido.

***E.T.*: Love Story**

In his classic treatment of narcissism, Freud suggests that the narcissistic person may love not only:

- (a) what he himself is (i.e. himself), [but also]
- (b) what he himself was,
- (c) what he himself would like to be, [and/or]
- (d) someone who was once a part of himself. ([1914] 1989, 556)

If we consider for a moment that Elliott's genital phase libido may not, in fact, be wholly contingent upon, or only revolve around, an anaclitic object relation derived from the heterosexual parental dyad, then we must entertain the possibility that E.T. is an object of Elliott's libidinal cathexis. E.T., as we have seen, may mirror Elliott to himself and so provide Elliott with a means of channeling narcissistic libido ostensibly outside himself, but truly back upon his own ego—if E.T. signifies only himself to Elliott vis-à-vis fantasy and not a genuine Other. Alternately, Elliott may love E.T. as the apple of one or both of his parents' eyes, having identified with his parent(s) and chosen an object most like himself to love in their stead—fitting the model for Freud's Leonardo case (Dean 2001, 124). Or, E.T., in his inchoate speech, child-like waddle, perpetual wide-eyed wonderment, and complete dependency upon Elliott, may represent to Elliott what he himself was as a toddler—casting Elliott as parental figure to E.T. But, then again, in his wise blinks and nods, middle-aged paunch, bald and shirtless, beer drinking, newspaper reading, father-clothes-wearing state, E.T. may represent the patriarchal figure Elliott would one day like to be. Alternately, in his feminine voice, replete with coos and purrs, clutching-and-patting hugs, dolled up, nurturing, eco-friendly, plant-bearing state, E.T. may represent the matriarchal figure Elliott would one day like to be. And last but not least, E.T. may represent to Elliott that vulnerable, dependent, and emotionally-sensitive part of himself he has let go in order to survive the physical loss of his father and the emotional loss of his mother. In any or all of these cases, Elliott libidinally cathects E.T. as a narcissistic figuration of himself. And much as Frommer (2000) articulates in his essay "Offending Gender: Being and Wanting in Male Same-Sex Desire," these libidinal cathexes of E.T. elude a heteronormative understanding of object libido; the differences and likenesses fueling Elliott's desire for E.T. are decidedly not based in genitality, for we—like these children—have been unable to definitively sex this alien other.

Finally, we might consider the above-recounted scene of Elliott's first kiss from yet another perspective—one from which Elliott and E.T. together share the experience of a first kiss through the schoolgirl. Though the film offers no scenes in which E.T. and Elliott "come out" as lovers, the film is nonetheless consistently interpreted as a romantic love story. Director Steven Spielberg himself characterized *E.T.*, admittedly his favorite film, as "a love story," as did a number of film critics (Ronge 2002). *The Guardian's* Thomson wrote, "It's a plain old love story, one with a twist: an inter-terrestrial love story," later describing the way E.T. "win[s] Elliott's heart" (2002). The hugs the two share and the intensity of their emotions—painted on their faces in tears and grimaces—lend further credence to the possibility that their relationship encompasses something more than friendship. It is Elliott's heartfelt declaration of love for E.T. that brings him back to life from a flat line. E.T.'s heart glows red whenever he encounters Elliott. Taylor captures the breathtaking passion of the parting scene, when E.T. begs Elliott to accompany him, "saying, simply, 'Come.' Elliott

responds: 'Stay.' E.T. closes his eyes and leans his head back, a look of exquisite agony on his face that wouldn't be out of place in the most rhapsodic passage of Puccini or Verdi" (2002).

However, from another perspective, the movie's final scene suggests a completion of the Freudian Oedipal cycle, wherein E.T. again pinch hits for the father. In the necessary resolution of the Oedipus complex, Freud proposes,

The object-cathexes are given up and replaced by identifications. The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexes. (1924, 664)

When E.T.'s index finger glows red and he tells Elliott that he will always be "Here," touching Elliott's forehead, we know that Elliott has fully introjected and identified with E.T. This introjection/identification enables Elliott to mourn E.T. in a way he cannot mourn his father, having lost his father prematurely. According to this reading, E.T. must now go home, because his period of usefulness in the construction of Elliott's masculinity has expired. That E.T. serves as Elliott's surrogate father is, of course, the crux of Heung and Sobchack's argument. However, this singular casting of the alien leaves aside a number of important questions, including but certainly not limited to: who/what constitute Elliott's libidinal object cathexes?

E.T., Trojan Horse

Wittig, in her essay, "The Trojan Horse," posits, "it is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine" (1984, 47). We may take the film *E.T.* to be precisely such a work of literature; for, while this filmic bildungsroman shines as a veritable success story, it also—like the story of the Oedipus complex—conceals a dangerous threat to the fixed sexual foundation upon which it builds psychic maturity—which threat is, of course, the "reality" that there is no such fixed foundation. In this sense, *E.T.*, apropos of the Oedipus complex, functions as a variation on Platonic anamnesis, whereby "the truth that has already been seen penetrates, again and again, into that which is forgetful of its origin"—wherein the "reality" of desire's mysterious origin, in all its polymorphous perversity, penetrates these fictions from within as a forgotten "truth" (Blumemberg 1993, 32). In *E.T.*, desire and sexual difference are coextensive and necessary only inasmuch as they are representationally received as such. Like the Oedipus complex, *E.T.* exposes the ostensibly necessary relationship between desire and sexual difference as science fiction—or, if you will (apropos of the famous proposition attributed to Freud that "Biology is destiny") a fiction of science that when taken for fact translates as fate.

Ironically, it is Oedipus' inability to repress, or to sublimate, his desire that proves his own undoing. In other words, it is Oedipus' failure to resolve the eponymous complex that—at least in part—makes for the tragedy of the myth. Paradoxically, it is Oedipus' oracular belief in the quotidian fairy tale of biology as destiny—manifested in his persistent privileging of a biological definition of family—that precludes recognition of the Other (the biological mother) as the site of his origin. (Until, that is, it is too late to reverse the sequence of events that end in tragedy.) This begs the question: Is it therefore only the inchoate, faithless state of Elliott's psychosexual development that enables him to recognize himself in, and love, E.T.? If this is the case, then *E.T.* suggests that representational diversity can script the Oedipus myth

and its derivative complex differently (consider what might have happened had E.T. been watching, say, *Brokeback Mountain*, rather than *The Quiet Man*), such that this capacity for recognition and love need not be irrevocably, tragically lost for those whose Other is in some way alien. More importantly, *E.T.* allows us to acknowledge the possibility that representation may not prescribe and render intelligible every experiential possibility. Indeed, to take seriously the possibility of an un- and/or multiply-sexed being and to recognize in the figure of E.T. an unknowable origin of sexual desire is to understand that the violent repression, or sublimation of the alien is not only coterminous with, but prerequisite to, the heterosexual nuclear family's originary function of winnowing so-called "sexual" difference and desire from polymorphous perversity, in order to fulfill Freud's promise of psychosexual maturity. *E.T.* thus reminds us that

It is the exception, the strange, that gives us the clue to how the mundane and taken-for-granted world of sexual meanings is constituted. [And that] Only from a self-consciously denaturalized position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted. (Butler 1990, 110)

Making *E.T.* Perfectly Queer

As Sobchack observed over two decades ago, in revealing the family to be a sociocultural construction, *E.T.* dramatizes those "processes which test and represent the coherence, meaning, and limits of the 'real' family as it has been constructed in patriarchal culture and suddenly exposed as horrific and alien-ated in relations and structure" (1991, 5–6). In the process, *E.T.* also necessarily reveals gender and sexuality to be sociocultural constructions. *E.T.*'s rising action draws extra-diegetic momentum and strength from the contemporaneous crusade of conservative narratives about family that absolutely rely upon conservative narratives about gender and sexuality for their preservation and promotion; *E.T.*'s denouement draws upon the will to power of these conservative narratives in the face of their own fragility. Premised in the conviction of Doty's 1993 *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, that:

Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into something" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along (1993, 16)

this paper suggests that *E.T.*'s enduring appeal lies not merely and not only in the film's feel-good effect for champions of the status quo of 1980s conservative familialism under siege; *E.T.*'s enduring appeal lies also in the film's queer progressive imaginings of fierce and fantastical new (and old) forms and functions of "family"—and in the identification and celebration of these by queer audiences.

In resolving the Oedipus complex on and through *E.T.*, Spielberg's child protagonist suggests to audiences that the heterosexual parental dyad is not a child's only route to psychosexual maturity; instead, various objects of affection may—at once or in succession—be oneself, one's father, one's mother, one's lover, and one's alien other. And while Freud repeatedly explored such possibilities, *E.T.* revisits them. But sadly, and tragically, this is a short visit. At the end of the film, in what one might regard as a Benjaminian "critical moment," wherein "the status quo [of conservative familialism]

threatens to be preserved" (Benjamin 1999, 474), *E.T.* and Elliott part ways and go home. Having shared an "encounter with the traumatic real . . . an encounter with a point of nonsense within the big Other (what the big Other cannot render meaningful)"—which encounter, however briefly, "frees the subject from its subjection"—they ultimately "pay the price for meaning [in this case, a place in the heteronormative social order] with [their] freedom" (McGowan 2007, 16–17). Though Elliott beseeches, "Stay," and *E.T.* implores, "Come," their time together must end. Persecuted for a queer relationality that is the privileging not of "*whom* one loves but *how* one loves" and for asking what many Lacanians consider to be "the explosive question of the real of sexual difference," both are forced to return to the illusory site of biological origin (Frommer 2000, 203; Feher-Gurewich 2004, 198). (See also Žižek's essay titled "The Real of Sexual Difference"¹² [2002].) *E.T.* returns to his parental dyad (we see only their shadows) and Elliott succumbs to the mythos of conservative familialism in the guise of his mother, now newly re-invigorated by the arm of a handsome male scientist (not coincidentally the lead scientist of the investigation team that almost killed *E.T.*) about her shoulders.¹³

The origin of sex may be alien to humans, but accepting it as science fiction would require these humans to alienate their humanity as they have come to understand and live it. *E.T.* must go home because they refuse to imagine alterity beneath/beyond/outside the bedrock of sexual difference. They will penetrate *E.T.* to death "in order to learn his or her secret"—that ostensibly sexual enigma of difference—before they will accept as impenetrable/unknowable an Other imbricated in an ethical relationship to their *own* alterity on par with "the Other's inhuman strangeness" (Dean 2001, 135, 131). The broader implications of such an aggressive approach to alterity—wherein otherness is domesticated into difference from oneself and sexual difference subsumes all other forms of difference—chill. And it is precisely this aggressive approach to alterity that makes for the unmitigated, emotionally uncompensated tragedy (rather, than, say, mere melodrama) of the film¹⁴ for spectators who themselves identify with "the Other's inhuman strangeness" and for this reason balk at the film's invitation to "turn the experience of pain into pleasure and . . . exchange a representation of irrevocable loss for a quasi-religious, ritual affirmation of the proposed transformative power and transcendence of . . . [conservative familialism] and self-sacrifice" (Plantinga 2009, 173). For the queer spectator to swallow as "feel-good" the sudden conversion of *E.T.*'s would-be murderer into Elliott's new father would be to renounce "a queer identity that's about transforming sexuality and revolutionizing gender . . . one that's about building community and family outside of traditional models; something that's challenging and seeking to dismantle the larger systems that are oppressing us in the first place" (Bernstein Sycamore 2004). In Stockton's terms (2009), to leave the theater bathed in warmth and with a glad heart is to stillbirth the queer child conceived in the film's progressive imaginings of fierce and fantastical new (and old) forms and functions of "family."¹⁵

But much as Doty's queer reading of the television sitcom *Laverne and Shirley* renders the show a "lesbian space" or "lesbian narrative" (1993, 51–7),¹⁶ a queer reading of *E.T.* suggests that the film's tragic, heteronormative ending by no means exhausts its queer "meaning potential" (Fiske 1986, 394). Inherently queer, the foregoing reading "refuses to allow the radical thematics of [*E.T.*] . . . to be dismissed as 'childish' by questioning the temporal order that assigns dreams of transformation to pre-adulthood and that claims the accommodation of dysfunctional presents as part and parcel of normative adulthood" (Halberstam 2011, 31). Indeed, Spielberg sends many of us—the spectatorial equivalents of

what Fetterley terms “resisting readers” (1978) and Sedgwick terms “perverse readers” (1993, 4)—home infused with the fervent hope that E.T. will forever live on in Elliott’s mind—if only as the deep-seated knowledge that adult constellations of sex and difference are little more (and nothing less) than socially constructed fairy tales, together with the memory that, as Dean suggests, “the other may be seen not as a threatening source of alien enigmas” (2001, 135) and that “real” difference—for all we know—comes from another planet.

NOTES

1. According to Stockton, the queer child grows “sideways” rather than “up” inasmuch as s/he deviates from such conventional, linear, and heteronormative progress narratives about child development as the Oedipus complex (among others) (2009). Halberstam elaborates on Stockton’s articulation of the queer child, whereby “childhood is an essentially queer experience in a society that acknowledges through its extensive training programs for children that heterosexuality is not born but made. If we were all already normative and heterosexual to begin with in our desires, orientations, and modes of being, then presumably we would not need such strict parental guidance to deliver us all to our common destinies of marriage, child-rearing, and hetero-reproduction” (2011, 27).
2. Such a queer reading defines a film as queer vis-à-vis its spectatorship, in keeping with the third of five models that Benshoff and Griffin put forth, whereby one might designate a given film “queer.” According to this model, “all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position—that is to say, one that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality” (2006, 10). This model resonates with Bruhm and Hurley’s definition of stories of queer child life as “not just ones we have to invent. These stories exist already [. . .] in a Wizard of Oz sense: they’ve been there all along if we’d only known where to look” (2004, xxxiv).
3. “Libidinal-cathexis” refers to the investment of psychic energy, or libido, in an object either imagined or real.
4. My assertion that Spielberg neither definitively nor exclusively sexes or genders his alien motivates my intentional use of the gender-neutral/gender-comprehensive pronoun “hir.” “Hir” (pronounced “here”) ranks among the most popular gender-free, or gender-neutral, pronouns in the genderqueer community (Conlin 2011).
5. One cannot help but here consider Lacan’s reading of the origin of the Freudian ego during what he termed “the mirror stage,” wherein a child acquires an ego upon first recognizing his own image in a mirror (2001).
6. According to the Oedipal model, the genital phase begins with the onset of puberty; at this time, a child’s raging hormones and developing ego render impossible either the continued childish, self-interested privileging of narcissistic libido over object libido or the repression of object libido. At this point, in order to preserve his own chance at eventual sexual gratification, the child must begin to resolve the Oedipus complex. The only way he can do this is to introject the object of his libido (customarily his mother, unavailable to the child because she already belongs to his father). Thus, a child decides that he will *become* what he cannot have. In becoming his parental libidinal objects—introjecting and identifying with them—a child is able to recycle object-libido back into narcissistic libido. Thereby defusing (at least to some degree) the sexual charge previously accompanying his

object-libido, this transformation facilitates the resolution of the Oedipus complex (Freud [1923b] 1949, 30).

7. For more on this phase, please see Freud ([1914] 1989, 547).
8. One man, one woman (both dwarves), and one boy wore the *E.T.* costume, collectively making for this shuffle (Calio 1982).
9. Or, as Halberstam puts it, “a queer model of ‘antidevelopment,’” in that Elliott resists conventional heteronormative developmental models (2011, 73).
10. I am indebted to Judith Feher-Gurewich for her incisive reading of Lacan.
11. Elaborating on Laplanche’s seduction theory, whereby “The child is seduced into intersubjectivity by meanings it cannot fathom, and these incomprehensible communications form the child’s own unconscious,” Dean laments the habit within psychoanalytic circles of “translating otherness into sexual terms” as a betrayal of the unconscious and therefore of “the psychoanalytic ethic” as well (2001, 134, 138).
12. Of Lacan’s seminar, wherein he draws the same restroom door to signify both “gentleman” and “ladies,” Zizek asks, “Is it possible to state in clearer terms that sexual difference does not designate any biological opposition grounded in ‘real’ properties but a purely symbolic opposition to which nothing corresponds in the designated objects—nothing but the Real of some undefined *x* that cannot ever be captured by the image of the signified?” (2002, 63).
13. Signifying the consolidation of cold, passionless rationality’s victory over fantastical, passionate romance.
14. For more on the distinction between unmitigated, emotionally uncompensated tragedy and what Plantinga terms “the paradox of melodrama,” whereby spectators receive “emotional compensation” for the negative emotions a given film elicits, see Plantinga (2009, 169–97).
15. Stockton argues that “the queer child” is only ever hailed into existence retrospectively, by the adult who finally parts ways with the straight identity assigned her at birth: “Straight person dead, gay child now born” (2009, 7). I want to extrapolate from this “backward birthing mechanism” (2009, 7) to suggest that the queer-identified adult who embraces *E.T.*’s fairy tale “solution” of conservative familialism similarly kills the queer child (Elliott, *E.T.*) by assigning him a straight identity.
16. Doty demonstrates the ways in which the series’ covert plot—to preserve Laverne and Shirley as a couple at all costs—constantly works to undermine the series’ overt plot—to find male suitors for Laverne and Shirley.

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