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Long Live the Queer:

Demystifying Noncitizenship in *Uncle Frank* and *Pain and Glory*

by

Andrew Manker

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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*Thank you, Dr. Bettina Tate Pedersen, for always believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself and for giving me the necessary help to go on my current adventure.*

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## They Will Always Call Us Faggots: We Must Own It

*“And I grew up living a schizophrenic existence in the family and in a social structure where every ad in every newspaper, tv and magazine was a promotion for heterosexual coupling sunlit muscleheads and beach bunnies. And in every playground, invariably, there’s a kid who screamed, FAGGOT!, in frustration at some other kid and the sound of it resonated in my shoes, that instant solitude, that breathing glass wall no one else saw.”<sup>1</sup>~David Wojnarowicz*

In this quote from David Wojnarowicz’s memoir, he traces a history of queerness—and erasure—going as far back into his life as childhood where he begins to understand his existence with respect to the other kids in the playground. He realizes in this moment from childhood, that his existence will seemingly always be less than an ideal existence, for he is a homosexual, and a queer. But where is the word “faggot” learned? Does it come from the playground? Of course, the word did not originate there, but how does this word come to be in society as a consistent weapon to demean queer people? Was it from our brothers? Our parents? The schoolyard, the church, or the government? Perhaps many of them in some cases; regardless, while it is important to note where a word like “faggot” might stem from in our personal lives, it is just as important to understand the intention behind these words. Many might just mimic such a word while others disseminate it with the homophobic intention of instigating hostility towards and violence against queer people. What is clear in Wojnarowicz’s memoir is his own remembrance of being instantly ostracized by a single word, severing him from the world he knows. Sara Ahmed’s conclusion in *Queer Phenomenology* understands moments like Wojnarowicz’s hearing faggot on the playground as “disorienting”; she writes, “Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s

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<sup>1</sup>Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. Vintage Books, 1991: 105.

belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable” (157). Wojnarowicz’s moment on the playground works doubly to disorient him from the world around him and himself. Because he no longer has a sense of security with who he is (or might be), the playground is no longer a safe space where he can safely engage in childish activities, and whatever person he might become is distinct from the kids around him. Because of one word, his sense of self and the world around him become incongruous. Moments like this begin to shape the world around him, and similar moments happen everywhere and every day to queer people—becoming lodged in their unconscious mind and shaping what queer means in a negative way.

I begin this paper with a quote from Wojnarowicz because of his keen sense of queerness during the midst of the AIDS epidemic—one of the most explicitly hostile periods towards queer people, when many publicly discussed AIDS as some curse given to gay men from God. Not only does his text speak volumes about the entanglement of tyranny, empire, and the Christian faith, but his words also affect two specific emotions that lie at the core of this paper—grief and anger. These emotions tether Alan Ball’s *Uncle Frank* to Pedro Almodóvar’s *Pain and Glory* because both protagonists must each come to terms with the grief and anger that shackle them to the homophobic worlds they grew up in—both recalling how the word “faggot” induced fear and anxiety over who they might be. What this thesis will focus on is the ways in which such words lodge themselves within the unconscious minds of each protagonist. Additionally, these films reiterate the homophobia rampant in the world Wojnarowicz’s memoir archives. Why these films work so well together in discussion (other than the obvious queer connection) is how both Uncle Frank and Mallo have memories of homophobic comments weaponized against them which are based in some religious tradition and which they must both come to terms with.

Where Mallo receives most of his younger education from the “Father” at his Catholic school in Spain, Uncle Frank imbibes similar sentiments through the authority figures in his childhood, namely his tyrannical father—Daddy Mac. Although each film prioritizes the narratives of these characters in adulthood, each of their invasive memories of childhood begin to highlight the issues of physical and psychic pain both Uncle Frank and Mallo struggle with as adults. In both films these memories are directly connected to the psychic trauma which manifests itself similarly in both characters. Where Mallo uses heroin to alleviate the physical pain he feels from this psychic trauma, Uncle Frank (an alcoholic) struggles to avoid the pain he feels and inevitably returns to alcohol to avoid his pain.

In this thesis, I use Ahmed’s theory on queerness and the lines we follow and might benefit from deviating from, José Muñoz’s theory on queer temporality and the need to cultivate hope—creating a utopic understanding of queerness—, Julia Kristeva’s theory of the foreigner within ourselves (making up our unconscious being), and Lauren Berlant’s theory of the infantile citizen to best understand the nuanced depictions of queer pain and queer futurity in *Uncle Frank* and *Pain and Glory*. Through this queer lens, I contend that Uncle Frank and Mallo must trace back the pain in their lives—pain that entangles itself in memories of childhood—to transpose the grief in their lives into hope by amputating the internalized homophobia in their respective lives.

## Part I – Crises of Memory &amp; Foreignness

*“Foreigner: a choked up rage deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency, opaque, unfathomable spur. The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder.”*<sup>2</sup> ~Julia Kristeva

As a queer man, I felt deeply connected to Kristeva’s words the moment I read them—especially this quote—, for to be queer in a conservative family is to be silenced while a “choked up rage” grows deep inside. Before I digress, I must address the negative connotation a word like “foreigner” carries otherwise Kristeva’s metaphor will be lost. She makes clear how dominant groups subvert “others” and “foreigners” in new and insidious ways. Her context recasts the sentiment this word carries and explores the psychic issues connected to those who would use it to ostracize people from society. Kristeva is concerned with how “foreignness” might change meaning in an ever changing, rapidly growing world: “[S]hall we be intimately and subjectively, able to live with the others, to live *as others*, without ostracism but also without leveling? The modification in the status of the foreigners...leads one to reflect on our ability to accept new modalities of otherness” (2). This modification and rethinking of “foreigners” allows for the necessary space to consider the ways in which our own psychic personhood ostracizes each of us from everything, so—rather than alienate other people because we are insecure about the fragility of our psychic personhood—we must, instead, inspect the internalized language which shapes this psychic personhood. In other words, where the word foreign was used to reject

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<sup>2</sup>Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. 1991. Translated by Leon Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1991: 1.

minority groups, and Kristeva uses it to consider the ways in which each of our psyches internalize the othering we have experience. We all see the world differently and have different access to different discourse and react differently to this discourse. That is *our* “foreignness.” For example, while I was growing up, I would hear comments from a parent or relative like, “That is so disgusting” or “There is so much sin in the world,” whenever I saw a gay couple in a movie, on television, or in public. These types of comments, although not as violently othering as words like “faggot,” began to other me from myself and my queerness. Because I am gay, these comments depicted my gayness as something that can only be sinful or ugly. Thus, whenever I participated in what it meant to be queer, I felt ugly and sinful: to become queerly hopeful, I needed to amputate every negative facet of language used to describe my queerness.

Through this innovative way of thinking about “foreignness,” Kristeva’s work calls attention to the effect language has on the psyche, and thus why queerness is better understood through this work. Extending this metaphorical exploration of “foreignness” to films like *Uncle Frank* and *Pain and Glory* is productive when dealing with queer characters like Mallo and Frank because their queerness is at the epicenter of familial exile and causes them to feel foreign to their own families. What I mean is Mallo’s and Frank’s narratives allow for a queering of Kristeva’s foreigner. Because Kristeva’s work takes a semiotic approach to issues of the psyche, I can better trace the homophobic discourse in each film back to the fictional representation of psychic trauma both Mallo and Frank are entrenched in. Their limited understanding of their own queerness is made clearer through Kristeva’s theoretical “foreigner.” It is their fear of exile from their own families (which is to say the norm or ideal) that traps them in a homophobic limbo where moments in adulthood are constantly battered by memories of childhood. Their queerness, like my queerness, makes each of us witnesses to the psychic pain felt when our families remind

us of our foreignness. To put it simply, if the psychic pain is never examined, if the “foreigner’s face” is never examined, then notions and feelings of queerness will always be accompanied by grief whether it might come in waves or all at once. I must make it clear that Frank and Mallo are not at fault for their grief, but they can take control of what being “foreign” means to them.

Kristeva’s sobering sense of language’s impact on the unconscious proves valuable in times of self-discernment for a queer person because the exterior world around us treats our sexuality as some disgusting, perverted way of life. While *Uncle Frank* is primarily a story about Frank’s adult journey to accept his queerness, his foreignness—once examined and accepted—challenges the family dynamic constructed by his tyrannical father, Daddy Mac and makes his bond with Beth, his niece, even stronger. It is through his bond with Beth that he sees a glimpse of what family can mean with respect to his sexuality. She helps make his journey home for his late father’s funeral more productive. In fact, her words voice over the opening scenes of *Uncle Frank* and highlight the volatile relationship between Frank and Daddy Mac: “He was smart and funny and considerate. He was the kind of person I wanted to be. But he was the one Daddy Mac picked on and belittled in front of everybody. Uncle Frank was good at hiding how much it hurt him, but I could see it” (00:06:58-00:07:14). While Beth is unaware as to why Daddy Mac “picks on” Uncle Frank, her perspective is valuable for how she understands that something about Uncle Frank—inherent to him—makes him a victim of his father’s shame. To put it simply, Uncle Frank is not loved—but hated—by his father for some hidden reason unbeknownst to the rest of the family and also the viewer. While his family might not participate in said hateful resentment and behavior, their silence only intensifies the relationship between Frank and Daddy Mac. Daddy Mac’s hateful behavior and words in conjunction with the family’s silence are two facets of language that continue to shape the “foreigner: a choked up rage” within Uncle Frank.

Something to note about this “rage” is that the longer Frank avoids it, the harder it will be to come to terms with such a beast. His avoidance of living an openly queer life was necessary for his own safety both physical and emotional; however, with his father’s inevitable death, he is given an opportunity to safely live a queer life to its fullest—in the open.

To put this type of conundrum into words, Frank’s avoidance of the foreigner within is rooted in internalized homophobia—a natural response to Daddy Mac’s “fire and brimstone” way of raising children which gives Frank no option but to fear his own queerness. He must address “the foreigner’s face,” curated by the homophobic discourse surrounding his entire upbringing, and it is the fear of what this face might look like that pushes Frank to run from his family and move to New York in the first place. The audience’s only access to this unconscious face that Kristeva foregrounds is through Frank’s memories which “display the secret manner in which we face the world, stare into all our faces, even in the most familial, the most tightly knit communities” (3-4). What should have been a tight-knit community, his family, was actually a place of hostility, fear, and loneliness. Because he had no one to talk to about his queerness, Frank shoved it deep inside himself until he felt he could escape the harmful gaze of his family. In this way, family gatherings become moments where his queerness is like a dark cloud hanging above the family; although no one discusses or addresses it, their faces remind him of the queerness he was forced to hide.

In, perhaps, a less volatile yet still unwelcoming family, Salvador Mallo also struggles with feeling welcome in what should be his tight-knit community. While his narrative reveals more about his childhood than Frank’s, both must engage with their own memories to fully grasp the stranger (foreigner) within themselves. In Mallo’s case, his narrative plunges right into two distinct points from his childhood while he is shown submerged in water as an adult: the first

memory showcases him as a young boy with his mother (and other women from their village) doing laundry in the creek; and the second shows him as a young boy joining a Catholic school for early education. What both these memories highlight are the joy Mallo feels about life and how he figures himself in life as an individual. Unfortunately, as his second memory shows, Hermano José María (played by Luis Calero) slowly begins to mutate Mallo's individuality and joy into something he can control. He wants to mold Mallo into a man who fits perfectly into the agenda this Catholic school has for boys:

HERMANO JOSÉ MARÍA. Hermoso nombre. ¿Te gusta cantar? ... Pero te gusta la música, ¿verdad? (Beautiful name. Do you like to sing? ... But you like music, right?)

YOUNG MALLO. Sí, me gustan los Beatles y las películas. (Yes, I like the Beatles and movies.)

HERMANO JOSÉ MARÍA. Pues aquí ampliaremos y encaminaremos tus gustos hacia temas menos paganos. (Well, here we will broaden and direct your tastes towards less pagan subjects; 00:08:40-00:08:55).

The irony of Hermano José María's tactful message of using the word broaden right before "direct" is uncanny, for the last thing he wants Mallo to do is broaden his taste. He wants to mold Mallo into a man who is acceptable to the Catholic church, so instead of being allowed to partake in the world's beauty, Mallo is being directed towards religious instruction and Catholic music as a way to indoctrinate him. What follows directly after this conversation is Mallo's adult voice revealing how once the school found out he could sing, he was no longer allowed to take any classes that were not music related. The Hermano perverts Mallo's joy for music by limiting what music can be as a means to limit who Mallo can be.

Shortly after these memories, Mallo voices over the scene while various images of the body's makeup flip across the screen. Mallo shares with the audience each aspect of the physical pain he feels every second in his adult life. While this physical pain sets the plot into motion, the psychological pain he feels underneath it all becomes more apparent as he turns to heroin for an escape from the physical pain that torments him. Subsequently, during his drug induced comas, Mallo's memories from childhood begin to converge on a single moment that awakens something in him, a deep pain he feels with his queerness and how it specifically relates the relationship he has with his mother. The reason for his mostly isolated life as an adult unravels as memories reveal more about Mallo's relationship with his mother. Another way of thinking about this unraveling is what Ahmed describes in her book, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, as "a process of becoming intimate with where one is: an intimacy that feels like inhabiting a secret room that is concealed from the view of others" (11). What may be true for Mallo, or at least becoming true as his narrative develops, is how memory works in this secret room where he is able to become intimate with himself. In becoming intimate with his psychic pain, he can reclaim agency over his physical body and how he relates to the world around him.

Ahmed's secret room, a useful metaphor to help understand Mallo's narrative, is amplified by considering Muñoz's notion of the "not-yet-conscious" from his book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: "The not-quite-conscious is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present" (21). Where Ahmed is more concerned with the present and how people like Mallo, Frank, Ahmed, and I might need to readjust, or reorient, ourselves when entering different spaces, Muñoz advocates for a queer

future that exists only as potentiality and is ever transforming. He understands that queer people are not fully queer because of the foreigner they have been made to become, so they must constantly reimagine what queerness means to them—which looks to a potentiality in what queerness can be. Regardless of these nuanced musings on queerness, both Ahmed and Muñoz assist in a psychological and sociological study of what intensifies the pain buried deep inside Mallo. It is Mallo's pain that leads him to heroin and the heroin that leads him to unlocking memories.

Even though each film showcases families from different countries, the similarities between the queer men and their relationships to the adults who raised them is uncanny. Both Daddy Mac and Mallo's mother share a certain fear (whether they are always aware of it or not) for the future of the family and how the family image is some fragile antique that must be protected at all costs. This fear over the fragility of the family is what Ahmed calls a socially binding gift where “parents imagine the life they would like for their child,” and thus “imagin[e] what they will ‘give’ to the child as a gift that becomes socially binding” (85). Although gift is the metaphor that Ahmed chooses to use, I might better describe this gift as a cyclical curse that families continue to perpetuate until a child can escape or cure the curse (sometimes both are true). Moreover, the toxicity of this curse lies at the core of any socially binding “gift,” for this “gift” forces the child to assume a certain role in the family dictated by the head of household: “The demand for return acquires force, while the return accumulates ‘the force’ of the gift. We might note, however, that...[t]he failure of return extends the investment. So the gift, when given, produces the one who has received the gift as indebted and demands its endless return” (Ahmed 86). While Frank's “gift” is to live a heterosexual life—forced upon by him Daddy Mac—,

Mallo's "gift" requires him to live the life of a good Catholic son who must make his family—namely his mother—proud, which insinuates a life of heterosexuality just as much.

The root of this issue is the fact that children do not exist to be marionette dolls for their parents to fulfill some puppet fetish. They have their own goals and desires and needs, which should be beautiful and exciting, yet authority figures fear a loss of control over something they have created. Perhaps their notions of "God" (as a fear-inducing and angry God) become entangled in the power dynamic of the children they have authority over. In her book, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Berlant describes this exchange of power dynamics and ideas as an issue of "infantile citizenship" where familial authority figures internalize an anxiety-induced tyranny from those in power (namely, religious institutions and government): "But the infantile citizen's faith in the nation, which is based on a belief in the state's commitment to representing the best interests of ordinary people, is also said to be what vitalizes a person's patriotic and practical attachment to the nation and to other citizens" (27-8). Nation, here, means an actual nation; however, throughout the rest of her book, nation can also substitute for family, for families of a nation often fear a loss of power over their own liberties and, subsequently, reiterate the same methods of control the nation uses over them to control their offspring. And so, the cycle continues. Why this idea of infantile citizenship is so important is because I believe families and nations, alike, share similar makeups in that to be a family member requires a socially binding "gift" just as much as being a citizen in a nation does.

Although I do not intend to excite chaos or anarchism, I do believe both nation and family *must* realize that having members of the nation or family who have varying sexualities is okay. My queerness—just as Ahmed's or Mallo's or Frank's or Muñoz's queerness—does not cause or equal chaos. It does not cause or equal anarchism. What does cause chaos and

anarchism is the socially binding gift where “[h]eterosexuality becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life. The child who refuses the gift thus becomes seen as a bad debt, as being ungrateful, as the origin of bad feeling” (Ahmed 86). The irony of this entire dilemma is how family’s and nation’s need for control over their “citizens” will be the cause of their downfall. Regardless of who might be at fault, the reality is that nation and family are on the downfall unless they learn to adapt. They are the reason for their own fragility. Berlant tethers this quandary to the core of nations (and families as well) “because the stability of the core image is the foundation of the narratives that characterize an intimate and secure national society, the nation must at all costs protect this image of a way of life, even against the happiness of some of its own citizens” (175). Berlant makes it clear that both families and nations prioritize the security of their power and ideals over the individual. This is even clearer when considering Mallo and Frank, for both queer men’s happiness and well-being was exhausted for fear of their queerness and eccentricity—risking the status of the family (and nation by extension).

Just as Mallo must forgive himself for needing to exist outside of his family’s social debt, Frank needs to first address the ways in which his homophobic family dynamic ruled by Daddy Mac, the family’s patriarchal tyrant, shapes his exterior world, so he can also become more intimate with himself. Moreover, Kristeva notes how the dynamics of human interaction, even at the most intimate levels of social groups, reflect something to an individual, like Uncle Frank. More specifically, our perspective on the world reflects to us in a certain way that we must investigate to fully understand each dynamic we have with these groups. Kristeva believes an investigation of the sorts is imperative to recognize the stranger “within ourselves” so “we [can be] spared [from] detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem,

perhaps makes it impossible, [t]he foreigner...disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (1). To recognize this foreigner within, then, Frank must amputate the traumatic pieces of his memory that keep him from connecting fully with his queer self. Otherwise, according to Kristeva’s notion of the foreigner, he will always be discomforted and self-destructive. He must look at the rampant homophobia in his family and name it, then he will be able to find comfort in the queerness and homosexuality that makes up his unconscious.

Another method of thinking about this kind of horrific mirror-world that is Frank’s family and the pain he feels when interacting with them is through Berlant’s examination of “social personhood”:

When the meaning of a person is reduced to a body part, the identity fragment figures as a sign of incomplete social personhood; its dialectical Other, the stereotype, masks this violence in false images of simple self-unity, as though the minoritized body were naturally and adequately described by the identity that names it violently. (103)

Frank’s social personhood, within his family, has been reduced to Daddy Mac’s emotional abuse in response to Frank’s queerness. Frank has been made to feel that his social personhood is incomplete, and it is the violence of Daddy Mac’s words and perspective that sews Frank’s queerness to feelings of hate and unwantedness. Frank cannot find the beauty and hope that his queerness should make him feel until he addresses the stranger within himself who is largely comprised of his father’s homophobia. Kristeva’s work on the stranger within only strengthens Berlant’s notion of “social personhood” by illustrating “[t]he violence of the problem” and the violence’s connection to “the crises undergone by religious and ethical constructs” (2). Frank’s

and Mallo's respective foreignness display the violence of infantile citizenship and the pain caused to queer people by the family-as-extension-of-nation complex. This is to say that through these films, with respect to an individual's foreignness due to their authority figures and families treating them as noncitizens (nonhumans), intensifies the pain hyper-present in both Frank's and Mallo's lives.

## Part II – Pain &amp; Disorientation

*“For it is on account of having no one at home against whom to vent their fury, their conflagration of love and hatred, and of finding the strength not to give in to it, that they wander about the world, neutral but solaced for having developed an interior distance from the fire and ice that had seared them in the past.”*<sup>3</sup> ~Julia Kristeva

Kristeva’s words through a queer lens make the psychic trauma caused by homophobia within a family painstakingly clear, for queer individuals are given no space in the exterior world. Queer individuals must trap their queerness in the unconscious to protect themselves from those who are meant to protect them. As a result, their queerness begins to marinate in fury, love, *and* hatred. Frank’s and Mallo’s queerness exhibit this queer paradox of a sort because both carry love and attraction for other men but have been taught and raised to hate that attraction. More specifically, in *Pain and Glory*, Mallo voices over a sequence of images where he shares his physical and psychic pain: “I started to know my body through pain and illness. I lived my first 30 years pretty much in the dark, but soon I discovered that my head and what was inside it, besides being a source of pleasure and knowledge, held infinite possibilities for pain” (00:10:37-00:10:57). Mallo shares his psychic pain as an adult, and his narrative converges on absolving this pain. Through memory he begins to sift through his psychic pain while he uses heroin to manage his physical pain. In muting his physical pain, Mallo is able to inspect memories that continue to affect his psychic pain as an adult—pain that keeps him from making art and pain that perverts the love he once had for life.

While much of his adult life on screen does not include his mother, his memories seem to revolve around her. In one of his final conversations with her (later in the film), Mallo communicates his need to explore the world and every aspect of life, and how he could not do

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<sup>3</sup>Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. 1991. Translated by Leon Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1991: 9.

that while still living with her. In this conversation the unresolved tension from his own independence (contrary to his mother's wishes) is ever present. To put it simply, he needed to leave home because his social personhood would always be tainted by his mother's view on life and the family. What she does not realize (because she makes his leaving home about her) is her infantile citizenship pushed Mallo out of the home. Her rigid ideals of family-nation-church exist as the catalyst for his departure. Mallo does what he needs to do as an adult by finally addressing his mother in a way that both provides respite for himself and grace for his mother (a noble path to take); as a result, his mother replies, "Te pregunté si querías que fuera a vivir contigo. Dijiste que tenías un estilo de vida que no podías compartir conmigo." ("I asked if you wanted me to come live with you. You said you had a lifestyle that you couldn't share with me"; 01:31:51-01:32:03). Mallo and his mother understand that although they are discussing his lifestyle as a filmmaker, the real conversation is about his sexuality. If his mother joined him in Madrid, then Mallo's ability to live as a homosexual or queer male would be obstructed. Mallo's mother asks a question that unconsciously seeks to reclaim her son's personhood and reclaim what is not hers.

Although her approach is less than tactful, Mallo understands his mother's pain and replies with "Mamá ... lo siento mucho por no haber sido el niño que querías. Cuando solías decir: '¿A quién se parece este niño?', No lo dijiste exactamente con orgullo. Y yo estaba consciente de eso.... ¿Te he fallado solo por ser como soy? Lo siento mucho." ("Mom... I'm very sorry for not having been the kid you wanted. When you used to say: 'Who does this kid take after?' You didn't exactly say it with pride. And I was aware of that....Have I failed you just by being the way I am? I'm really sorry"; 01:32:42-01:33:24). Mallo is forced to bear his own pain and grief, as well as that of his mother. He reflects on how even as a child he understood the

reality of his relationship to his nuclear family. He needed to leave so that he could create worlds that allowed him to reorient himself as a queer person. Settling this dynamic through Ahmed's perceptive approach to heterosexuality and a straight line proves most helpful: "The normalization of heterosexuality as an orientation toward 'the other sex' can be redescribed in terms of the requirement to follow a straight line, whereby straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, direct, and honest" (70). For instance, Mallo's mother cannot comprehend Mallo's need to escape the grips of this straight line; as a result, she conflates his refusal to let her move in with him as some sort of selfish antic, but the reality is Mallo could not risk having his mother move in with him. She not only reminds him of the straight line he cannot follow, but she also becomes a symbol for straightness, constantly reminding him of the supposed values he cannot live up to simply because of his queerness.

Not only does she not understand his grief, but also she never truly transcends her submission to the aforementioned family-as-extension-of-nation complex. She cannot even give Mallo an answer to his vulnerable question; instead some of her last words speak to some claim Mallo's mother believes she has over his life. Ahmed's description, "To identify with the family would be to wish for its approval (to become a good subject) and thus to desire what 'the family' desires: the reproduction of its line," (74) and analysis of Freud's case concerning a lesbian woman helps to illustrate the grief that the family-as-extension-of-nation complex causes a queer person:

[F]or the daughter, being the source of injury is itself 'painful.' Such pain could be read as a bodily identification with the parents....She both desires what is off the family line and feels pain for the way that desire becomes the origin of familial hurt. In other words, her pain is caused not by the failure to follow the

family line (which would make her pain closer to shame), but by witnessing the ‘grief’ that this queer departure causes for others. It is the intimacy of this pain and grief, as the ‘point’ at which bad feelings meet, that reminds us how queer lives do not simply transcend the lines they do not follow. (75)

This analysis can be used to better understand this brief conversation between Mallo and his mother, for Mallo wishes his mother no ill-will. In being who he is, the foundation of his desires requires a new future that has not been decided for him. In choosing a queer life, he is reminded daily of how his desires cause his family pain. Although he escapes his family geographically by moving out after high school, Mallo cannot escape the bad feelings met every time he creates a new line—which is to say every time he moves closer to what is queer. What complicates (but potentially provides a solution to this familial pain) is Muñoz’s hopeful queer sentiment which roots itself in the present by “looking back at a no-longer-conscious that provides an affective enclave in the present that staves off the sense of ‘bad feelings’ that mark the affective disjuncture of being queer in straight time” (24). Mallo needs to address the intimate feelings triggered by his conversation with his mother. He needs to look back at what appeared to be “no-longer-conscious” to keep him grounded while in the vortex of bad feelings that stem from his upbringing.

Although Mallo’s queerness is not instantly revealed in the plot of the film, his story converges on a “coming out” to his mother of the sorts. He, a queer man, lives a private life with little to no mention of family by blood except for in his memories—an important detail to note. The family he chooses to care for him in adulthood, namely, Mercedes (played by Nora Navas) who takes him to doctor appointments, Zulema (played by Cecilia Roth) who is an old friend, and Federico Delgado (played by Leonardo Sbaraglia) who is an old lover and becomes the

inspiration for Mallo's newest film. While he is open about his queer love with his chosen family, it is his "closeted" life from his mother that deeply afflicts him. It is this deep affliction that he must discover and amputate and why every memory concludes if not revolves around the relationship he has with his mother. Mallo's memories seemingly try to tell him something, or (more realistically) Mallo is trying to let go of the pain that stems from his leaving the "straight line" and thus his family and mother. Mallo arguably feels grief for needing to leave his mother behind but also anger for having to as well.

An even clearer depiction of familial bad feelings is exhibited in *Uncle Frank*, through Frank and his relationship with his father, Daddy Mac. Daddy Mac tyrannically rules over his family. Even though Frank lives as a queer man in New York, he occasionally returns home under the guise of heterosexuality and must continue to witness his psychic trauma caused by the subversion of queerness under the family-as-extension-of-nation model. Daddy Mac, in this way, is what Berlant defines as the infantile citizen in her book: "[D]emocracies can also produce a special form of tyranny that makes citizens like children, infantilized, passive, and overdependent on the 'immense and tutelary power' of the state" (27). In Berlant's analysis, the infantile citizen defines the world with a limited capacity for difference because tyranny is internalized in the patriarchal head of the family and forced upon the family. Because Daddy Mac has internalized a specific type of manhood created by the state (but also in his understanding of faith and the Bible), he, then, unconsciously perpetuates this same type of tyrannical power over his family. In other words, Daddy Mac has been trained into an adulthood where he is passive and infantilized by the state: he reiterates his manhood through an infantile performance of masculinity through the state's requirement for men to be "moral" and strong. His reiteration is entrenched in unthinking behavior. In his world, this is the only potential future

for an American citizen (which is to say no future for queer individuals because he equates queerness with immorality), so he then implements the same type of infantilizing power over his children and extended family alike. There is only one future, one line for children, and it is straight for Daddy Mac.

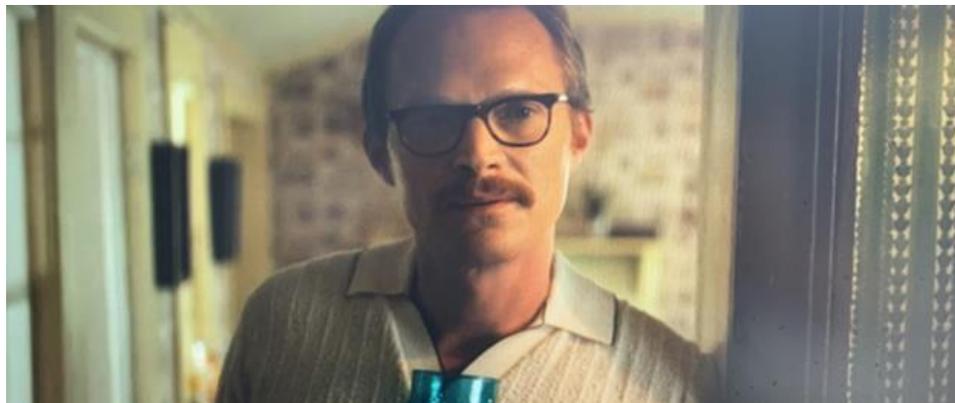
Berlant augments this extreme, and often violent, version of citizenship and tyranny by tracing it to national culture: “[T]he only thing the nation form is able to assure for itself is its past, its archive of official memory, it must develop in the present ways of establishing its dominion over the future. This is one reason reproductive heterosexuality and the family always present such sensitive political issues” (56). Berlant recognizes the fragility exhibited in the infantile citizen and those under the authority of this citizen. Daddy Mac’s infantile citizenship requires validation through his family’s submission to a rigid line they are required to follow. This line has three notable requirements: the family must completely obey Daddy Mac, they must be heterosexual, and they must believe and perpetuate the ideals enforced by Daddy Mac. These requirements are most heavily evidenced in the scene from *Uncle Frank* where Daddy Mac is opening gifts for his birthday. Positioning himself at the head of these familial gatherings on his recliner (although, perhaps, throne is a more precise description), Daddy Mac celebrates those who seemingly follow the line drawn out for them by Daddy Mac. For example, when Mike shouts at his son, Bullet, Daddy Mac says, “Hey, now. That’s how you handle a rambunctious child” (00:05:13-00:05:19). He sends a message to the entire family that the father’s exertion of power must be swift, violent, and angry. He leaves no room for resistance or rebellion, for the father’s word is law.

What becomes evidently clear with the sustainability of the infantile citizen is the constant state of anxiety and fear of loss of power this infantilization perpetuates. Because its

existence requires a submission to the power of the state and perpetuates this power over the family, the infantile citizen fears anything or anyone who might offer a glimpse into a different future that would eclipse the infantile citizen. This fear is intensely shown in the scene where Daddy Mac is opening a birthday gift from Uncle Frank:



Daddy Mac looks over at Frank with contempt while everyone else in the room sits uncomfortably silent from (00:05:39-00:05:44; e.g. Figure 1).



Frank, excluded from the family's circle, stands in the doorway—in the margins of his family's gathering as an outcast foreigner (00:05:45-00:05:50; e.g. Figure 2).

Using staging and lighting, these images (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) highlight the tension between Daddy Mac and Frank. In the second image (Fig. 2), Frank is split from the light and the shadows. This splitting gives the sense that Frank is both present but also not. In the same way, his sense of self is split, for Frank lives a dual life which continually collapses the negative

feelings he has from familial pain of the past with his present life as a queer man living in New York. This scene exemplifies all of the complex emotions, primarily grief and anxiety, that stem from the family-as-extension-of-nation complex. To make matters even worse, Daddy Mac chastises Frank for the gift Frank got him: “You think I’m too old to polish my own shoes, need a goddamn machine to do it?” (00:05:39-00:05:44). To which Frank responds, “Of course not. No, I... It’s... I have one” (00:05:45-00:50:00). This brief dialogue works doubly because the gift Frank tries to give to his father in some hope they might have one thing in common works as another tool for Daddy Mac to humiliate and ostracize Frank. In occupying the same space as his tyrannical father, Frank must stand in silence, for he can never be welcome so long as he is queer, which is to say he will never be welcome so long as Daddy Mac—the infantile citizen—lives and rules. The two cannot exist at the same time. Daddy Mac’s infantile citizenship directly conflicts with Frank’s queerness.

Consequently, as long as Daddy Mac lives, Frank must abort or swallow his own queerness if he wishes to participate in any family event, and thus his queerness is a rejection of heterosexuality; for Daddy Mac, to be queer is to diminish heterosexuality. Daddy Mac knows that Frank has already refused this inheritance ever since Daddy Mac caught Frank in bed with Sam when they were each sixteen years old. Ever since that moment, Daddy Mac looks at Frank like an ungrateful child who can neither repay a debt nor follow the straight line. Because Daddy Mac’s Evangelical Christian faith requires an unquestioning belief in what this faith believes is moral, he is not allowed to understand Frank’s queerness, for it is a perversion to this faith and thus not allowed. This is to say that if Frank wants to be a family member, he must be Christian; here, Christian means (and will only ever mean) to not be queer. In this way Daddy Mac is incapable of understanding his blind submission to “[c]ompulsory heterosexuality” because the

infantilizing nature of his religion requires an unquestioning belief in it. Moreover, his blind faith (meaning faith equals blindness) and requirement for those who wish to participate in the family insists on an acceptance of Ahmed's aforementioned gift which "diminishes the very capacity of bodies to reach what is off the straight line. It shapes which bodies one 'can' legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one cannot" (91). In this sense, Frank is suspended between the straight line he can never follow and reaching a future that exceeds any straight line (or any line at all for that matter).

Daddy Mac intensifies this feeling of suspension for Frank in two distinct ways: Daddy Mac is a reminder of the death threat he gave to Frank if he ever caught him living queerly again and how Frank never made peace with Sam's suicide. Sam's suicide and note for Frank doubly inflict Frank with a never-ending feeling of grief because his first love at sixteen chooses Ahmed's straight line in the form of self-destruction via suicide while he chooses the straight line as a means to survive his family until he can safely escape said family. His pushing Sam away at sixteen forever haunts him since he both loses his young love but also the life of another queer person—someone he relates to:

YOUNG FRANK. We can't ever do that stuff again.

SAM. Frank.

YOUNG FRANK. We have to stop now...if we want any chance to be normal and not end up perverts. Do you want to be a faggot? A queer? Do you want to go to hell? 'Cause it's a sickness. And God hates it. Don't ever come near me... or talk to me again. (01:10:00-01:12:50)

In this traumatizing memory that looms over Frank throughout the entire film, young Frank reproduces Daddy Mac's infantile citizenship as a safety measure to exist "safely" in his family.

He unfortunately uses Sam as a praxis for his own queerness to avoid any physical (and emotional) censure from Daddy Mac—a decision that haunts him for much of his adult life. Kristeva’s words help to explain this type of phenomena in that where this queer angst and masochistic behavior stems from is the foreigner within. In other words, because a queer person wants to avoid directly hating themselves, they might choose another queer person to use as substitute. In young Frank’s case, he feels it is in his best interest to expel Sam (and in doing so, also expel his own queerness) from his life so he can retain some form of family during his adolescent life. He is, in this way, reacting normally to the discomfort one feels when they are at odds with the norm; she writes, “Confronting the foreigner” whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel ‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy’” (187). In losing his composure, Frank falls prey to the enticing security that infantilization offers—namely his father not killing him. Daddy Mac’s threat to kill Frank is enough to momentarily force Frank back under his control.

Nonetheless, these explosive bad feelings looming over Frank are best understood through what Ahmed presents as disorientation. Frank, never having absolved himself of these feelings, continues to live a cyclical life of pretending for his family to follow the straight line (this happens whenever he visits home) and pretending to live without a line (this happens whenever he is in New York as a queer man). This disorientation takes root when Frank verbally assaults Sam as a result of Daddy Mac’s threat, for “[b]odies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support...and reorientate their relation to the world. So, too, the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative...depending on how they seek to (re)ground themselves” (Ahmed 158). Frank tries to reground himself by tethering

his queerness to Sam and then trying to expel them both. In this act of expulsion, he not only fails to regroup—which is to say reorient—himself but also fails to address his own fragmented self. Frank’s fragmentation only highlights Muñoz’s declaration that “[w]e crucially need to map our repression, our fragmentation, and our alienation—the ways in which the state does not permit us to say ‘the whole’ of our masses” (55). In *Uncle Frank* Daddy Mac operates as the state in that he does not validate Frank’s existence. He understands homosexuality and queerness to be some faculty that can be removed through prayer and abstinence. There is no queer future so long as Daddy Mac reigns. There is only violence and grief for anyone who challenges his infantilization.

As I stumble through Frank’s oppressive fragmentation, I turn to Berlant’s musings on Queer Nation as a way to strengthen Muñoz’s approach to mapping out our own fragmentation:

Queer Nation uses the allure of commercial and collective embodied spectacle to beckon *you* toward a different sort of citizenship....[J]ust as *you*, the desiring citizen, enter the sphere of what appears to be mutual consent, an invisible finger points back at you. It unveils your desire to see the spectacle of homoculture without being seen; it embarrasses you by making explicit your desire to ‘enter’ and your need for ‘permission’ to identify. (172)

Because the standards of citizenship within the family-as-extension-of-nation model both silence and ostracize Frank, he fragments himself to partially participate in both worlds which are in complete opposition of each other. Where Berlant is most useful is her proposed beckoning of that which is queer. Frank in this way is beckoned to New York in hopes of a queer future; however, this beckoning both frightens and excites him. He, unfortunately, does not realize he cannot escape the embarrassment he feels when enjoying homoculture *until* he addresses his own

fragmentation. Remnants of his compulsively heterosexual identity from childhood still chase after him. The invisible finger, then, both points to his own queerness but also Daddy Mac's disgust and hate for this queerness.

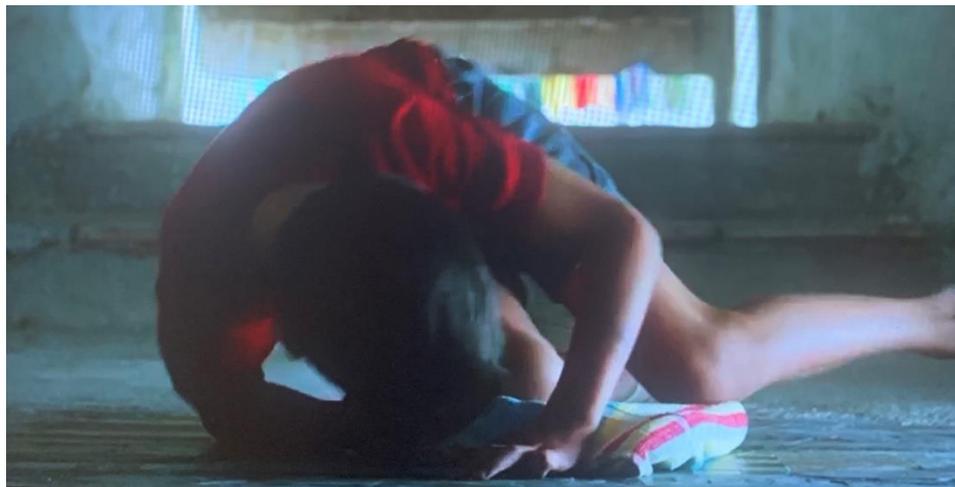
This invisible finger pokes and prods the extremely fragile facade Frank lives behind, a facade that convinces Frank he can live into his queerness while abiding by straight time. This is to say that Frank cripples his queer possibilities and uses straight time as a crutch for not having to address his own fragmentation. Thankfully, Daddy Mac dies and becomes the catalyst for Frank "[t]o see queerness as horizon" where "straight time is interrupted or stepped out of" (Muñoz 32). When Daddy Mac dies and outs Frank in his will to the entire family, there is a moment where all Frank had been using to sustain the duality and fragmentation in his own life comes crashing down onto him: "To my oldest son, Francis Mackenzie Bledsoe, Jr....I leave nothing but disgust with the filthy and unnatural perversion he engages in with other men, and shame that he carries my name" (01:09:00-01:09:25). This moment of disorientation unfurls the security Frank had built around himself out of fear of having his family react in the same way Daddy Mac did. In Ahmed, this inevitable shattering within Frank is echoed in that "[t]he point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do)," rather it "is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope" (158). Although Frank's disorientation sends him running out of the house to the lake where he loved and lost Sam, he has the potential to finally address his own fragmentation and reorient himself to the future.

Similar to Frank's disorientation during the will reading is shown during one of Mallo's memories where he quite literally loses his footing at the sight of an older boy showering. While

the effect of disorientation is similar, the cause for disorientation is more hopeful and less violent than Frank's moment, for Mallo is not being outed to his entire family during a will reading. He is simply presented with a beautiful boy who radically shifts Mallo's perspective on beauty, desire, and attraction:



Mallo stares at the naked body of Eduardo (the boy he tutors) and becomes disoriented from the space and world around him (01:39:51-01:39:53; e.g. Figure 3).



Young Mallo becomes undone and falls to the ground as though his enamor of the naked Eduardo literally shakes his stability in the world (01:39:53-01:39:55; e.g. Figure 4).



Eduardo stares back at young Mallo falling to the ground (01:39:55-01:39:57; e.g. Figure 5).

In the first image (Fig. 3), young Mallo stands opposite Eduardo and stops the moment he sees Eduardo's naked body. Additionally, in the first two images (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4), Mallo is cast in the shadowy part of the room which works perfectly to symbolize how Mallo is both physically in the dark and metaphorically in the dark about queer desire. In this sexual awakening of sorts, young Mallo begins to recognize the beauty in something he has been raised to believe should only be beautiful to women: the curves of the male body, the muscles highlighted by light and shadow, and the softness of these curves juxtaposed by the strength of the muscles.

Despite the darkness in the first two images, the third image (Fig. 5) places Eduardo's body in angelic lighting as though his body should be worshipped for its beauty. What this series of images show is the disorientation that physically moves Mallo's body. To emphasize the disorienting feeling Mallo feels when seeing the beautiful naked male body, Mallo's falling is shot in slow motion. This memory is vital to understanding how Mallo reacts to his first notions of queerness, for "[m]oments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground" (Ahmed 157). This throwing up of the world is

to say that Mallo's perspective, which he thought to be concrete and secure, is instantly upended and shaken when he realizes he finds beauty in the male body. In one moment, everything he thought he knew about desire and love must be reevaluated.

## Part III – Amputation and a Cultivated Hope

*“It is a queer imagining that traverses friendship and gossip, strolls through the archives on a Sunday afternoon, and so much more. The archives is a fiction. Nobody knows that better than queers—people who have had to cope with the fiction of a socially prescribed straightness. Queers make up genealogies and worlds. So let us write it down.”*<sup>4</sup> ~José Muñoz

Muñoz speaks to a perspective, here, that gives life new meaning—with queerness being at the epicenter of what life can be. He makes two distinct points: (1) history is a glimpse, a fraction, of what I denote as the infantile family-as-extension-of-nation model and thus *is fiction*; and, (2) because this is true, queers have the hindsight to refuse this fiction and create new worlds, meaning to create new definitions of love, intimacy, family, and citizenship, so queers *must* write it down. Although Ahmed’s focus is on the necessary disorientation of queer people, her work echoes the sentiment of Muñoz, for through the queer individual’s disorientation, the infantile family-as-extension-of-nation model becomes equally disorientated. This compulsively heterosexual model, then, is becoming queered through people like Mallo and Frank; she describes, “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. As I have suggested, the effects of such a disturbance are uneven, precisely given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living—certain times, spaces, and directions” (161).

Daddy Mac’s will backfires on Daddy Mac when what was written as a means to destroy Frank actually destroys the family-as-extension-of-nation complex instead. Rather than reiterate the straight line which operates through tyranny and fear, Frank’s family dispels the remnants of Daddy Mac’s infantilization and transforms into something revolutionary. Of course, they are shocked just as Frank is from the reading of the will, but their shock is not from a place of fear or

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<sup>4</sup>Muñoz, José. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 2009, 10th ed., New York UP, 2019: 121.

anger, rather, it simply surprises them. Their reaction requires Frank's participation. If they wish to move forward (which they all seemingly do), Frank cannot avoid reorientation forever.

Frank's sister Neva, the main proponent of this reaction (at least most apparent), tries to make this desire for something new that can include Frank's queerness by reaching out to Frank after Daddy Mac's final will is read by the attorney. What might be the longest twenty-five seconds in this film, as horrific and traumatic as it may be, ends with a gentle hand reaching out.

Neva's soft and loving hand is, as Muñoz states, "[A] call to end groups, hierarchies, and families [and] a call to replace those previous systems of classification with new circuits of belonging" (126). Frank is not ready in that single moment for this call but needs it, nonetheless. Neva's reaching out invites Frank's queerness into something new even if he is not quite ready yet. To accept this future and find peace, he must search through his memories and allow his sister to absolve the deep pain and grief his father caused him. His escape from the will-reading sends him to Sam's tombstone signifying a conclusion in the memory that he both avoided and which kept him in a state of disorientation. This, then, propels him to return to Neva's hand and push for Muñoz's utopia: "[I]t is a call to think about our lives and times differently....Utopia in this book has been about an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning. I offer this book as a resource for the political imagination" (189). Muñoz's utopia makes a call to action: Frank, Mallo, and those who wish to live into their queerness like me must reimagine their own fragmentation, so we can reorient ourselves and insist on that which is always to come—a future of belonging where our queerness pushes us to reimagine the present. The family-as-extension-of-nation complex, in and of itself, does not capsize or advance utopian ideas, but when it is unaware of its own submission to infantile citizenship (which arguably happens more often than not) there is no potential in the future, only pain and grief.

Neva's extending hand that reaches out for Frank is her way of saying, "I am sorry we have failed you, but we are here now. In this way, Neva attempts to augment the Bledsoe family with what Muñoz sees as queer potentiality: "What we need to know is that queerness is not yet here, but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality. And we must give in to its propulsion, its status as a destination. Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness's pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel" (185). Neva seemingly feels queerness's pull to invite a new type of family—one that refuses infantilization, one that is dynamic and adaptable to new definitions of citizenship and intimacy. Frank's narrative converges on this moment. Just as he has been chasing after a queer potentiality that he unconsciously knew could not coexist with Daddy Mac alive, so does his narrative want so deeply to be utterly queer. Once he returns to Neva's reaching hand, he has the motivation and trust in this hand to introduce his family to his partner, Wally (played by Peter Macdissi). As his narrative comes to an end, his newly defined family sits around a picnic table with Frank, Wally, and Beth living in the joy that their newly defined family can offer them—a symbol of the hope Muñoz describes as futurity.

Just as hopeful, if not more, is Mallo's narrative which ends with the film's last shot showing Penélope Cruz, who plays Mallo's young mother, and Asier Flores, who plays young Mallo. In this shot, the camera pulls away to reveal Antonio Banderas, as Mallo directing another film: it is his own story which until this moment we have understood as just memory. We now see that the memories are the film which adult Mallo can now make free of pain and free of writer's block. While Mallo was, overall, a very successful filmmaker and writer, his pain (both physical and psychic) kept him from writing new stories; more specifically, it kept him from creating new worlds where queerness is written down and shared. The disorientation he feels when seeing Eduardo's body during one of his last memories pushes him to a breakthrough in his

writing. This memory, in addition to the final conversation he has with his mother, is highlighted through Ahmed, for “[t]he point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope” (Ahmed 158). Because he is queer *and* a writer, his writing is thus queer. With much earnestness, Muñoz makes it clear that queers must write their experiences down, so that life can be constantly challenged to never be static or frozen in time: “When ‘future generations’ are invoked, the poet is signaling a queerness to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear” (25). Where the compulsively heterosexual world wishes to infantilize people under the family-as-extension-of-nation complex, queerness cultivates a hope where there was only anxiousness and fear. Mallo’s writing cultivates such hope in his own life, and thus all queer lives, for his world-making will reach future generations.

Another way of thinking about this cultivation of hope is through Ahmed’s description of life after the straight line: “If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can respond with joy to what goes astray” (178). The response to this reorientation to life without a straight line is and always will be joy. Mallo returns to filmmaking to conclude his narrative with the joy of creating worlds just as Frank’s concludes with the joy of a new type of family gathering. Each of their films works as prime examples for how queerness works dynamically to redefine life for everyone—life where there are no rigid lines that we must follow but only hope in what might come.

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