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# Queer Tableaux

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When I looked at the streets  
And when they looked at me  
—*The Void*, *The Raincoats*

The word *tableau* not only gestures to the specific aesthetic strategy of the *tableau vivant*, but also implies Sara Ahmed's work in which the table is significant for its status as a preferred object of phenomenological inquiry. Her work, which posits the table as a synecdoche for the house, serves in part to set the tone and orientation for what new directions in queer studies might do, to where they might point. Whether or not one accepts Ahmed's rejection of the so-called affirmative turn in favour of a politic of unhappiness, there is something to be gleaned from the way in which she sets the scene of such a politic:

A revolution of unhappiness might require an unhousing; it would require not legitimizing more relationships, more houses, even more tables but delegitimizing the world that "houses" some bodies and not others. The political energy of unhappy queers might depend on not being in house. [ . . . ] Indeed, reflecting back on *The Well of Loneliness*, we might note the significance of "the walls" as a motif: the walls create spaces; they mark the edge between what is inside and out. The walls contain things by holding up; they bear the weight of residence. In *The Well*, the walls contain misery, and the revolution of the ending involves bringing them down. In this film, the walls are container devices, but "what" they contain depends on the passing of time, shaped by the comings and goings of different bodies. Inside the house, we are occupied. *Things happen*.<sup>1</sup>

This extended quote not only speaks to the character pursued later in this paper, who is literally homeless, but also to the work of queer geography, whether of the rural/anti-urban or the suburban, insofar as Scott Herring and Karen Tongson locate queer energy precisely out of the doors of the house, as well as out of the walls of the Roman city.

## The Gayborhood

Jumping historical time periods and locals from the Roman city to an Old French designation of class is one way in which to move from the architectures of tables, walls, and houses to the comings and goings of different bodies that Ahmed locates within and

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1. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 106-7. (Emphasis mine.)

outside them. Speaking of the kind of uncritical anti-urbanism he is decidedly not interested in doing, Herring mentions the ‘gentrification of U.S. queer life in general.’<sup>2</sup> Gentrification is a useful way in which to think about the discourse of metronormativity in which and against Herring inserts/asserts his arguments and one extendible to archives both actual and virtual if we think in terms of what Sarah Schulman has referred to as the general ‘gentrification of the mind.’<sup>3</sup> Gentrification and metronormativity, like what gets contained by Ahmed’s walls, are both stories of movement and how movements both happen in and make happen spatial and temporal configurations. This is to say that to think about the literal position of a queer subject, that is, the place where the subject is materially and in relation to other subjects, is to confront the myriad ways in which that subject will be conditioned depending upon how proximate space is normatively differentiated and vice versa. In the context of urban space, by which is meant less a quantity than a quality of density, the spatial narrative that supports the queer subject is twofold — emigration and speculation. First, queer escapes a repressive and oppressive rural environment to seek amnesty, either in the form of celebrated welcome or anonymity, in an urban one. Subsequently, queer forages into the concrete jungle, creating and in pursuit of circuits of sexual partners and diverse sociabilities.

This narrative, however, has become increasingly contested, both for the way in which it upholds an imaginary boundary between rural and urban and for the subjects it obscures in the process. Resonating with Herring’s work, Tongson has described how queer conceptions of the urban might be complicit with more sinister ones of gentrification, suggesting that ‘the cultural value assigned to urban modes of queer life — to its mobility, style, innovation, improvisation, liveliness, and ‘contact’ — has appreciated urban property values while depreciating modes of racialized queer sociability.’<sup>4</sup> Significantly, then, urban modes of queer life appreciate not only urban property values, but also ‘upwardly mobile queers,’<sup>5</sup> who will eventually be able to inhabit such valued urban property. More, and to reiterate, these normativizing geographic processes — of gentrification, of metronormativity, of suburbanization — are mutually constitutive of both space and subjectivity.

At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the danger of thinking about gentrification on the scale of queer subjects or of connoting a causal relationship by uncritically collapsing the scales in between. As Neil Smith notes, ‘those who can be seen moving in are blamed for gentrification, whereas without a more analytical assessment those more powerful interests moving capital out of and into urban neighbourhoods are

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2. Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York UP, 2010), 11.

3. Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (forthcoming from Berkeley: U of California P, 2011).

4. Karen Tongson, ‘The Light That Never Goes Out: Butch Intimacies and Sub-Urban Sociabilities in “Lesser Los Angeles,”’ in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 364.

5. *Ibid.*

rendered comparatively invisible.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Tongson's and Herring's 'upwardly mobile queers' placeholder not only figures of metronormativity, but also relatedly homonormativity and neoliberalism, the queer narratives of which Herring sees present from at least the early twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, then, Herring posits six analytical and overlapping axes of metronormativity, which might be thought of as different forms of scale — narratological, racial, socioeconomic, temporal, epistemological, and aesthetic<sup>8</sup> — and adopts these as those in which a critical anti-urbanism might interfere. He synthesizes a toolkit of typographic terminology in order to describe and detail the methods of these interferences. Saying 'a toolkit of typographic terminology' locates Herring's leaning on traditions within mechanically reproduced print culture. He shows the failure of Walter Benjamin's hope 'that access to the tools of industry would democratize design for the masses'<sup>9</sup> at the same time that he reignites it. For example, in his discussion of 'critical rusticity'<sup>10</sup> vis-à-vis *RFD*, Herring uses the term 'boilerplate' to name both the mechanical process in which news material was circulated and the way in which 'a national and cosmopolitan gay male identity for literary public spheres across a post-Stonewall U.S. nation'<sup>11</sup> was secured. Contra to such massifying procedures, Herring terms the tactics in which he is interested 'paper cut politics.'<sup>12</sup> Herring also employs etymological/conceptual dyads, two of which are significant here: urban/urbane and anarchist/anachronist. Urban/urbane locates the way in which cities and their citizenry carry with them a sense of refined, polished, and superior fashion-forwardness. Anarchist/anachronist locates the way in which dominant cultural histories can be upset by inappropriate redeployments in the present. While the conceptual scales that Herring proffers are useful tools with which to do queer geographies, in terms of his own analysis, they perhaps come at the expense of attention to the material and aesthetic scales of the

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6. Neil Smith, 'Gentrification: Are Museums Just a Vehicle for Real Estate Development?' Lecture, *Keywords Program: Idees rebudes. Un Vocabulari per a la Cultura Artística Contemporània* (Barcelona: MACBA, 2008).

7. Herring, 32.

8. *Ibid*, 15-6.

9. Christine Harold, 'On Target: Aura, Affect, and the Rhetoric of "Design Democracy,"' *Public Culture* 21 (2009): 612.

10. Herring, 85: 'By this term, I refer not only to an actual geographic space removed from the metropolitan [ . . . ]; I also refer to a dynamic mode of queer critique and a novel structure of feeling, a rhetorical and emotional engagement with U.S.-based metronormativity that critiques any representation of the rural as an "empty" space removed from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stress or inequality. Suspicious of metronormativity, such critical rusticity also functions as auto-critique.'

11. *Ibid*, 77.

12. *Ibid*, 23: 'By itself, a paper cut rarely does significant damage since it never punctures the body's deep tissue. It does, however, cause a considerable amount of discomfort, often more annoying than dire. But an aggregate of paper cuts is another country. They may interfere, prod, agitate, and pester from a point of distraction to a point of disruption [ . . . ]. At their most successful, they are constant nuisances to the idealizations of any urbanized lesbian and gay imaginary [ . . . ]. At their most engaged, they become cultural remainders that, no matter how costly or inconvenient, thrive in the so-called boondocks of aesthetic intolerance.'

places and sites he addresses, such that just what counts as rural and stylistic for him is flattened and remains nebulous. Tongson, in lingering in the geographic specificity of the Inland Empire region of Southern California, perhaps not only offers a more particular picture of place, but also in doing so is able to read across scales of the local/regional, national, and global/transnational, even as her preferred unit of geographic measure — the suburb — might limit itself to a quality of the United States.

In terms of the independent film *My Own Private Idaho* (*MOPI*), the geographic specificity of the film is that of the US Pacific Northwest — the cities of Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, and the desert of Idaho — but because the film concerns street hustlers, the conceptual lens through which it makes sense to pursue the film is not one of spatial fixity but of what Herring calls queer infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> That is, what connects and disconnects these places, what, for Tongson, is most poignantly configured in the cloverleaf interchange. Having approached twenty years since its original theatrical release date and been commemorated in a collaborative exhibition between director Gus Van Sant and actor James Franco, *MOPI* is perhaps best known for its treatment or lack thereof of queerness itself and enactment by Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix. And in its contemporary reemergence, the film is perhaps all too susceptible to metronormative circulation. A reading of the film's queer infrastructure, however, shows the film equally, at least, to be performing something else.

Scenes of country roads both bookend the film and are important in characterizing the critically queer anti-urban Mike Waters character (Phoenix) in distinction to his unrequited love, Scott Favor (Reeves). In fact, as a shot of salmon swimming upstream would suggest, one way to view the film might be as one long detour between where the film begins and ends — on a country road in Idaho. Unlike the upwardly mobile movements of metronormativity and gentrification, we are drawn to the movements of Mike's body, movements of cruising, hustling, hitchhiking, and sleeping — movements that go nowhere, or at least that have indeterminate or recursive ends. From them and through the Mike character, *MOPI* opens up a space of queer infrastructure, a space akin to what Kathleen Stewart has called the space on the side of the road — “The “space on the side of the road” begins and ends in the eruption of the local and the particular; it emerges in imagination when “things happen” to interrupt the expected and naturalized, and people find themselves surrounded by a place [ . . . ] where the effects of capitalism and modernization pile up on the landscape as the detritus of history, and where the story of “America” grows dense and unforgettable in re-membered ruins and pieced-together fragments.”<sup>14</sup> While Stewart's project is technically an ethnography of southwestern West Virginia, the emergence of *things happening* when other things fall apart—an emergence that Stewart here shares with Ahmed—can speak equally

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13. Ibid, 154: “[ . . . ] the six-lane highways, the cloverleaves, the county roads, the suspension bridges, the no passing zones, the alleyways, the tollways, the stop signs, the exit ramps [ . . . ] the gravel, the tar, the asphalt, the buckets of yellow and white paint [ . . . ]”

14. Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton UP, 1996), 4.

productively to *MOPI*. In the opening shots of the film,<sup>15</sup> much is established along with the open road to confer Mike's anti-urban status—his costume and accouterments (rucksack and pocket watch), the pedal steel guitar soundtrack (later audible as *America the Beautiful*), and the handheld and time-lapse photographs. Additionally, we are privy to Mike's narcolepsy and imagined and reconstituted relationship to his mother. In his discussion of queer infrastructure, Herring (building on the thinking of Sigmund Freud via Benjamin via Judith Butler) describes the way in which melancholy spatializes as a way to talk about 'the psychic processes of those who pivot between — or who stand outside — a ruralized and an urbanized identification.'<sup>16</sup> Part Antigone and part Dorothy Gale, Mike works as a queer figure precisely in terms of the melancholic psychic topographies conditioned by his characterization as an orphaned white narcoleptic hustler. Toward an exploration of this topography we now turn.

### **I Love You and You Don't Pay Me**

Within the detour that is the narrative bulk of *MOPI*, the action varies from expositions of subcultural formation and bonding within a group of hustlers; intimate exchange between the two lead characters, Scott and Mike; homosexual sex between Scott, Mike, and johns; and heterosexual romance between Scott and his betrothed. An account of this action might be thought as playing on an idea similar to what Herring calls 'southern backwardness.'<sup>17</sup> Though no longer in the U.S. South proper, the 'urban squalor of Portland's and Seattle's homeless street hustlers'<sup>18</sup> conjured in *MOPI* does provide a region in which critical degradation takes place through means similar to those Herring charts in his discussion of the photographs of Michael Mead — 'Thrusting Pater's imaginary eighteenth-century French painter into the Internet age of a sexually "backward" "Deep South," Meads confounds any linear trajectory that might suggest his deference to or his extension of traditional archives of Western gay male art that naturalize queer urbanism in a museum or on the Web.'<sup>19</sup> *MOPI* partakes of a similar aesthetic strategy through its conflation and degradation of texts. Counterpoint to Mead's contemporary deployment of Wilhelm von Gloeden in the South and on the Internet, Van

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15. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wwAftKY1ks>

16. Herring, 173.

17. Ibid, 114: 'By "southern backwardness" I refer to a stereotypical characterization of the U.S. South [ . . . ] as a geographic region that is socioeconomically, culturally, and politically lacking, one that is seemingly committed to ideals of an uncritical rusticity. Such cultural lack also ties to a temporal "backwardness," most prominently expressed in the caricature of the U.S. South as a frozen region outdated by supposedly more progressive spaces across the nation [ . . . ]. Likewise, such southern "backwardness" also links to temporal norms that structure queer metronormativity in the form of trendy fashions or being in the know.'

18. Kathy M. Howlett, 'Utopian Revisioning of Falstaff's Tavern World: Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*,' in *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002), 165.

19. Herring, 106.

Sant recontextualizes Shakespeare's Henry IV plays as auteur-ly cinematized in Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* by admixing them with John Rechy's *City of Night* if that book had taken place in the Pacific Northwest.

Also similar to Herring's analysis is the way in which these confusions pivot on the shared trope of the uninitiated boy who, with varying degrees of intentionality, wanders into a subterranean derelict world. In Shakespeare's plays, Welles' film, and the character of Scott, this journey primarily (arguably) serves to foreground an eventual and inevitable return to a family of monetary and political prominence. In Rechy, and in the character of Mike, however, this journey is/becomes a way of life, one that is at once celebrated, or at least self-consciously accepted, at the same time that it becomes a necessary and painful deviation from the life trajectory afforded Scott. In this respect, Mike's queerness results from his inability to progress and confine his desires to particular narratives. Herring discusses this in terms of age — 'Because "Allen" and "Justin" are presumably in their late teens or early twenties, both fall outside this period of sexual experimentation that Howard outlines. The images thus move beyond standard time frames of southern white male same-sexuality and into an anachronistic queer time.'<sup>20</sup> Whilst age is certainly at work in *MOPI* as well, Scott tries to argue that any relationship of physical intimacy between two men is solely economic. Mike, however, queerly asserts himself against this model. What queers Mike as a hustler is not the homosexual sex acts in which he engages, but that he can imagine doing so without monetary compensation. He is out of time for the way in which he displaces same-sex intimacy from out of money to out of love. From this perspective, Mike's space on the side of the road becomes less about a space from which to hail a john and more about 'a state of drifting need.'<sup>21</sup>

### **I Like Your Twisted Point of View, Mike**

Or, rather, maybe less than a question of more or less, one of the important interventions of *MOPI* is its insistence on the raveling of Mike's white working class background with his queer desire. This is a point that complicates Herring's, at times, straightforward critique of the privileged mobility that brings queers to the metropole. For Mike's moves to and from the city are not determined by the terms employed earlier of emigration and speculation, but are indicative of 'the enforced nomadism of the disenfranchised.'<sup>22</sup> Speaking more specifically to the conditionality of Mike's enforced nomadism, Tongson remarks in her analysis of the Rodrigo character in Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*, 'financial and sexual independence are often confused for one another, especially when both become mobilized in the form of queer labor.'<sup>23</sup> In this light, it is significant that

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20. Ibid, 109.

21. Roger Ebert, 'My Own Private Idaho,' *Chicago Sun-Times* (18 October 1991).

22. Matt Bergbusch, 'Additional Dialogue: William Shakespeare, Queer Allegory, and *My Own Private Idaho*,' in *Shakespeare without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital* (New York: PALGRAVE, 2000), 213.

23. Tongson, *Relocations* (forthcoming from New York UP, 2011).

when the narrative of *MOPI* moves from the United States to Italy it is not by way of a direct flight from Portland but via a Holiday Inn off Interstate 85 outside Boise where Mike and Scott recognize a German john, Hans, with whom they engage in sex work and to whom they sell their motorcycle. More, Scott forsakes Mike in Rome, and it is once again through hustling that Mike is able to return to the United States. This, then, is one of the economic conditions that undergirds metronormative transnational circulation, one that Herring, at times, is perhaps too quick to dismiss in an effort to get to the anti-urbanism of the sites he visits.

Remaining in Italy for a moment, another film that comes to mind is Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*<sup>24</sup> — not only for its ostensible setting in Rome, but too for its engagement with a kind of critical rusticity in its 'pairing of art history and the "drift of desire,"' its narrative structure of 'overdetermined poles surrounding an elided middle,' and its focus on the precursor to the hustler — the artist's model.<sup>25</sup> Of import, here, however, and what initially drew attention to *Caravaggio*, is the tableau as discussed by Elizabeth Freeman.

Freeman uses multiple conceptions of the tableau in order to discuss Isaac Julien's film *The Attendant*, which she situates in the first wave of the New Queer Cinema, where *MOPI* is also situated. The interest here is not in the success of her specific application of the concept (to *The Attendant* and through sadomasochism), but the way in which it might also apply to *MOPI*. Initially, and like *Caravaggio*, the temporality of the tableau resonates with that of Herring's description of critically rustic intervention into southern backwardness — '[The tableau vivant is] a medium of historical return that never sloughs off the mediating presence of actual bodies.'<sup>26</sup> So, in addition to the way in which *MOPI* partakes of an aesthetic strategy of conflation and degradation on the level of content, so too does it on the level of form. Not only do all of the sex scenes in *MOPI* take the form of tableaux vivant, but also does one scene in particular in which the hustlers of the film appear as the cover boys of pornographic magazines with titles like *Go down on History*. Such a title would seem to come very close to describing Freeman's erotohistoriographic project in which 'various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce form(s) of time consciousness.'<sup>27</sup>

The tableau speaks not only to the movement and temporality of history — to that which, in this instance, traverses Shakespeare, Welles, and Rechy through sex scenes staged as tableaux vivant — but also to the movement and temporality of film itself. For Freeman also discusses the tableau in the terms of Marcel Hénaff who highlights its "double emphasis on motion and motionlessness" and the way in which it 'paradoxically

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24. Jarman's *Caravaggio*, as it is echoed in the film clip to R.E.M.'s *Losing My Religion*, also conjures the musical referent of *MOPI*'s title — the B-52s *Private Idaho*.

25. James Tweedie, 'The Suspended Spectacle of History: The Tableau Vivant in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*,' *Screen* 44.4 (2003): 388-9.

26. *Ibid*, 380.

27. Elizabeth Freeman, 'Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,' *Social Text* 84-5 (2005): 59.

establishes and eliminates distance, presumably because it seems to invite the spectator into the scene.<sup>28</sup> This second conception of the tableau, which allows for motion and motionless and seems to invite the spectator into the scene, might be thought in concert with Jean-Luc Nancy's thoughts on film. Moving away from representationalist critiques that foreground the gaze and the forceful importations of perspectives from which films then necessarily become viewed, Nancy theorizes what he calls the regard, or "a mobilized way of looking," which he associates not only with looking, but also with respecting and thinking.<sup>29</sup> The way in which this pertains to the tableau is that, for Nancy, we are given over to regard in those scenes of a film that, in a certain sense, are the least filmic, scenes that are still, immobile, and/or that juxtapose mobility and immobility. The tableaux vivant of *MOPI*, as well as those shots in which we first encounter Mike against the time-lapsed Idaho landscape, are scenes like these. Finally, this latter sense of the tableau, one that establishes and eliminates distance and that offers a meaning that one is not mastering, speaks to the difference between Herring's and Tongson's archives. While Herring, with his *anti-*urbanism and *counter-*stylistics is sometimes caught up in an oppositionality that might ultimately uphold the urban, Tongson, through her re-conceptualization of remote intimacy, sidesteps the potential pitfalls of accounting for an aesthetic in terms of style. Instead, she proffers a more performative orientation toward the aesthetic in that, although we might unite her archive in its temporality or anglophilia, is more about a relationship between objects that remain disparate.<sup>30</sup>

### Dancing on Our Grave

Mike's queer experience of time as a hustler, regarded through the tableau, is compounded by his queer experience of time as a narcoleptic. Etymologically a combination of the Greek *narke* for numbness or stupor and *lepsis* an attack or seizure, the word narcolepsy shares its root with narcotic,<sup>31</sup> as is accentuated in the film by the hustlers' frequent indulgence in drugs. The condition of time interrupted and

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28. Freeman, 'Turn the Beat Around: Sodomasochism, Temporality, History,' *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 19.1 (2008): 46-8.

29. Ian Balfour, 'Nancy on Film: Regarding Kiarostami, Re-Thinking Representation (with a Coda on Claire Denis),' *Journal of Visual Culture* 9 (2010): 35-6: "A rightful look is respectful of the real that it beholds, that is to say it is attentive and openly attending to the very power of the real and its absolute exteriority: looking will not tap this power but will allow it to communicate itself or will communicate with itself. In the end, looking (*regarder*) just amounts to thinking the real, to test oneself with regard to a meaning that one is not mastering."

30. Tongson, *Relocations*: 'I have come to imagine remote intimacies describing the communities for whom intimacies cohere across virtual networks of desire through radio, music, television, on the internet, and now through online social networking sites. Remote intimacies account both technically and affectively for the symbiosis that can happen between disparate subjects.'

31. Narcolepsy, 'Dictionary.com,' *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (Random House, Inc.), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/narcolepsy>.

experienced as a series of seizures of stupor is also oppositional to dominant standards of time. As Judith Halberstam notes, ‘Within the lifecycle of the Western human subject, long periods of stability are considered to be desirable, and people who live in rapid bursts (drug addicts for example) are characterized as immature and even dangerous. But the ludic temporality created by drugs (captured by Salvador Dalí as a melting clock and by William Burroughs as “junk time”) reveals the artificiality of our privileged constructions of time and activity.’<sup>32</sup> In *MOPI*, narcolepsy is the temporal portal through which, independent of his specific place of geographic occupation, Mike returns to a melancholic topography figured as a space on the side of the road in Idaho. Mike’s melancholic disposition might be thought in relation to a number of different lost objects — his mother, his father/brother, and his friend/lover — and across a number of different conceptions of mourning and melancholia that Herring mentions — Freudian, gender, gay, and geography — but of import here are the latter two.

Gay melancholia expands from a case in which there was an object that was lost to one in which the queer subject, having already been denied feasible recognition of the object within heteronormative society, experiences ‘a preemption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love.’<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, and from the perspective of Mike, Mike loses his unrequited homosexual love of Scott to Scott’s proper progress and maturation of finding a girlfriend and returning home, from the country to the city, to collect his father’s inheritance. On another hand, and more symbolically, Mike is the lost object of homosexual love, as his narcolepsy recalls condemnations of queerness as somatic illness and resonates with the cultural background of the AIDS pandemic in 1991, a background that would otherwise go all but unmentioned in the film and ‘an especially unrealistic omission in a film about gay hustlers living and (sex-) working in urban America in the early 1990s.’<sup>34</sup> The conflation of narcolepsy, queerness, and AIDS extends beyond and around the film, as in an interview in which Phoenix and Reeves, however ironically, insinuate that viewers of the film should heed caution in the event that they catch narcolepsy.<sup>35</sup> This conflation might provide one way in which to encounter critically Mike’s whiteness. Within and beyond the context of the New Queer Cinema in which *MOPI* might be located (and even more specifically here the New Queer Road Movie), and like some of Herring’s archive, *MOPI* partakes of ‘a cinema of white normativity;’ however, it does so productively, as José Muñoz has suggested of the films *Frisk* and *Safe*, films that ‘analyze whiteness and death

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32. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York UP, 2005), 4-5.

33. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford UP, 1997), 147.

34. Mark Adnum, ‘My Own Private New Queer Cinema,’ *Senses of Cinema* 34 (2005), [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/new\\_queer\\_cinema](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/new_queer_cinema).

35. David Román, ‘Shakespeare out in Portland: Gus Van Sant’s My Own Private Idaho, Homoerotics, and Boy Actors,’ in *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain* (New York UP, 1994), 322.

as individual tropes and, coterminously, as imbricated phenomena.<sup>36</sup> Here, think particularly not only of the carnivalesque funeral of the Bob/Falstaff character toward the end of the film that interrupts the simultaneous austere funeral of Scott's former mayor father, but also of when, after rejecting an offer for a ride from a man in a Mercedes Benz in an affluent part of town (Hans, incidentally), Mike wakes from a narcoleptic episode in Scott's arms beneath a statue that reads *The Coming of the White Man*.<sup>37</sup> More than a sexual pun or an analogy between the treatment of Native Americans and homosexuals, the work this shot does is to negate the universal positionality of whiteness by pointing to the particularity of Mike's white embodiment.

Accompanying this particular symbology figured, in part, by Mark's narcolepsy is the geographically specific literal and psychic space onto which it opens up. The uncomfortable situations that put Mike to sleep often take place on the sides of sidewalks and roads and fantasmically return him to a home in Idaho. Homeless not only literally on the streets of Portland, but also unable to locate the mother that might afford him a more normative kind of home, Mike returns both physically and psychically to Idaho and its roads. This suggests a reading as well of 'a geography melancholy' in which 'an urbanized queer made an unconscious and foreclosed identification with whatever counts for the rural once the rubber meets the asphalt.'<sup>38</sup> Mike's space on the side of the road in his own private Idaho is both a literal place that he returns to — that he will never be able to leave, that simultaneously goes nowhere and everywhere, and that has a face — and a spatialized psychic topography in which he returns home and finally finds his mother. As such it recalls Herring's analysis of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* in which he attends to the geographic association between the loss of her father and the loss of the rural, evidenced in such remarks as 'I can't really imagine him anywhere but Beech Creek.'<sup>39</sup> While Mike too can't really imagine his mother anywhere but Idaho, and certainly is unable to physically locate her anywhere else, he also — despite his movements via hustling through Seattle, Portland, and Rome — cannot really imagine himself anywhere else either.

The privacy of Mike's own Idaho, however, and his seemingly solitary experience is misleading, or might not be taken literally, or might be extended to and incorporated by viewers of the film. This is not to suggest Idaho as 'as an "empty" space removed from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stress or inequality' in which anyone might insert herself. Rather, like the potentiality for collectivization and politicization proffered by gay melancholia, and like Herring's analysis of Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, Mike's 're-racination' in the space on the side of the road, his 'imaginary re-rooting into the

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36. José Esteban Muñoz, 'Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the New Queer Cinema,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4 (1998), 137.

37. <http://images.amazon.com/images/G/01/video/stills/ken-riv.jpg>

38. Herring, 173.

39. *Ibid*, 177.

places that one, willingly or not, leaves behind,<sup>40</sup> might gesture to the different particular roads from which viewers may have traversed and/or to which they return. For, in a similar way in both scenes that bookend the film, the viewer is situated alongside Mike on his road: In the end, when an omnipotent point of view shows Mike, sleeping, being picked up from the road and put into a car, 'it's either you who's the person picking him up or you're him, just being asleep.'<sup>41</sup> And, once again, in the beginning, when Mike yells at a rabbit, he also yells at the viewer, 'Where do you think you're running, man, we're stuck here together!'

But, emerging momentarily from the film, where exactly are we stuck? On a more topical, material note, earlier was mentioned Herring's positing of the narrative emergence of metronormativity in the early twentieth century. Here, he is, in part, building on the work of John D'Emilio, who 'argues that gay identity first emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century through the ascent of wage labor in industrializing cities and the independent sexual lifestyle this wage labor afforded.'<sup>42</sup> David Eng, who also builds upon this work, asks, in light of what he somewhat confusingly calls queer liberalism, 'How might we describe the relationship between *late* capitalism and gay identity?'<sup>43</sup> In the terms of this paper, one way in which to work toward some provisional answers to this question might be through the subprime mortgage crisis. On the one hand — and in terms of a queer liberalism that works complicity with the consolidation of late capitalism and gay identity — a certain form of gay identity has been reinserted back into the household from which it had to depart in order to constitute itself through wage labor. This would narrowly describe, for the most part, the form of 'the white male borrower [who was] offered the safest of mortgage contracts.'<sup>44</sup> More productively, though, we might look to those commonly portrayed as victimized by the crisis for their corruptibility in the face of currency and contracts, those of the so-called *subprime class*. In their work, *In Praise of Usura*, it is precisely in the excess and inflation of the sin of usury in which Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos locate a *de-domestication*, an *unhousing*, of desire that might work against a restoration of normative sexual and racial boundaries in order to 'separate the temporality of speculation from the obligation of debt.' Such a separation would be precisely the kind of queer unhousing through which Mike could conceivably love Scott without his having to be paid.

To return, then, to the Ahmed quote with which we began the present discussion of unhousing, what happens when we excuse ourselves from the table and step beyond the walls of the house? One thing that might happen is that we emerge and encounter the

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40. Ibid, 43.

41. Bergbusch, 'Additional Dialogue,' 211.

42. David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 26.

43. Ibid, 29.

44. Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos, 'In Praise of Usura,' *Mute* (2009), [http://www.metamute.org/en/content/in\\_praise\\_of\\_usura](http://www.metamute.org/en/content/in_praise_of_usura)

more expansive geography in which our house is housed — whether it is the town, the city, the country, or the suburb. In the terms of the epigraph from *The Raincoats* (the band's name recalling the drizzly climate of *MOPI*'s Pacific Northwestern particularity), we might look at the road, and the road might look at us. This is to suggest that the geography of affect — the spatialization of melancholia that produces a psychic topography — might too be thought in reverse, in terms of an affect of geography, or what Herring calls geography melancholy. Discussed here has been the attention a film pays to both movements that traffic between geography and affect. Film per se offers an additional remove from our houses, literal and psychic, in the regard it potentially has for us and that we have for it in moments of stillness. In *MOPI*, this stillness is spatialized on the side of the road, a place so quotidian as to almost be passed by. Against the 'commercial imperative to indulge in the representation of movement'<sup>45</sup> in film — which might be complicit with a metronormative imperative to move to the city, or a neoliberal circumstance in which sexual and economic freedom are conflated — *MOPI* gives us pause at a space on the side of the road. In so doing, the film, rather than making for us a place at the proverbial table instead offers us the inviting distance, the remote intimacy, of a queer tableau.

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45. Balfour, 41.