

Psychiatrizing the Homosexual

Queer Identification, Readerly Pleasure, and the
Psychological Ethic in 1950s Gay Pulp Fiction

by Edward Kai Yan Tie

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The Cold War: the term itself exudes contradiction. The label for a heated American period of crescendoing fear and anxiety; the designation for a historical moment when normalizing efforts at suppressing enemies—foreign and domestic, real and imagined—intensified; the Cold War, named so for its lack of direct military encounters between the United States and the USSR, denotes a fraught epoch of international proxy wars and global ideological warfare. On the home front, anti-communist and anti-homosexual discourse attained new political currency.¹ “[E]xorcising [the communist’s] presence became a national obsession,” an exercise in “the projection of collective fears and desires” that rendered the term “communist” a totalitarian signifier of democratic doom, an “enemy appear[ing] everywhere.”² In the face of this enemy, America would need to marshal the sum of its political, military, and intellectual might.

Simultaneously, the normalizing ethos of the Cold War

consensus, with its concomitant determination to root out all kinds of deviancy, meant that the anti-communist mission easily aligned with an existent regime of sexual regulation animated by the threat of the homosexual—in particular, gay men.³ From FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's 1937 declaration of "war on the sex criminal" to California's first-in the-nation sex offender registry in 1947 and the Lavender Scare of the 1950s—which purged suspected homosexuals from government and military posts—state surveillance and punishment increasingly penetrated the private realm of queer intimacy and personhood. This invasive vigilance equated queerness with national danger, societal unrest, and mental illness.⁴ Like communism, queer sexualities posed a fundamental threat to the stability of the democratic American nation-state in a moment when deviancy—both political and sexual—was marked as inimical to the heterosexual, capitalist American ideals symbolized by the nuclear family.⁵

Americans had begun to recognize the deficiency of their queer identificatory practices—and thus their potential inability to expunge the male homosexual enemy—following the 1948 publication of the Kinsey Report. This report, a sexological study, dramatically exposed the startlingly wide range of non-normative sex acts and sexualities among "ordinary" Americans.⁶ Furthermore, this research proposed that homosexuality appeared in a variety of forms—some undetectable by the public. Contemporaneous media formats obsessively recirculated the report's facts about the perversity of American men and the possible invisibility of homosexuality. Kinsey and his research served as fodder for "late night jokes and limericks, racy advertising slogans, and even radio songs."⁷ The straight American populace came to understand that sexual deviancy was not merely a perverse menace creeping along the margins. It permeated American society. Amid the aftermath of this fear about homosexual identification, new discursive resources were generated to ease and address this fear. In the subsequent analysis, I look to

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works of gay pulp fiction from the 1950s as literary objects and popular media meant to disseminate psychiatric knowledge about the feared homosexual. Indeed, these books ultimately sought to inculcate readers with the ability to recognize and contain sexual deviance.⁸

First, we must delineate the ostensible function of the broader genre itself: pulp fiction. Throughout the 1950s, the American publishing industry furiously mass-produced inexpensive paperback novels with original stories about taboo topics. These works of pulp fiction documented the deepest fears that enthralled the American public imagination in the Age of Anxiety, a moment in which American society broadly writ was tensely grappling with the social, economic, and political ruptures of the postwar era. These narratives tracked “juvenile delinquency, motorcycle gangs, wife-swapping, teen drug use, college scandals, mob racketeering, suburban malaise, and the erotic dangers of psychoanalysis” alongside deviant sex and sexualities of all kinds: “adultery, prostitution, rape, interracial relationships, lesbianism, male homosexuality.”⁹ In showcasing the sensational, the dramatic, the fearful, and the grotesque, the pulp fiction paperback—its name derived from its printing on cheap stock—also worked to provide pleasure to its consumers by proffering a fascination of the abomination. I am interested in a specific subgenre of these works known as gay pulp: a set of paperback novels published in the 1950s that depicted the sordid being and twisted becoming of gay men.

Though gay pulps were about gay men, they were ostensibly not for gay men. Publishers marketed these works as “exposés aimed at enlightening heterosexual audiences.”¹⁰ Exploiting anxieties about identifying queer men, these publishers intended to respond to the needs of the market of readers. Gay pulp works thus sought to satiate the appetites of a straight collective seeking to know and to identify the homosexual. Their methods were distinctly psychiatrized in that these works translated expert discourse about the psychological

becoming, being, and abjection of the homosexual into popular narrative formats that could be widely dispersed. Paula Rabinowitz has described pulp as follows:

a modernist form of multimedia in which text, image, and material come together as spectacle to attract and enthrall a recipient, its audience, its reader. This medium was designed for maximum portability and could move seamlessly from private to public spaces.¹¹

Gay pulps in the 1950s demand a reworking of this definition—these books were not sold in bookstores, but rather through the mail, enabling and restricting purchases in private.¹² Derailing Rabinowitz's definition further, the few gay pulp fiction books that existed were often discarded or torn up after being consumed.¹³ To read about homosexuals in public was a dangerous act—one might be mistaken for a homosexual.¹⁴ Even if gay pulp could never navigate public space, public knowledge about homosexuality could be constructed by the movement of expert psychiatric discourse into popular culture via the medium itself.

I want to dwell on this readerly fear of being identified as a homosexual for a moment. If psychological knowledge could mark out the bodies and minds of those who might be queer, the straight readership, consuming these pulps, might also find out something sexually unsavory about themselves. In searching for the queer, they might find their claimed heterosexuality corrupted, this sexual perversity repressed within their own sexuality. This deconstruction and reformation of self-identity would take place through the active, self-didactic process of reading these pulps. Identification of the homosexual thus worked both ways: it burrowed inward to the truth of the self and also projected outward to the queer enemy.

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MARKETING, GENRE CONVENTIONS, AND READERLY PLEASURES

Structuring the discourse of gay pulp and its processing of psychiatric expertise into popular knowledge were the dictates of both the wider gay pulp market and federal and state laws regarding homosexual representation in print in the 1950s. A gay pulp by Vin Packer, *Whisper His Sin* (1954), demonstrates the dramatic flourishes demanded by a print advertising strategy that pandered to straight readers' hunger for information about the homosexual. These works trafficked in the bewildering and the abominable and dared the reader to enter the dreadful minds and worlds of homosexual men. Embossed on the pulp's back cover is an underlined, bolded statement from the book's publisher: "This is one of the most shocking novels we have ever published."¹⁵ Indeed, shock constituted one of the main appeals that gay pulp could offer for straight audiences.

For straight audiences, gay pulp rendered the homosexual an object from which to cull various forms of readerly pleasure. By perusing gay pulp, heterosexual readers could find lurid pleasure in stories of strange men with mysterious pasts and ambiguous sexualities. They might find voyeuristic delight in listening to the internal monologues of homosexuals agonizing over their same-sex attraction and self-hate. Perhaps they would relish in the ecstasy of transgression when reading shocking yet sensual accounts of "sordid adventures in the bizarre world halfway between the sexes."¹⁶ Beyond the fact that straight readers extracted perverse pleasure from scenes of homosexual distress in gay pulp, these books also appropriated and enacted the American mainstream's—and presumably the reader's—worst fears about queer sexualities. The plots of gay pulp routinely depicted emotionally stunted homosexuals attempting to seduce and convert straight men. The marketing and discourse that surrounded gay pulp produced—and reproduced—queer sexualities

as psychologically damaged, perverse threats to the nuclear family, the community, and the American nation-state. These fears would have to be literarily contained through pulp narrative. Death of homosexual love or of the homosexual himself were two ways to end the homosexual threat. Therefore, these novels tended to reassuringly terminate with a repudiation of same-sex relationships or queer death, leaving the reader with a triumphant yet tragic image of the monstrous homosexual struck down.

OBSCENITY LAWS AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL DUBIETY

The ubiquity of queer-bashing narratives in these works from the '50s reflected the production of gay pulp within a matrix of federal and state obscenity laws that proscribed the portrayal of gay sex, sexuality, or individuals in print—unless the text was written with a condemnatory tone.¹⁷ For example, the Comstock laws—federal acts delineating the definition of obscenity—rendered works that featured homosexual content unavailable.¹⁸ Gay pulp works would have to finesse these constraints. Thus in the final moments of *Whisper His Sin* (1954) the gay deuteragonist sits in an electric chair, awaiting his death. *The Divided Path* (1958) concludes with the queer main character dying in a car crash as he drives to a date. Of course, obscenity laws never achieved their desires to completely censor affirmative gay content—Michael Bronski cites the 1951 gay pulp work *Finistère* as a novel that “end[s] ‘badly’ [without] necessarily promoting antihomosexual sentiments or themes.”¹⁹ Even if the plots of gay pulp were impelled by obscenity laws to barrel inevitably toward queer death, the works themselves could still subvert the meanings of this death.

Obscenity laws—like the aforementioned Comstock laws—even compelled authors to forego use of the term “homosexual.” This discursive exclusion demanded the utilization of an alternative rhetoric around homosexuality. Gay pulp, when alluding to gay sex or sexuality, nearly uniformly embraced euphemism, referring to a

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queer character's "habits," "affairs," "peccadilloes," or "tendency."²⁰ One character's mother, describing her son's homosexuality, refers to it as an "abnormal consanguinity."²¹ Grappling with his same-sex attraction, the gay protagonist of *The Divided Path* speaks of his "emotion[s]," "thoughts," and "urge[s]."²² Though these works exhibit a clear refusal and rejection of the term "homosexual" or "homosexuality," they did not necessarily struggle to communicate the "truth" of deviant sexuality. Rather, the erasure of "homosexual" from the vocabulary of gay pulp required these works to resort to euphemism.

One scene from the gay pulp work *Man Divided* (1954) stages the larger epistemological questions about queerness that could be provoked by euphemism. Euphemism is a precarious mode of communication; the task of exchanging of one word for a more amenable one while still preserving meaning in the process is a sometimes paradoxical task. Intending to expose Oliver's homosexuality to his wife, Sally, in *Man Divided*, Magda deploys euphemism, but Sally is left confused and unsatisfied: "There are some subtle nuances floating around here that escape me entirely."²³ Magda, exasperated by her own circumlocutions and Sally's deficient understanding, exclaims, "I would certainly say it if I could find the right words . . . It's so perfectly obvious."²⁴

Magda's failure to communicate Oliver's sexual deviance to Sally draws attention to the epistemological dubiety of euphemisms. Proxies for the term "homosexual" aspire to the "immediate self-evidence of denotation" that the original term offers, even as the original term is disguised.²⁵ But the misinterpretation of a euphemism is always a possibility if, like Sally, one does not know what precisely the euphemism denotes. The text, as if conscious of, and compensating for, the possible insufficiency of euphemism, proliferates a redundancy of signifiers that refer to the likelihood of Oliver's homosexuality. Oliver refuses to divulge his past lovers; he rendezvouses with strange men at night; he fails to ever consummate

his marriage with Sally. The overwhelming accumulation of these signs in *Man Divided* seeks to render Oliver's homosexuality highly probable. It is only via an overpowering excess of evidence, triggered by the possible inability of euphemism to say exactly what it means to say, that one becomes quite sure of Oliver's homosexuality.

Though practically intended to inhibit the possibility of discussing homosexuality, obscenity laws produced a plethora of homosexual significations within the texts of gay pulp. Following her attempted unveiling of Oliver's homosexuality, Magda derides Sally's lack of knowledge about homosexuality—faced with all the evidence, how could she not know? Indeed, Magda says, "I shouldn't think I would have to explain. Perhaps you're not such a woman of the world as I thought. I should think you'd already know."²⁶ Thus, the obscenity laws, designed to police homosexual presence in cultural media, inadvertently nurtured the scourge they were enacted to dispel.

QUEERNESS AND LATENT ANXIETIES IN THE AMERICAN PSYCHE

In the Cold War, to be an American "of the world" was to fear the world. This was the era of Permanent War waged at home and abroad against the homosexuals and the communists.²⁷ The pulp work *Whisper His Sin* spoke to these concerns. Ferris Sullivan—the book's protagonist and a homosexual—sits in a college classroom, struggling to pay attention as his sociology professor denounces the evil embodied in homosexuals and communists and the threat they represent to the American way of life: "[They] must be weeded out . . . [They do] not belong in the beautiful garden of life."²⁸ Then, linking both communism and homosexuality to the psyche, the dull yet melodramatic professor opines, "Who knows what thoughts are hidden in the minds of many men—indeed in the mind of any man."²⁹

The professor's fixation on the mind as the locus of corruption

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for toxic communist ideology or sexual perversion illustrates the outsized role of the psyche in the American public imagination of the 1950s. The mind functioned as the battlefield on which the Cold War would play out: the weaponry and warfare of the Nuclear Age would emphasize manipulations of the psyche and the social norms in addition to the destruction of bodies.³⁰ Psychiatric experts and major political figures at the time “drew the categories ‘Communist’ and ‘homosexual’ together in the 1950s . . . [painting both] primarily as psychological defectives” and labeling both as dangerous contagions of the mind.³¹

Tethered to anxieties about the vulnerability of the American mind to communist hijacking or homosexual tendencies was a desire to know what lay within the recesses of the American psyche—an impulse to explore the mind to which *Whisper His Sin* speaks. (For instance, this impulse is evoked by Sullivan’s sociology professor.) If one mapped out the mind and its beliefs, one could ultimately know who was the enemy and who was not. This conviction demonstrates the epistemological authority with which Americans had invested psychological knowledge—psychology could decode and distill the essential truth of the human mind and personality.³² Building on Judith Butler’s claim that invisibility has “the effect of a structuring inner space,” Catherine Lutz writes,

The Cold War’s distinction was that everyone, not simply the enemy, went into hiding, and so significant relations became invisible. As they did, ghostly inner spaces were hypothesized to take their place, and the psyche was remade as a newly significant structuring principle.³³

Thus in this historical moment, psychology became a key epistemological entry point for understanding not just the mind and personhood, but also politics, culture, and broader society.³⁴ With the Cold War came the weaponization of psychological knowledge in order to understand, identify, and purge the enemy—without regard

to whether that enemy was the homosexual or the communist. As I have noted before, this knowledge not only opened up the Other but the self-partaking in this knowledge as well—with potentially destabilizing consequences. The straight reader, troubled by the fact that they themselves might be queer, finds themselves “implicated in that which one opposes.”³⁵

THE FAIRY, QUEERNESS, AND THE SELF

Gay pulp exploited Americans’ obsession with psychological knowledge and their desire to know the homosexual. These gay pulp books often explicitly advertised their narratives as journeys into the recesses of the homosexual psyche. The back cover of *Whisper His Sin* intones, “This book begins in the tortured mind of a boy and ends in the tormented murder of his parents.” The boy, of course, is gay. *The Divided Path*, in the first page after the front cover, offers to the reader “psychological insight” into the queer mind.³⁶ The works themselves often alluded to the timeliness and contemporary relevance of these psychological investigations into the homosexual psyche, often referring to homosexuality variously as “the problem of our times” or “a strange way of life that has become all too prevalent.”³⁷ *The Divided Path* also refers to the alarming findings of the Kinsey Report: “[this book] will open your eyes and heart to a tragic situation, which, according to the Kinsey Report, involves one out of every five men in America today!”³⁸

Prior to the Kinsey Report’s publication in 1948, the American public primarily envisioned homosexual men according to the stereotype of the fairy or the pansy—“men with bleached hair, rouged cheeks, and lipstick” whose effeminate appearance and gender insubordination connoted queerness.³⁹ A host of groups—especially social-scientific figures concerned with sexual regulation like law enforcement members, psychiatric experts, and judicial authorities—came to realize that, in addition to materializing as the conspicuous fairy, the homosexual could also troublingly vanish

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into the crowd. He could be invisibly lurking among the straights by presenting himself as normatively gendered, thereby concealing his own sexual deviance and his broader threat to the hegemonic way of life.⁴⁰ In this moment, the fairy stereotype outlived its usefulness as an identifying mark of difference that encapsulated all representations of homosexuals.

Homosexuality could longer be limited to the bodies of a fixed, highly visible, distinct minority. As these boundaries blurred, a new approach to homosexuality emerged, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick termed a “universalizing view” that envisions homosexuality as a structuring concern and possibility “in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities.”⁴¹ Attached to this notion of new concern about homosexuality is a incertitude of the self—a doubt about heterosexuality among the straight readership to which gay pulp was ostensibly marketed.

Homosexuality was interpreted contemporaneously as a mental disease by psychiatric experts, a crime by judicial authorities, and a sin by religious figures. Americans came to think that it might linger within anyone, a secret freighted with danger. Kinsey’s work “convey[ed] and culpabilize[d] a universal potential for homosexuality in men.”⁴² It seems that *The Divided Path*, in its advertising strategies, sought to harness this panic. Americans’ concern about their own possible homosexuality sublimated into an intense focus on rooting out and understanding the homosexual—a compulsion that shapes straight readers’ engagement with gay pulp fiction in the 1950s. *The Divided Path* latched onto this compulsion, offering a way for readers to “open their eyes” and become psychologically acquainted with the homosexual and his neuroses, problems, and conflicts—perhaps these readers would even see the homosexual in themselves.⁴³

QUEER PSYCHIATRIC OBSESSIONS IN LITERARY FORM

In works from the 1950s, gay pulp's psychiatrized narrative mode synchronized with its advertisement as an exploration of the homosexual mind. The content of such works mapped the ruinous terrain of the homosexual mind and opened up queer interiority to straight readers. Readers could voyeuristically listen to Michael's self-hate and inferiority complex as he grappled with his seemingly perverse lust and witness his psychological struggle to suppress his "compulsive need" for men: "This must stop. But how to do it! He felt powerless to control the emotion that gripped him . . . Exasperated at himself . . . he turned his head and drew away . . . Desire flickered with him, and he felt the hot blood chugging in his throat."⁴⁴ Critically, these moments of queer self-hatred follow on the heels of moments of intense queer desire and near-pornographic description. Right before he dives into a tirade deriding his own desire for men, Michael focuses his attention on the object of his infatuation:

The full curve of the pouted lips, which in the half-light were dark with their redness . . . his arms tingled and burned to encircle Paul, to draw that handsome, pathetic head down into the curve of his shoulder and hold it there . . . forever, never let it go. Michael's fingers itched to smooth the touted silk of Paul's hair . . . to stroke the tawny velvet of his skin, to cradle him always.⁴⁵

The textual proximity between these scenes of self-hate and deviant sexual desire forge a link between queer abjection and readerly pleasure derived from the seeing the homosexual in his broken, subservient, psychologically-damaged state. Consuming this highly sexualized scene, readers relish the carnal, perverse intensity of queer desire. In the gay pulp character's queer receipt

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of discipline and in the attempted recuperation of heterosexuality embodied by queer self-hate, readers voyeuristically bask in the abasement of the homosexual. Through Michael's interior monologue, the text also references psychoanalysis in its emphasis on the arrested psychological development associated with homosexuality; the narrator claims that Michael "wanted to remain young as long as possible—stunted."⁴⁶ In *Whisper His Sin*, readers interpret Sullivan's neurotic obsession with privacy, his shyness and lack of masculinity, and his regular nightmares as evidence of the broken mind indicative of a homosexual.

This text also welds queer psychiatric pathology to sexual feeling—Sullivan's anxieties about privacy, his limp personality, and his fear of nudity come to the fore when his love interest, Paul Lasher, appears naked in front of him. The book offers a gratuitous, sexualized description of Lasher's "good firm build," his wide lips, his "sparkling brown eyes, his dimpled red cheeks, and his broad white grin."⁴⁷ Even as Sullivan diverts his eyes, the text directs the reader towards Lasher's attractive figure and his flirtatious remarks: "I'm really quite pretty when I'm dressed, Mr. Sullivan."⁴⁸ Yet Sullivan's irrational discomfort, his throbbing anxiety, permeates this moment; he "cower[s] against the wall, unable to look [Lasher] in the eye or answer him." Sullivan's deep homosexual attraction to Lasher underlies his rising panic.⁴⁹ The reader thus experiences and fuses two pleasures—one derived from the sexually charged atmosphere of the scene and the other from Sullivan's transference of his queer sexual energy into hysterical panic, a sublimation of homosexual desire.

The gay pulp text, in harnessing queer anguish to queer desire, endeavored to limn the homosexual's mental damage and his resultant perverse sexual feelings and render them available for readerly consumption and pleasure. Quoting Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Rabinowitz conceives of pulp as expressing "an aesthetic . . . based entirely . . . on the *pleasure of the consumer*."⁵⁰

So strenuously did gay pulp work at giving pleasure to its readers that it transmuted queer mental suffering into a sexualized effect that readers themselves could partake in. The reader luxuriates in sexuality, even as Sullivan, who rejects and defers his felt desire by looking away, cannot.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC AND THE PARENTAL

Gay pulp fiction in the 1950s did not simply display the homosexual in his present state of psychological abjection for readerly consumption, but also traced the etiology of the twisted gay mind and documented case studies in the development of homosexuality. Many works emphasized scenes of childhood. These narratives, time and time again, attribute the genesis of homosexuality in a child to an intimate mother and a distant father, thus reiterating the paradigmatic psychoanalytic account of faulty family configurations yielding psychosexual pathology.⁵¹ Michael's mother in *The Divided Path* "preferred to keep him at home as much as possible in the house," and, even more damningly, "Michael had never really trusted his father."⁵² *Whisper His Sin* characterizes Sullivan's mother as a "large [and] iron-willed" woman concerned with producing "a nice, healthy son" who performs masculinity properly.⁵³

Meanwhile, Sullivan's father—intellectual, distant, and unconcerned—exemplifies the stereotype of the detached father. In fact, his work as a bacteriologist keeps him busy and away from the home, preventing him from recognizing the perverse contagion—the psychic "germs" of homosexuality—that have infected his own son.⁵⁴ Gay pulp's references to homosexuality as a biological vector is not surprising considering the function of a contagion as a potent organizing metaphor throughout the Cold War in reference to homosexuality and communism. For instance, justifications for the Lavender Scare deployed contagion to insinuate that one homosexual could beget a plague of deviant sexuality in otherwise

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heterosexual settings (e.g. a federal office building).⁵⁵ The contagion metaphor even found application in the character of the homosexual himself, a “predatory sex-deviant whose perverted practices were simultaneously appalling and seductive, so much the latter that his sexual contagion was dangerously easy to spread to . . . ‘normal’ individuals.”⁵⁶

In offering a glimpse of the tortured, self-hating inner thoughts of the homosexual and reenacting psychoanalytic accounts of faulty family configurations, gay pulp depicted the pathological path that begot homosexuality and the symptomology and pain of homosexual existence. The tone here is clearly condemnatory, and these stories of homosexuality certainly functioned as cautionary tales. Readers consuming gay pulp developed from these scenes of homosexual psychological abjection a voyeuristic pleasure that had profound educational value. In gazing at the homosexual in its abjection and ontogeny, the reader begins to understand the sexual enemy of the Cold War. Gay pulp operated in service of this gaze, laboring to satiate a voracious American appetite for information and narratives about the homosexual enemy using sensationalized and shocking psychological accounts of homosexual formation and pathology. After all, as Rabinowitz has noted, the object of gay pulp lay in attracting and satisfying its readers.⁵⁷

Gay pulp fiction’s instrumentalization of psychiatric knowledge to explain homosexual abjection mirrored and sustained the larger therapeutic culture of the postwar United States in the 1950s. In the final moments of *Whisper His Sin*, the narrator quotes a psychiatrist’s testimony in order to dissect the origins of Sullivan’s and Lasher’s homosexuality: “In both cases, there was a lack of any model on which growing boys could mold themselves—no male personality who could show strength and affection, and serve to guide them by example into healthy heterosexual relationships.”⁵⁸

THERAPEUTIC CULTURE, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND THE AGE OF ANXIETY

The literal invocation and narrative centering of psychiatric expertise to explicate homosexuality's origins reveals how psychiatry expanded its purview beyond the mentally ill to critique wider social, political, and personal defects. Psychiatric discourse enabled the articulation and resolution of America's postwar social and political ruptures, with particular regard to anything that might disrupt the Cold War's paradigmatic "regime of unblinkingly erect and autonomous white masculinity . . . organized around the ideal American cold war family."⁵⁹ The psychiatrist referenced in *Whisper His Sin* participates in the therapeutic and discursive maintenance of this heteronormative regime as he attributes homosexuality—a psychosexual disease disruptive to the individual, the family, and American society—to the absence of a properly masculine heterosexual male role model.

At the heart of what has been called the American therapeutic ethos of the Cold War was a desire to improve the self. This ethos also emphasized the promise of collective, curative progress and the oneiric wish of "the good life."⁶⁰ Yet this healing impulse also presupposed an existing lack, weakness, or incompleteness embedded in American society, its families, and its citizens. Characters across an array of gay pulps routinely label each other as "neurotic," "psychotic," "antisocial," or accuse one another of experiencing "hallucinations," "delusions," or an "inferiority complex."⁶¹ In such declarations, these characters repeat psychiatric discourse and thus affirm its explanatory power and cultural ubiquity.⁶² Amidst these accusations and allegations rests a pathologizing but optimistic assumption: there must be something wrong with all of us, and, if psychiatric terms could clarify what it was, they might thereby enable improvement. Situated in relation to wider appeals for inner American psychological strength in the face of communism during

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the Cold War, these psychiatric imputations were reflective of a larger, pathologizing therapeutic project. Such representations belied public anxiety about the profound psychological vulnerability of the American mind at the time.⁶³

EXPLOITING FEAR THROUGH GAY PULP

The homosexual's psychological damage did not simply exist as a scapegoat for American therapeutic culture's anxieties about mental illness—his deranged, homosexual mind and the threat it posed to American society produced real fear. By opportunistically sensationalizing the horror of the homosexual menace, gay pulp confirmed and restaged Americans' worst fears about homosexuality in print. Consumers of gay pulp fiction read about homosexuals' attempts to degrade and corrupt normative male heterosexuality. Unable to convert the masculine, heterosexual object of his lust, *Man Divided's* Cromer confesses his homosexualizing intentions to Oliver: "You represented everything that I wish I could be, and I was doing my best to destroy it."⁶⁴ Cromer thus sees homosexualization and destruction of normative American manliness as twin projects. If in this moment "unblinkingly erect and autonomous white masculinity" cohered with American notions of national strength, homosexual endeavors to pollute and dismantle this masculinity meant homosexuality was a subversive, treasonous force.⁶⁵ This depiction, of course, intersected with contemporary McCarthy Era suspicions that constructed the homosexual as a security risk. The homosexual was liable "to succumb . . . to the advances of a hunky Soviet spy or to give away secrets out of fear of blackmail"—a fear that also justified homosexual purges from the federal government in the 1950s.⁶⁶

As the red scare of this decade was refashioned into a lavender scare, the connections between homosexuality and communism became increasingly literal. Countess R. G. Wadek claimed in her 1952 treatise *The Homosexual International* that "[homosexuals]

serve the ends of the Communist International in the name of their rebellion against the prejudices, standards, and ideals of the bourgeois world.”⁶⁷ Echoing and playing on the worst suspicions of American society concerning the political loyalties of the queer, gay pulp works reinforced the link between the communist and the homosexual. In *Man Divided*, while gossiping with the neighborhood wives, Sally, concerned about the mysteriousness of her husband Oliver’s past, jokingly claims, “We’ll all have to learn about my husband together. I wouldn’t be surprised if he turned to be a . . . Communist spy, or something.”⁶⁸ The text thus implicitly binds Oliver, the putative homosexual character in *Man Divided*, to communism, braiding the meanings of homosexuality and communism and echoing the Cold War’s cultural equation of the secretive homosexual and the subversive communist—both of whom ultimately constituted feared threats to a heteronormative, democratic American way of life.

In addition to reinforcing associations between homosexuality and communism, gay pulp actively yoked homosexuality to other figures of Otherness: “They call [the homosexual] egghead, queer, creep, eccentric, bohemian, Communist, and psychopath.”⁶⁹ *Whisper His Sin*, in listing these diverse Others in addition to the queer, curates a collection of the abject and the deviant. In the Cold War era, fear of the homosexual and fear of the communist certainly operated as influential affective forces in the American public imagination, but these fears must be contextualized within the larger normalizing impulse—a desire to expunge deviance from American society and “uphold sexual and gender conformity in the nation”—that defined the Age of Anxiety, a moment of angst and fear in the United States.⁷⁰ Indeed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed describes anxiety as an approach to objects of fear in which one’s thoughts often move quickly between different objects, a movement which works to intensify the sense of anxiety. One thinks of more and more ‘things’ to be anxious about . . . until [anxiety]

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overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world.⁷¹

In conjuring up these other objects of fear in quick succession, *Whisper His Sin* pulls the reader into a panic, replicating the agitated flitting motion of thoughts characteristic of anxiety to which Ahmed brings attention. The text, moving the reader's gaze through these sources of panic and fear, produces the will to purify society of the wretched and the obscene that constellated around Cold War ideals of conformity and consensus.

Gay pulp and its demonization of the homosexual thus participated in a larger discourse of paranoid distress. Fears of annihilation by a veritable cast of enemies—the mad, the bad, the nuclear bomb, the communist—intimately shaped American understandings of the self, the nation, and the Other. Indeed, we must consider how effective gay pulp really was in educating Americans in the art of recognizing the queer. As this passage suggests, perhaps these works were merely priming Americans to recognize strangeness, or deviance more generally, as opposed to any specific representation of the homosexual. This concept suggests that, even as gay pulp offered the promise of discovering the homosexual, these books offered a disappointing, oftentimes imprecise fulfillment of this promise of identifiability. Misreadings of homosexuality—an unintended failure of identification—might instead constitute the product of Cold War era gay pulp.

HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY AND IDENTIFIABILITY

Gay pulp's explorations of homosexual identifiability in the wake of Kinsey's research further attested to the ways in which queer abjection and the fear it generated could be weaponized to the stoke fears of a straight readership. *Man Divided*, for example, drives the narrative force of its plot purely on the question of which of the pulp's male characters might be homosexual. The reader must engage in detective work, prying out the identity of the titular

homosexual enemy through a careful reading of the text. An excess of evidence testifying to the likelihood of Oliver's homosexuality populates the text. Yet, even this proliferation of evidence never rids the text of a certain dubiety—the very act of producing an excess of evidence conjures up questions about why the excess is being performed in the first place. Is it a misdirection? Indeed, what could it be attempting to actually mask? Thus, even as the text assures us that Oliver is homosexual, the reader eyes Tom and Marcia's unhappy marriage with suspicion.⁷²

Unable to identify homosexuals through the twin deviances of gender and sex, the homosexual seems unsettlingly invisible, and the reader comes to distrust the intentions of the text itself. Listening in on Cromer and Oliver's argument, the reader questions whether this is a flirtatious, coy quarrel between friends or lovers.⁷³ *Man Divided* ultimately betrays the already suspicious reader: Oliver is revealed to be straight; Cromer, in fact, is the homosexual, the man divided. The excess of signs pointing to Oliver's homosexuality means nothing in the end. In this final reveal, *Man Divided* performs a reversal, a repudiation of the tropes surrounding the mystery of homosexual identity embodied in gay pulp of the 1950s.

HOMOSEXUAL TRUTH?

Gay pulp claimed to be able to excavate the homosexual psyche and unearth the truth of homosexual being. *Muscle Boy*, a work from 1958 by Bud Clifton, advertised as much on its back cover, offering to “frankly, startlingly” reveal the homosexual, down to “bare the naked truth” of this deviant.⁷⁴ If the Cold War shepherded the erection of inner structuring spaces within the homosexual himself, gay pulp offered a way to access these spaces in order to grasp the essence of the homosexual. The books themselves valorized the process of entering queer interiority as educational and indeed edifying. On the back cover of *Whisper His Sin*, the publisher claims that “this is one of the most morally enlightening

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books you will ever read.”⁷⁵ Yet *Man Divided* rejected this notion of edification. The surprise reveal of Oliver’s heterosexuality hints at the unidentifiability of the homosexual, the danger of reading too closely for homosexual lack, abjection, or essence. How could *Man Divided* begin to offer the truth of homosexual identity when it could not even utter the word due to obscenity law? The text itself, as mentioned earlier, articulates homosexuality through the dubious language of euphemism. D.A. Miller tells us that a text with such a silence and dubiety regarding homosexuality is “implicitly haunted by the thing itself, not just in the form of the name, but also, more basically, as what the name conjures up: the spectacle of gay sex.”⁷⁶

Muscle Boy resurrects this very ghost. The straight protagonist finds himself transposed by a shady photographer into a gay sex scene in “the dirtiest pictures he’d ever seen. They didn’t leave a thing to the imagination. And he was in all of them with some guy he’d never seen.”⁷⁷ The text itself is unable to provide the details on the image of gay sex it had conjured up. The photographer, seeking to blackmail the protagonist through these pornographic pictures, explains to him, “Of course you didn’t pose for them. It involves double negatives and all sorts of tricks, but with a negative taken from the finished print. Oh, it’s real tricky.”⁷⁸ The camera—its lens ostensibly capable of capturing and freezing reality in a frame, producing a photographic truth—can be manipulated; the question of who is homosexual can be twisted and answered with a lie. The truth of homosexual identity itself is tricky, and might prove ultimately inaccessible. If this inaccessibility was true, there were certainly dangers to reading too closely and too much into the homosexual—the narrator in *Muscle Boy* suggestively speaks to this as well when he notes that “Sometimes there isn’t any reason for what you like to do . . . it’s an urge.”⁷⁹

Yet, there was also a deeper anxiety and motivation reflected here: that the straight protagonist might, without knowing it himself, be queer. Even worse, maybe others had recognized his queerness

already. The self-educative quest of our imagined straight reader—the endless search for homosexual psychological truth the repetitious euphemism of pulp—seems to leave him in the uncomfortable position of having made too much intellectual contact with this queerness. The implication: his own repressed homosexuality motors this search. The reader, unconsciously reveling in a lacuna within his own sexuality, chases another cycle of searching and reading.

Implicit within the pedagogical strivings of gay pulp and readership's autodidactic desire to know the homosexual enemy was a fixation on the figure of the homosexual himself. He came to embody psychological weakness; to represent a contagion of perversity; to herald a new age of moral decadence. Ultimately, he portended the annihilation of America itself. Similarly, the quest to identify this sexual menace became imbued with the Cold War's representative effects of paranoia, fear, and obsession.

Indeed, there were fears that the maw of sexual perversity had already swallowed American society whole. The *New York Amsterdam News* raised this specter when it opined in past tense that “the third sex (homosexuals, that is) has invaded and captivated Harlem . . . [moving] in TEN THOUSAND STRONG.”⁸⁰ Not only had these homosexuals infiltrated the city space—they had ensconced themselves in all manner of professions, working as “kitchen helpers, domestics, office clerks,” even “holding down top executive positions, running our leading social agencies, supervising our school children, and wearing the blue uniform of New York's finest.”⁸¹ Homosexuals had penetrated the very agents of the state responsible for their suppression.

Accompanying this panic was a desire to master the homosexual—to know him intimately. When critiquing the Kinsey Report, psychoanalysts claimed that he had not done enough. Lawrence Kubie, for instance, called for more ever more sophisticated studies of homosexuals that would delve into the

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biological, the psychiatric, the social, and the cultural constitution of queers, as if more study would enable the mastery of homosexuality itself.⁸²

It is a trope in post-structuralism that the act of studying usually reveals more about the researcher than the object of inquiry. In this case, these various studies of the homosexual, popular and expert, unmasked a deeper compulsion driving the act of study: an investigatorial pleasure of the search to know the homosexual. Perhaps these various spectators reveled in exploring the various ways the homosexual subject might be constructed. In focusing their gaze on the homosexual object, they hoped to witness the truth of his being. Though some works resisted, gay pulp was in large part an interlocking piece of this discourse. It posited that at the end of its psychological tunneling into the homosexual mind—beneath the phenomenon of abjection—there existed the deep and hidden truth of homosexual being. Laying its sights upon this twisted sexual phenomenon, the presumed heterosexual readership could begin to undertake the project of dismantling and purging it—an act shot through with the normalizing politics of deviance that defined the Cold War. Yet there was always a suspicion of elusiveness—that some dimension, internal or external, of the homosexual figure might escape their strategies of mastery.

Even worse, the reader might accidentally stumble upon an indeterminable queerness within themselves in the process of educating themselves about homosexuality, an alienation from heterosexuality caused by mentally and literarily touching the psychological knowledge of queerness. The project was no longer limited to that of locating homosexuality lurking within society. Armed with the knowledge of queerness' psychological abjection, these readers might find at the end of their journey into knowing the homosexual a darkened mirror—and their own visage staring back.

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- ³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 17.
- ⁴ Scott De Orio, March 10, 2016, comment on Regina Kunzel, “Histories of Sexuality and the Carceral State—Part 1,” Notches, March 10, 2016, <http://notchesblog.com/2016/03/10/histories-of-sexuality-and-the-carceral-statepart-1/>.
- ⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 17.
- ⁶ Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged Americans: Survey, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 192.
- ⁷ Anna Lvovsky, “Queer Expertise: Urban Policing and the Construction of Public Knowledge about Homosexuality, 1920–1970,” Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 129.
- ⁸ My reference to the psychiatric or the psychological ties together the kinds of knowledge produced by the separate yet interlocking disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis.
- ⁹ Michael Bronski, *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps* (New York, St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003), 3; 2.
- ¹⁰ Drewey Wayne Gunn and Jaime Harker, *1960s Gay Pulp Fiction: The Misplaced Heritage* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 1.
- ¹¹ Paula Rabinowitz, *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4.
- ¹² Bronski, *Pulp Friction*, 18.
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- ¹⁴ Bronski, *Pulp Friction*, 17.

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- ¹⁵ Vin Packer, *Whisper His Sin* (New York: Gold Medal Books, 1954), back cover.
- ¹⁶ Nial Kent, *The Divided Path* (New York: Pyramid, 1959), 1.
- ¹⁷ Gunn and Harker, *1960s Gay Pulp Fiction*, 4.
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- ¹⁹ Bronski, *Pulp Friction*, 7.
- ²⁰ Dean Douglas, *Man Divided* (New York: Gold Medal Books, 1954), 139; Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 7.
- ²¹ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 115.
- ²² Kent, *The Divided Path*, 79; 93; 95.
- ²³ Douglas, *Man Divided*, 158.
- ²⁴ Douglas, *Man Divided*, 159.
- ²⁵ D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *Representations* 32 (1990): 118.
- ²⁶ Douglas, *Man Divided*, 159.
- ²⁷ K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 49.
- ²⁸ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 33.
- ²⁹ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 34.
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- ³¹ Catherine Lutz, "The Psychological Ethic and the Spirit of Containment," *Public Culture* 9 (1997): 145.
- ³² Lutz, "The Psychological Ethic," 66.
- ³³ Lutz, "The Psychological Ethic," 66.
- ³⁴ Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*, 4.
- ³⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Psychology Press, 1993), 241.
- ³⁶ Kent, *The Divided Path*, 1.
- ³⁷ Douglas, *Man Divided*, back cover; Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, back

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³⁸ Kent, *The Divided Path*, 1.

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⁴⁶ Kent, *The Divided Path*, 10.

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⁴⁸ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 15.

⁴⁹ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 15.

⁵⁰ Rabinowitz, *American Pulp*, 40.

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⁵² Kent, *The Divided Path*, 6, 7.

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⁵⁴ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, 7.

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⁶² Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*, 4.

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⁷² Douglas, *Man Divided*, 8.

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⁷⁴ Bud Clifton, *Muscle Boy* (Ace Books, 1958), back cover.

⁷⁵ Packer, *Whisper His Sin*, back cover.

⁷⁶ Miller, "Anal Rope," 123.

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⁷⁸ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, 93.

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