Dualities of Safety and Terror in Queer Fiction

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Abstract

In American culture, the home is one of the core spaces of 'family values' that theoretically rejects queerness and nonconformity. However, queer fiction offers a counterpoint to this framework. By reclaiming Gothic and speculative elements for queer narratives, writers are able to reimagine the home, including the home-as-symbol. In particular, this article will examine the home and how female characters experience it as a site of both potential safety and potential terror. In part, this is born of a conflation of the feminine and monstrosity. These characters "maintain a discomfort with the scripts of heteronormative existence" (Sara Ahmed, *Queer Feelings,* 151). Here, I will look at the way that women conjure monsters for their protection (*Starling House,* Alix E. Harrow), are themselves objectified and made monstrous ("The Husband Stitch," Carmen Maria Machado), are haunted by generational traumas (*The Haunting of Alejandra,* V. Castro), and are monitored and demonized by an authoritarian government (*I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* Marisa Crane). While the physical space of the home *can* operate as a space of privacy and safety, social expectations of heteronormativity and gender do not stop at the threshold of the home, and so gender expression/sexuality can still clash with social expectations in this space.

Keywords: queer representation; family; female Gothic; domesticity; female heroine, gothic fiction.

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1. Family Values

In American culture, the home is a core space of 'family values,' a space that theoretically rejects queerness and nonconformity. From the mainstream view, the family has been culturally coded as a white, nuclear unit consisting of one (straight, cisgender, masculine) father and one (straight, cisgender, feminine) mother and two-point-five children, ideally in a house in the suburbs. The pressure to conform to this model of home and family—one centered around both literal and metaphoric reproduction of cisgender and heteronormative existence—has been critiqued by queer scholars for decades, including (but certainly not limited to) the likes of Judith Butler (2000), Lee Edelman (2004), José Esteban Muñoz (2009), and Alison Kafer (2013).

Lisa Duggan coined the term "homonormativity" in 2002, defining it as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay

constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2002, 179). Homonormativity operates under the idea that gay politics shouldn't seek to dismantle the systems-as-they-are, but rather should seek inclusion in these systems. The nuclear family serves as the ideal to be strived toward and, with queer citizens, homonormativity only promises this ideal at the expense of any additional civil rights or more radical change in the world. But the family—and perhaps especially the *idea* of the family—is couched not only in ideas of cisgender heterosexuality; it is also contextualized in particular sociocultural systems and politics, such as capitalism. Kafer, among others, takes her critiques a step further into the intersectional, writing in *Feminist, Crip, Queer* about American culture's "profound anxieties about reproducing the family as a normative unit, with all of its members able-bodied/able-minded and heterosexual" (2013, 69). The family is, in some ways, the status quo's first line of defense in a society, and so it becomes imbued with all of the ideals of what the 'norm' should be, and what all those whom are othered should aspire toward, no matter how impossible the norm is to actually achieve.

By implementing Gothic and speculative elements in queer female narratives, writers are able to reimagine the home, including the home-as-symbol, while grappling with the "extreme states" that Tom J. Hillard identifies in "'Deep Into That Darkness Peering': An Essay on Gothic Nature": "The literary Gothic mode is typically concerned with extreme states, such as violence and pain, fear and anxiety, sexual aggression and perversion, all of which have led many readers over the years to dismiss such texts as sensational and indulgent" (2009, 690). While queerness may be traditionally relegated to sexual perversion, queer fiction (and queer culture more broadly) certainly engages with these other listed themes of violence, pain, fear, and anxiety. (Among the many examples of queer literature with these themes are *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928), *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf (1928), *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin (1956), *Maurice* by E.M. Forester (1971).) When writers critically consider the home as-it-was, the home as-it-is, and the home as-it-might-otherwise-be in popular culture, they engage in speculation that is more expansive and more inclusive instead of attempting to force reality into more narrowly-defined norms.

In Alix E. Harrow's *Starling House,* the way in which the Starlings talk about the titular house highlights its dualities, as a place of both danger and safety: one of the previous Starlings calls the house "their 'sanctuary'" (190). The house's wardens are not selected through blood or patrilineal legacy, but rather by the house magically calling out to "someone lost or lonely, someone whose home was stolen or sold or who never had a home in the first place… and they are never homeless again" (190). Through the years, Starling House was a refuge for the persecuted—first for Eleanor, as a penniless outsider and young girl who was left vulnerable, then for someone (quite literally) demonized for

their skin condition, Indigenous sisters at a so-called "boarding school,"[1] the child of sharecroppers, escapees from a U.S. Japanese concentration camp, queer women, etc. Opal describes it as a lighthouse, "except lighthouses are supposed to warn you away, rather than draw you closer" (10). Arthur, however, calls the house "a grave" (190). The occupants of this house do not have peaceful lives or deaths. Starling House is not one or the other, but rather both; it's a double-edged sword, handing out purpose and home alongside premature death all in one package.

Female characters inherit the home as a site of potential safety as well as a site of potential terror. In part, this is born of the culturally-imposed connections between women and domestic spaces. As such, the home can be safe because domestic spheres are (allegedly) designed to be safe for women, enticing them toward traditional gender roles, and/or violently enforcing those traditional gender roles when necessary. Ultimately, safety is a myth sold to women; as fiction writer Jane Mitchell writes in in "Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection and Subversion in the Marital Gothic Novel," "married life has promised much, including personal safety" (2018, 59). The myth is broken not only by a physical or mortal sort of threat, but also (perhaps especially) in situations where the woman has no one willing or able to protect them.[2]

Stories are weaponized as another means of terrorizing a woman in a society that "uses and abuses a woman's body" (Mitchell 2018, 67). These female characters often "maintain a discomfort with the scripts of heteronormative existence" (Ahmed 2014, 151). Women who refuse or are otherwise unable to fit gender norms within these "scripts of heteronormative existence" are often painted as figures that are not only wrong, but in some way twisted and grotesque. From this combination of elements, an association of the home with terror can emerge.

One form this association may take is the conflation of women and the monstrous—women who conjure monsters for their protection (*Starling House,* Alix E. Harrow) and women who are themselves objectified and become unhuman ("The Husband Stitch," Carmen Maria Machado). In particular, the monstrous is connected to women when they fall outside of the acceptable bounds of womanhood, whether their gender could be considered queer(ed) or not. Culture may impose itself on the home in other ways as well, breaking any hope of the safety of boundaries: the home may become a site of hauntings and inter-generational trauma (*The Haunting of Alejandra,* V. Castro), where the

[1] Note: these "schools" were created when "Indian children were forcibly abducted by government agents, sent to schools hundreds of miles away, and beaten, starved, or otherwise abused when they spoke their Native languages" ("US Indian Boarding School History").

[2] In *Starling House,* this happens with Eleanor and the Gravelys. In "The Husband Stitch," this happens with the narrator and her husband. These are the men whom they are supposed to trust—they are, after all, family in some way or another.

historical and cultural context imposes terror, or the home may become a site of state-imposed surveillance and demonization (*I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* Mac Crane), where an imagined futurity and cultural context are responsible for imposing the atmosphere of terror. Women who have queer desires—such as the bisexual protagonists of *The Haunting of Alejandra* and "The Husband Stitch" and the gay protagonist of *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself*[3] —further threaten the heteropatriarchal home with their desire because they may, in fact, may not require a man's presence to make a home at all.[4]

2. Good Girls and Monsters

In *Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow*,* 19th century Eleanor dreams the monsters into existence with the help of an underground mystical river in order to protect herself from the men in her life in a way that no one else would. She then builds the Starling House to keep herself (and her monster-protectors) safe from the outside world. Centuries later, protagonist Opal, who lives in the run-down former coal town, is trying to take care of her younger brother since their mother's sudden death years earlier. Opal gets a job cleaning the local haunted house—the Starling House—and gets to know the house's mysterious owner, Arthur. This novel centers around things which are supposed to frighten—social outcasts such as Opal, as well as strange Starling House warden Arthur, and even the house itself.

In a novel-within-the-novel, written by Starling House's mysterious architect E. Starling (aka Eleanor), she writes of The Beasts of the Underland (i.e. her summoned monsters). Eleanor describes the beasts as dangerous, but she tempers this portrayal by describing her self-insert, Nora Lee's, relationship with the beasts: "A good girl ought to be frightened of them. She ought to run away. But Nora Lee, who was not a good girl and never would be, did not run away. She whispered her story to the Beasts of the Underland, and they rushed past her into the night, baying for blood" (2023, 135).

As it turns out, these beasts are real. The house's warden is tasked with preventing these beasts from killing people in the town. Opal eventually learns that the wardens of the house all eventually succumb to the monsters while trying to protect the town. Back in the 19th century, Eleanor Starling's father and uncles had stolen all her mother's money to start a coal business, and after her mother's death, these brothers—the Graveley

[3] It is possible to potentially read Eleanor Starling in *Starling House* as asexual and/or aromantic. It is not clarified in the text if she is straight but merely refuses abuse at the hands of men she's related to, or if she experiences romantic/sexual desire outside of the heteronormative expectations beyond this. Arthur Starling, however, is explicitly queer (namely bisexual).

[4] Such a notion may be presented as terrorizing to the idea of phallocentrism, where "the male, or male sexual feelings or activity, [is positioned] as the main subject of interest" (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*).

brothers—abuse Eleanor herself when she falls into their custody. After her father dies, Eleanor inherits everything, so one of her uncles forces Eleanor to marry him to get control of the family finances again. As Eleanor puts it,

> I kept waiting for someone to object, but the most I got was a pitying glance from the neighbors' maid, an awkward grimace from my uncle Robert. Everyone else drew away from me, like hands from a hot coal. They averted their eyes from evil and, in so doing, became complicit in it. I watched my uncles' sin spread over the town like night falling, and finally understood that no one was going to save me. (275)

Eleanor explains to Opal that the Beasts "were my own creations, born of my own desperate nightmares" (279). No one in town is willing to save Eleanor because the town's economy relies on the Graveley brothers and their coal business. Additionally, holding the town hostage by its economy grants the Graveleys the power to terrorize enslaved people. It is one of these previously enslaved men who helps Eleanor figure out how to use the magic of the river to defeat her uncles. Eleanor's story is primarily set in/after 1869, in the formerly confederate state of Kentucky; slavery only became illegal in Kentucky four years prior, with the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. In this cultural context, this previously enslaved Black man would likely not have been considered human by most people in town, nonetheless a respectable man, and yet he was the one who gave Eleanor the tools to protect herself. Harrow often plays with the irony of the respectable (which should, in actuality, be acknowledged as reprehensible) and the unrespectable (that should, in actuality, be acknowledge as heroic or righteous).

Eleanor Starling (who uses Nora Lee as a self-insert) writes and illustrates a children's book based on her fantastical lived experiences. Eleanor describes "the creatures from my nightmares, animals made of teeth and claws, fury and justice. They looked at me as if they'd been waiting for me. I wept with joy, with terror, with awful love. I told them about my uncle and showed them the ring on my finger, and they ran into the darkness. When they returned, their muzzles were wet and red" (276). Monsters with bloodied muzzles are the things nightmares are made of, but there is a twist here: the monsters are the protectors, the men are the true predators. Because Eleanor's uncles and father were deemed respectable by the town, simply by virtue of being white men with power and money, the Gravelys are not seen as the agents of terror which they, in reality, are.

The nicest of the three Gravely brothers (by relative standards) tries to come for Eleanor's land, wherein, "he told me all the things he could do to me, with nothing but a friendly drink and a firm handshake with the right person" (278). Among the potential accusations he lists against Eleanor are familicide, witchcraft, and madness. Eleanor realizes "They would all believe him. Can you imagine it? A world that bent to your every whim, where any story you chose to tell became the truth, simply because you said it?" (278) There is power here in reality—the beasts are a real tangible threat, for example—but there is just as much power in stories and belief. If the town believes the Gravelys to

be upstanding citizens, then they will make that the reality, even if it requires them to ignore inconvenient truths. If the town believes the stories that Eleanor Starling is evil or wrong in some dangerous capacity, then her entire life is changed by little more than their perception. Even within the traditionally tamed domestic space—the Starling House—Eleanor can be painted as an agent of terror. To be fair to the townspeople, this is not merely perception; after all, Eleanor has to become what she is perceived as—dangerous—in order to save herself through a kind of vengeful terrorization. She is an agent of terror insofar as her imagination is what birthed the monsters that still pose a threat to the town two centuries later.

In "The Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado, the central character is one who can be read as monstrous even as she tries to follow the rules of being a "good girl" like Eleanor does. Instead of creating monsters, the narrator is herself inhuman; in fact, all of the women in the story are, as symbolized/literalized by the presence of a ribbon on each of them. Machado retells a story about the girl with the ribbon around her neck; the perspective character in this iteration is not the boy who loves her, but the girl herself. It is the magical ribbon that keeps the girl's head attached that implies a kind of other-than-humanness about this character. Machado's narrator frequently switches between her own story and folktales that involve women in danger.

"The Husband Stitch" is even more confined to the domestic space, mentally and physically. After the narrator marries, the house is the setting of most of the remainder of the story. The narrator sets a stage where the story can be interpreted as a performance, both in terms of its play-like cues[5] and the oral storytelling cues[6]. The narration of her own life is interspersed with stories that the narrator has heard; some of these stories are familiar urban legends/folk tales, such as the hook-handed man. The folk tales and ghost stories are sources of gendered terror—a woman asks for something sexual and is committed to a sanitorium; a girl goes to a graveyard after dark and dies of fear; a girl dies because her secondhand wedding dress came from a dead woman; a woman cuts out her own liver to feed to her demanding husband. Men are often a source of terror in these tales, even when they are not necessarily evil in intention—the man has his partner committed because she transgresses propriety; getting married indirectly kills the girl in the dead woman's dress; the woman sacrifices her own body (her liver) to avoid her husband's wrath.

[5] The story opens with a list of characters and how their voices should sound.

[6] For example, the instruction "(If you read this story out loud, the sounds of the clearing can be best reproduced by taking a deep breath and holding it for a long moment. Then release the air all at once, permitting your chest to collapse like a block tower knocked to the ground. Do this again, and again, shortening the time between the held breath and the release.)" (7).

Even the moments where the narrator finds pleasure become recentered on her husband's pleasure. The narrator begins taking an art class to find self-fulfillment. (This art class is one of the few times the story leaves the house while the narrator is a married woman.) When the narrator feels attraction to a female model she meets through the class, this has the potential to be a transformative realization about her identity. However, her husband merely uses this moment for his own sexual fantasy: "He is so glad of this development that he begins to mutter a long and exhaustive fantasy as he removes his pants and enters me, and I cannot hear all of it, though I imagine that within its parameters she and I are together, or perhaps both of us are with him" (2017, 23).

In one of the embedded narratives, a woman in a folktale might survive by living with wolves, as she is later reported as being seen hunting and "suckling two wolf cubs" with whom "she felt a kind of sanctuary, peace she would have found nowhere else. She must have been better among them than she would have been otherwise. Of that, I am certain" (13). Once again, a character uses the word "sanctuary." Inherently, sanctuary implies the dualities of safety and of terror, even in cases where the sanctuary itself is not violated. A sanctuary, after all, is a place of safety. However, implied in that safety is the unsafe, that which the person must be kept safe from, the reason for the boundary that has been erected. Terror, then, waits beyond the borders of sanctuary. For Eleanor and the other Starlings, the house is the place of safety set against the terror caused by the people in town; for the wolf-mother in "The Husband Stitch" (and, it is implied, for the narrator herself), being among wolves is perversely safe, whereas being around people (in a patriarchal society that, these folktales tell us again and again, hurts women) is the place to be afraid.

In "Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection and Subversion in the Marital Gothic Novel," Jane Mitchell writes,

> The gothic uses and abuses a woman's body; in this genre, she is 'moved, threatened, discarded, and lost'. Any woman who defies normal[7] expectations of marriage—home and motherhood—or demonstrates an awareness of her own sexuality or interest in sex, is vilified and forced into abject space. Even within marriage, the wife who enjoys sex ends up either dead or incarcerated. (2018, 67)

The home is supposed to be a place of safety. However, the narrative prophecy that Mitchell lays out still comes to pass in "The Husband Stitch": Machado's narrator *does* enjoy sex and *does* end up dead; no matter how much of herself/her body she gives, her husband will not be satisfied until he consumes all of her. She narrates at the end of her life "He's not a bad man, and that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt. He is not a bad man at all. To describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would do a deep disservice to him. And yet—" (30) And yet he still hurts her; and yet he still kills her; and yet he still

[7] See also: cisgender, straight, and femme.

never lets her have any place of true safety and sanctuary and peace, not even within her own mind, not even within her own body. He does not know what the outcome will be (curiosity kills the wife), but he *does* know that untying the ribbon causes his wife distress; her feelings (and, notably, her lack of enthusiastic consent) are not enough of a deterrent for his own desires-turned-demands.

3. The Curse of White Colonizers

In *The Haunting of Alejandra* by V. Castro, Alejandra's status as a queer woman of color without a wealthy background makes her feels lucky to have even been noticed by someone like her husband (who is white, straight, handsome, relatively wealthy, and able-bodied). As a result, Alejandra shrinks herself to fit what her husband wants her to be. At the opening of the novel, she is living the heteronormative dream: her husband as bread-winner, her as homemaker, and three children in a big house. Mitchell writes that

> For the gothic wife, married life has promised much, including personal safety. Once she has committed to the institution of marriage, however, the institution becomes knowable and, at the same time, *unheimlich*: strange, unwelcoming and even menacing. There is, therefore, an opportunity within the marital gothic to explore how women… increasingly felt terrorised by the restrictive roles of wife and mother, through the concept of the uncanny. (59)

In *The Haunting of Alejandra* by V. Castro, Alejandra has been "promised… personal safety" by her marriage to a financially stable white man. But her home—and "the institution of marriage" it symbolizes—still cause Alejandra to be "terroised by the restrictive roles of wife and mother." She is haunted by the creature that has plagued the women of her family for generations through a curse on mothers.

This haunting creature takes on the guise of La Llorona to maintain power, keeping a foothold in the world through the terror that such an idea inspires. The literal woman who originates the La Llorona lore—Rosa, a mother out of options and without support—is separated from the demonic creature in the text. Like in *Starling House* and "The Husband Stitch," stories have power, and society tries to wield that power to keep the status quo intact.

In response to widow Rosa's suicide, and her simultaneous attempt to drown her daughters in the river with her, the townspeople say "*she will most definitely be punished for her deed. Yes, wander the Earth looking for them. Never able to rest. La Llorona crying for her children*" (Castro, 2023, 254, italics original). The creature "heard the story of this woman who attempted to take the lives of her children and herself. What a wonderful disguise to frighten them. How they conjured nightmares out of thin air. So potent were these images and tales. They thrived on the fear. Killed themselves with it. It would come and go as this La Llorona" (254). The creature knows the power of stories, and the way in which humans lend their belief to ideas that can then become reality. The creature

is merely taking advantage of such facts of human nature in order to perpetuate its own power—because stories, after all, have that power to lend.

The creature begins haunting this family line during colonization. One of Alejandra's far-back ancestors, Atzi, stays behind to give her family (including her daughter) a chance to escape the colonizers and find safety elsewhere. After being raped repeatedly by a white colonizer and becoming pregnant, Atzi thinks about how "Death was the only escape from the curse of being a branded and conquered woman, as Atzi was. She was a thing they used and ridiculed. They called her brown skin *inferior* and *savage.* Yet they lusted after it, and her" (35). As Atzi is dying, the creature comes to her and promises Atzi's daughter "will live a long, healthy life, ensuring [Atzi's] bloodline continues" (37). Atzi proposes that the creature take the souls of the colonizer's children growing inside of her: "When I die, take the souls of these demon seeds that were forced upon me. Kill the man who did this to me… Take his family and save my daughter" (37).

After this, the creature terrorizes first-born daughters in this bloodline, trying to get them to die by suicide. The creature's primary tactic after a woman has a daughter is to convince that woman that she is a terrible mother and worthless; sometimes, the creature even works to get these women to hurt their children. For Alejandra, this haunting often takes place in the home itself—the bathroom during a shower, a child's bedroom. The creature feeds on "*Unhealed pain and rage growing riper generation after generation*" (87, italics original). Atzi herself reflects on how, after colonization, "generations upon generations would suffer. She thought of their stories. Their voices. Their histories, all up in flames. All of it, unwanted. It was after their defeat at the hands of the conquistadors that the real nightmare had begun for her people, especially for the women and girls who had to submit to these strange men" (35). Atzi is referring to colonization by white men, but this sentiment is also true of the demon that becomes attached to their family.

The creature haunting Alejandra is not working alone. American cultural systems, and those who benefit from them, are co-conspirators in the attempts to get Alejandra to die by suicide. The generational curse is as much tied to patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity as it is to the literal supernatural creature in question. For starters, Alejandra was adopted by a white Christian family that was abusive in ways subtle and obvious. She remembers, at one point in the narrative, her adoptive father beating her physically; in that moment, a young Alejandra fears that there may have been a sexual desire from him mixed up in that. But there are also less obvious abuses throughout her childhood, including disconnecting her from her culture, as well as subjecting her to parentification[8] by forcing Alejandra to assume caretaking responsibilities for their other adopted children.

[8] "Parentification occurs when youth are forced to assume developmentally inappropriate parent- or adult-like roles and responsibilities" (Dariotis et. al.)

And ,whether he realizes it or not, Alejandra's husband[9] contributes to the interior circumstances that make space for Alejandra's suicidal ideation. The lasting effects of colonization work in concert with the lingering creature to terrorize Alejandra. As she plays with her children, Alejandra thinks about "the decisions she'd made in life. She had always just stacked the blocks without knowing what she was building. Her soul languished within the rusty scaffolding of the tower she'd built" (29). Her name is not listed on any of the family's assets (like the deed to the house), and her domestic role is imposed, both of which make her feel invisible and less valuable. Her husband alternates between dismissing her concerns (like her desire for more financial freedom) and lashing out at her (such as when he mocks the altar she puts up with items of cultural significance to her). No matter how much Alejandra attempts to be "the respectable person" who "is chaste, modest, does not express lustful desires, passion, spontaneity, or exuberance, is frugal, clean, gently spoken, and well mannered" (Taylor 2010, 145), she will never be enough, nor will she be fulfilled by the requirements of this kind of marital partner and mother.

As in "The Husband Stitch," it is revealed that the home—this space that should be one of safety—is easily made into one of terror, no matter how much others (especially the men in their lives) tell these women otherwise. As Alejandra thinks about her husband early in the narrative, "Lately his presence felt like a plastic bag over her head… she instinctively grabbed her neck with one hand, as if there really were a bag around it, before inhaling deeply through her nose. What if she removed his hands and removed the bag? She didn't want to think about the fuss it would cause. They'd call her selfish, unloving" (Castro 2023, 23). In refusing phallocentrism and the heteronormative family unit, Alejandra is the one who would be cast as the villain of the story, no matter her feelings or her husband's part in causing them. Feminism scholar Dianna Taylor writes in "Monstrous Women" that

> Given the presentation of a particular cultural perspective simply as normal, women, people of color, working-class people, and gays and lesbians will continue to fall short of professional standards and, hence, to be viewed as inferior… these groups are marked as Other, and are therefore always in a position of having to prove themselves in ways that white bourgeois men are not required to do. (2010, 146)

Alejandra has to work to figure out what gives her a sense of safety—her therapist, her children, her birth mother, the women she dreams of (i.e. ancestors), and, eventually, the

[9] It is worth noting that her husband is not just perpetuating patriarchal systems; as a white, straight, cisgender, relatively wealthy man who lacks critical self-reflection, he is perpetuating white supremacy, heteronormativity, and oppressive class dynamics in addition to—and in combination with—patriarchal ideals.

choice to work as a curandera. Safety, for Alejandra, comes from a place of support networks, independence, and feeling fulfilled in her life's work.

4. For Your Own Good: Violating Boundaries of Home

State-imposed surveillance can be responsible for imposing the atmosphere of terror, especially if such surveillance violates the boundaries of home, inflicting fear under the guise of heightened safety. Mac Crane's *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* is set in a speculative dystopia, one where extra shadows are literally added to violators of the law. It is positioned by the president as more humane than prisons, but this fantastical style of law and justice are still distributed with all the prejudices and inequities that make the current American justice system problematic. The president paints the shadows as the ultimate solution to a justice system rife with inequities, skirting altogether the systemic injustices that are truly at the root of prison abolition movements.

Protagonist Kris has two shadows because she hurt her wife, Beau, by accident. Her daughter is also born with two shadows because Beau dies in childbirth, and so the extra shadow is added automatically because their child (on the most technical of levels) 'killed' her. Kris considers Shadesters like herself to be made of "Two parts fearmongering, one part delusion, three parts manipulation. Season heavily with deceit labeled as *promise.* Stir consistently on low heat, so low hardly anyone notices it's on" (2023, 20-21). Taylor writes that the State's

> regulation and protection intersects with the disciplining of individual bodies within the context of modern societies, Foucault argues, and the norm is the mechanism along which this intersection occurs. It circulates between the disciplinary and the regulatory… While the norm still founds and legitimizes power, it now does so specifically by linking disciplinary power and biopower and thus facilitating the flow of power through and across all facets of modern societies. (2010, 128)

By the beginning of the novel, the government also has cameras in every room of people's homes. As they're told by the government official who takes part in the installation, "*This is for the good of everyone, you'll see. People behave better when they know they're being watched*" (Crane, 2023, 40, italics original). The boundary of home, then, does not provide any protection from state surveillance by the central timeline of the novel. Taylor specifies how "unlike natural monsters, moral monsters are not readily discernible, [so] techniques such as control, surveillance, and examination are required in order to distinguish them from normal individuals" (2010, 132). The state terrorizes anyone who is othered—queer people, people of color, past 'offenders' of various kinds, etc. Performance artist and scholar Pavithra Prasad writes "In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief" that "The violence visited on queer and trans people is often felt as violence against us all" (2020, 115).

When Kris' baby falls out of her hands, the state sends an agent who then tries to take the baby away even though she's fine. Kris, desperate to keep her child, has to threaten to out this agent to the government—as gay and as an enjoyer of kink—to get him to leave. This moment, devoid of context, may seem monstrous—threatening to out somebody for their sexuality or how they engage in consensual sex acts is certainly not a great or noble choice. However, Kris does what she feels is necessary in that moment to protect herself and, most especially, to protect her child. She has mixed feelings about this threat after, but it does keep her child in her custody. This agent, it should be noted, still terrorizes their family through the years, often anonymously from the shadows. This agent kills their Shadester friend/roommate, and attempts to turn other children against Kris' child at school.

Prasad writes that "Queer identity binds us in various configurations of kinship because this kind of family helps us survive daily microaggressions, dismissals, or invalidation by hegemonic institutions… However, cis-white-heteronormativity perpetuates irrational fears around professional and personal queer kinship systems" (2020, 116). Kris finds what safety she can with her child, her father, her friends, and her new girlfriend. Eventually, they use her girlfriend's connections as a former state employee to block the cameras at Beau's mother's home; they decide they'll all move out there. Kris' new girlfriend says "It's safer for us… She lives on ten acres of land. We can explore and be free" (2023, 333). The answer of where to find safety is still home, both in terms of people and place. However, like Alejandra's choice to divorce her husband and be free, the living arrangements need to change for safety to be instated. For Kris and her family, the search for sanctuary means that they must escape the surveillance that is an intentional and constant source of terrorization for them, instead building a new home where they can thrive.

5. Conclusions

Creative Writing Studies scholar Danielle L. Iamarino writes in "Codifying the Creative Self: Conflicts of Theory and Content in Creative Writing" that

> recent accord between creative writing and social movement is not itself a new development, but is a natural (if traditionally neglected) element of a craft that has always prioritized an awareness both of the human condition and the social climate of the era. The practice of translating thoughts to writing is unmistakably collective, absorbing the features of its environments, contracting and expanding around points of interest or concern. (2015, 1124)

Kris, Alejandra, and Eleanor all need to create their own sanctuary rather than work within existing arrangements and systems and hope that safety will be provided to them. The status quo is not set up for their safety, especially once they begin to veer outside of their assigned gender roles (which are very much based in cisnormative, heteronormative, patriarchal traditions). If these women remain, they may end up dead like

Machado's narrator. The oppressor offers only terror—in the form of the state for Kris, and in the form of traditional heteronormative marriage for Alejandra, Eleanor, and Machado's narrator. It is the oppressed women who must become creative—even monstrous—in order to survive a world built to destroy them.

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