

Escape to Queer Mountain Siegfried & Roy, Queer Adolescence and the Cultural Imaginary

The press coverage following the October 3, 2003 attack on Roy Horn of the Vegas entertainers Siegfried and Roy by one of his pet tigers questioned the use, treatment and plausibility of using wild animals in entertainment venues. In its aftermath, several versions of the attack began to circulate. According to some audience members the tiger refused a command to lie down and then clamped its jaw on Horn's right arm. In this version, Horn repeatedly struck the animal's head with a microphone at which time the tiger lunged at Horn, clamping its jaws around his neck and dragging him backstage. The version told by Siegfried Fischbach and later by Roy Horn himself following the attack was one that emphasized the tight bond between Roy and the tigers—a narrative that relied heavily on the metaphor of family.

Accordingly, the tiger's actions were described as protecting Roy, dragging him to safety as one would a child or a sibling or given the manner in which the event was depicted, as a child aiding a parent in a moment of crisis. Roy was said to have passed out on stage, a reaction to his high blood pressure medication. The tiger, Montecore, then grabbed Roy by the neck and dragged him back stage to safety, accidentally severing an artery in the process. This metaphor of family that the entertainers invoke repeatedly is echoed in the publicity photographs of Roy, Siegfried, and their white tigers. Photographs of children at play with their parents along with the more formal and posed arrangement of "the family portrait." One image continually replayed in the press coverage and documentaries on cable channels such as A&E and "E," the Entertainment Channel, is one in which a white tiger leaps through a large silk screen image of Roy, emerging from the area of Roy's stomach onto the stage.

The repetition of such images, along with frequent clips of the tigers freely roaming the interior rooms and exterior grounds of Siegfried and Roy's "jungle palace" in the Nevada desert, reinforces the closeness of familial bonds between Roy, Siegfried, and the tigers. This emphasis on family often affects how the relationship between Siegfried and Roy is viewed. At a screening of the Vegas entertainer's Siegfried and Roy's 3-D Imax film *The Magic Box* which was released in fall 1999, I heard one older man tell the woman next to him that Siegfried and Roy were brothers this despite the fact that the film depicts separate childhood homes for the two. I cite this observation out of an interest in exploring the way in which metaphors of family and home inform the representations of Siegfried and Roy and how these tropes of recognition engage with conceptions of homosexuality. The

performances of the Vegas entertainers Siegfried & Roy (and the figure of the magician) represent a site for elucidating the relationship between the spatial topographies of “home” and queer performativity. The repeated imagery of containment and escape via the trope of the magician suggests a special relationship to the space inhabited by Siegfried and Roy and the construction of the queer adolescent. If, as I contend, the bases for Siegfried and Roy’s performances are conceptions of home (the narrative of the stage performance concerns saving the world from the evil goddess and returning Roy home) because of its inherent heterosexual sex-gender alignments, that space of home is in constant need of reconfiguring. As such, the spatial *representations* of home in their stage performances and the 3-D Imax film, *The Magic Box* can be read in line with other queer narratives as a way to escape and then re-articulate the confines of traditional depictions of home and family.

The film *The Magic Box* (1999) chronicles the entertainers’ lives through images that shift between present day performances and subsequent narrative reconstructions of their childhood. Siegfried opens the film with the admonition that “Magic brings back the child within us. We are born in wonderment but time diminishes the light and so we must return to the child to regain this sense of wonderment” (*The Magic Box*). Through the construction of the film and stage performances Siegfried and Roy attempt to return to this child *within* by exceeding the spatial confines of the stage. There is a need to define themselves in excess of that space, as extraordinary, via the costumes, exploding boxes, flights across the auditorium on a wire, disappearances from the stage and reappearances mid-audience that work directly in relation to depictions of the dark and confining spaces of their childhood homes and the oppressive masculinity of war-torn Germany. The practice of re-appropriating various spatial structures and using them for purposes other than those for which they were intended is common in queer art and is well documented by theorists and historians within the field of Gay and Lesbian/Queer studies.¹ While a number of these works focus on the uses of public space, the “site of home” is a recurring structure in narratives of queer adolescence as the protagonists attempt to reconcile their queerness within a structure that is designed to enforce heteronormativity—the normalizing practices by which gendered identities are simultaneously heterosexualized.

“Home” *can* be a space of sanctuary for some queer adolescents in that they are in the presence of caring siblings and/or parents; in the perceived privacy of the bedroom, they can close the door and behave in ways that might be at variance with sex-gender alignments. But “home” can also be a site of threat and constant surveillance. Parents and siblings can open the bedroom door at any moment. Behaviors, tastes (television programs, movies, music

selections) are open to criticism from other family members and friends and pose the threat of revelation for the child whose tastes are markedly different from culturally prescribed practices for his or her gender. The result is often a tension between home as sanctuary and home as threat. For Siegfried and Roy this tension is revealed between the site of home as a repressive inhibiting construct and the site of childhood itself as an unproblematic “utopian site of free-floating liminal exploration” (Gordon 7). It is the physical confines of home from which they must escape and the fantasy of childhood as a site of non-binding exploration of identities and desires with which they must engage.

Despite the cultural cliché that says once you leave home you can never go back, Siegfried and Roy’s performances (the present-day footage in *The Magic Box* and their stage show in Vegas are the same) suggest you can return home; the mise-en-scene of their stage performances and film continually evoke the primary and perhaps narratively primal scenes associated with home. The visual representations of their childhood homes in war-torn Germany are dark and monochromatic as compared to the ornate and colorfully spectacularized stage performances. Both Roy and Siegfried are depicted as children of dysfunctional families. In one scene a young Roy looks longingly out the window of his childhood home with his dog Hexa at his side. The interior is dark except for the light shining through the window highlighting the young Roy and his dog. While no family members are visibly present, quarreling voices can be heard in the background. The voiceover states that fights were frequent and there was seldom peace. Accompanying this voiceover, Roy can be heard to say that as a child “[m]y idea was to run away from home.” Seemingly alone and without stable families, both Siegfried and Roy turn to nature for guidance and learning. Roy roams the meadows and forests of Germany with his dog at his side. Siegfried climbs mountain tops where he spends his days away from home “searching within himself for the way to dream of a better life...[and]looking beyond the realities of life to a place of magic” (*The Magic Box*).

For Siegfried and Roy magic is linked with the mysteries of nature, a way to understand the machinations of the universe. Magic offers Siegfried answers and functions as a surrogate parent. For Roy the pivotal moment in his childhood is one in which his dog Hexa saves him from drowning in quicksand by bringing a farmer to his rescue. While in Freud’s scheme the primal scene is the traumatically anxious and frightening one of the infant’s or small child’s observing or hearing the sights and sounds of adults engaged in sexual acts (qtd in Moon 7), Roy seems to rework the primal scene in his narrative as a moment of connection with nature and a seeming understanding of the larger machinations

of the universe, a reworking that links childhood with a pre-cultural state. In a voiceover he states that “animals have an emotional language that we can connect with when we are absolutely in the moment with them.” The scene also functions as a screen memory of sorts, a scene first theorized by Freud that draws on actual figures and events from one’s experience but one which may also incorporate imaginary and symbolic elements that become retroactively charged with a set of meanings that simultaneously mask and reveal a network of formative perceptions and fantasies from and about one’s early life (Moon 98). Viewed this way, perhaps Roy’s emerging from the quicksand, aided by his dog Hexa, symbolically represents his rebirth, a fantasy of being autochthonous or being able to do without the mother who is often depicted even in queer narratives as the embodiment of normative culture and that which must be escaped; or, given the emphasis on his ability to communicate with animals, the scene also implies a rejection of the mother tongue. Roy as the child of nature is extraordinary in that he can communicate with animals. He has entered a world with an alternative discourse. Thanks to Hexa he escapes the dark engulfing quicksand which metaphorically equates with the dark confining heteronormative spaces of his childhood.

This narrative sequence in *The Magic Box* wherein Roy’s dog Hexa saves him is remarkably similar to the narrative Siegfried and Roy began to circulate following Montecore’s attack on Roy in October 2003 in which Montecore was said to have accidentally injured Roy in the process of attempting to protect him. In addition to engaging the metaphor of family Siegfried and Roy’s retelling of the attack also foregrounds the function of magic both in the show and in their lives. One of the principles of magic relies on the use of misdirection, directing the audience’s focus and attention away from the actual sleight of hand or “secret move” and toward some other action on stage. Of course, the same process might be said to apply to all acts of storytelling particularly when constructing autobiographically informed pieces in which specific events are highlighted at the expense of others. That is not to say that Siegfried and Roy’s retelling of their childhood relies on the principle of misdirection in order to steer the viewer away from the as-yet-unrevealed real or “secret story” of their sexuality. Rather than a futile attempt at closeting their sexuality, these feints can be read in line with D.A. Miller’s theorization of the “open secret.”²

While Siegfried and Roy never self-identify as gay in this film or in their public life in general, nonetheless their story shares traits with gay and lesbian narratives. In thus reconstructing their lives the film incorporates larger cultural patterns for representing adolescence. Like all coming of age narratives the trajectory in *The Magic Box* is about finding one’s true calling in life; however, in Siegfried and Roy’s narrative, not surprisingly,

sexuality is unremarked. As such it becomes yet another instance in which the weight of the unspoken would seem to return via the *mise-en-scene* (Nowell-Smith), particularly by way of the continual framing of Siegfried and Roy as a pair, if not a couple. However, the question of their sexuality is continually deferred throughout the film as well as in the stage performances of Siegfried and Roy through a series of narrative and visual techniques that conflate the adult Siegfried and Roy with a mythical state of childhood innocence.

As depicted in *The Magic Box*, Siegfried as a child has a fascination not with animals, as Roy, but with Magician's boxes, the ones with mirrors in the interior that are used to present the illusion of disappearance. The continuous juxtaposing of the past and present, the repeated use of mirrors and boxes suggest a return to the site of "the symbolic"—a central point of identity formation in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory³—which is underscored by their stage performances in which Roy is cut in half, handcuffed, shackled and thrown in a box from which he disappears but, of course, always reappears intact. The effect is one that collapses time by merging the present day magicians with their younger selves. This is also emphasized in both the opening and closing sequences of the film in which Siegfried and Roy are framed with the younger versions of themselves. The film then attempts to explain the behaviors of Siegfried and Roy as solely concerned with maintaining a sense of child-like wonderment about the world. They are not gay—they are just child-like.

Another way in which they maintain a sense of the child about them is by playing to the viewers sympathies by occupying the position of the orphan. Although both men come from traditional two-parent families, the families are not really "there" for the men. It seems that for Siegfried and Roy they are always already outside the normative conventions of home and family. As noted, Roy's family is conspicuously absent and Siegfried's is dysfunctional. The narrative trajectory then is about filling this void or rectifying the situation. The voiceover states that Siegfried's journey forced him to face his greatest fears: in this instance, the stoic masculinity that his father represents. Within the frames depicting Siegfried's childhood the mother is continually positioned in the background, often washing the dishes, her back turned away from the family, while the father sits sullenly in a chair. The young Siegfried enters the scene with the idea of showing his first magic trick to his father. Siegfried performs a disappearing act using a penny--a feat that brings a smile to his father's face. For a moment, Siegfried says in a voiceover, "Magic had broken the spell. I saw in my father the wonder of a child." And so, magic becomes the vehicle by which Siegfried can resurrect the child within his father, if only momentarily. However brief, it is a story about the relationship between a boy and his father. It is this child who breaks his

father's stoic masculinity. Siegfried's revisiting his childhood is significant in that it defines the constricting masculinity from which he must liberate his father and from which he himself must escape. The relationship with his mother, however, is never explored. Given the pernicious and persistent propensity for queer boys to be read as "Mama's boys" and for mothers to be "blamed" for their son's homosexuality, this absent narrative may be an intentional oversight.⁴ Young boys without fathers or those with dysfunctional fathers who subsequently cause these young boys to spend too much time with their mothers are more likely, so this theory goes, to exhibit cross gender characteristics and by extension become homosexuals.

In her essay "Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary," Biddy Martin notes that many novels that attempt to represent gay and lesbian subjectivity; here she specifically discusses how Aimee Duc's 1901 novel, *Are They Women*, "shift[s] from an initial celebration of cosmopolitan rootlessness and alternative affiliations to what becomes an ultimately melancholic longing for attachments that recapitulate identification with home, family, and nation" (55). Siegfried and Roy's narrative does not openly concern a gay subjectivity, nor does it celebrate a cosmopolitan rootlessness, so much as it depicts a search for origins; nonetheless their narrative does share some of the characteristics Martin describes. In light of Martin's observations that these narratives which celebrate cosmopolitan rootlessness are usually accompanied by a melancholic longing for home, Siegfried and Roy's film might be read not so much as a chronicle of their "extraordinariness" but an inscription of their "extra" ordinariness. Their life stories readily fit into larger, culturally recognized narrative patterns of childhood and citizenship within capitalist culture. They rose from humble beginnings to amass a fortune, in essence supporting the cliché of the successful immigrant; additionally, their emphasis on childhood and family readily play to the resurgence of family values throughout the nineties and even today.

In *The Magic Box*, segments narrating their childhood in Germany are interspersed with footage from more recent stage performances of their Vegas act. While the childhood stories focus on escaping their home lives, the stage performances reinstate the family. The stage show is structured around a narrative in which Roy saves the world from the evil goddess during which there are numerous magic acts. The film depicts the origins of their stage show: after the young Siegfried performs his first magic trick for his father, the two gaze into the fireplace as the scene morphs into present day footage of Siegfried and Roy's Las Vegas stage show. The voiceover states that the monstrous war that had gripped their

families and that had crushed their fathers gave Siegfried and Roy a taste for freedom—“the freedom that is necessary for anyone to master their own destiny.” The giant fire-breathing mechanical dragon that dominates that stage is equated with the terror and oppressiveness of WWII Germany. Marching soldiers in beautiful golden armor fill the stage. While earlier the evil goddess, who is also aligned with the dragon and soldiers, captures Roy, he later escapes and destroys her with the help of Siegfried’s magic. She vanishes in a flash of flames to be replaced by a white tiger. The next shot in the film version shows Roy flying around the auditorium suspended by a wire in Cirque du Soliel fashion while his and Siegfried’s laughter echoes throughout the auditorium like children at play, a refrain throughout the film and stage performances. The dark auditorium with pin lights on the ceiling gives the illusion of the infinite sky at night. In opposition to the regimented marching of the soldiers, Roy is literally and figuratively unbound. While he momentarily transcends the spatial confines of the stage, the shows narrative is about returning/finding home. Magic works well within this search for home because both the film and stage performances are really about transformations.

While the larger narrative structure is about transforming back to a child, the actual magic acts in the stage performances continually transform/interchange Roy and Siegfried. At times Roy will enter a cage or a box on stage and with a few waves of Siegfried’s phallic wand Roy is replaced by a white tiger. At other times Roy disappears to be replaced by Siegfried and vice versa. The result is that Roy, Siegfried, and the white tigers become synonymous with one another. This pairing or grouping is also echoed in *The Magic Box* where in one segment Roy befriends a Cheetah at the Munich Zoo and even sleeps in the cage with the animal. As with his dog Hexa, he learns to communicate with Chico the Cheetah, eventually adopting Chico and somehow smuggling the cat on board a cruise ship where Roy meets Siegfried. The conflating and interchanging of Roy and Siegfried at moments in the show (I will discuss the inclusion of the white tigers shortly) is yet another instance in which homoerotics emerges.

As Leo Bersani has noted desire to have is never entirely distinct from the desire to be and that boundaries between having and being are more blurred in same-gender desire (63). Accordingly, the pairing of Siegfried and Roy might be read as a pastiche on the distinction between having and being. The similarities between the two are so extreme/excessive that desire may not obtain. Primarily, they are identified jointly as “Siegfried and Roy.” It would be fair to say that most people do not know the last names of Siegfried and Roy and many people do not know which one is Roy and which one is Siegfried. While Siegfried and Roy never identify as gay, for many viewers, their demographics mirrors the diversity of tourists

in Las Vegas, the simple pairing of two adult men can/will be read as a homosexual pairing. At the same time the excessiveness of the pairing, both in physical appearance (hair styles, theatrical clothing, etc.) and the volume of publicity that has made their names synonymous with Las Vegas, also has the potential to erase such readings. The excessiveness becomes part of the spectacle that is Las Vegas.

While the magical acts tend to conflate Roy, Siegfried and the tigers, other instances in the stage show break or even counter these continuous pairings. At one point in the program, one long break in the action occurs during which Siegfried performs a magic routine in a more old-fashioned style where he directly addresses the audience and even has a volunteer from the audience come onto the stage to help him perform a series of rope tricks. During this part of the show Siegfried plays the stereotypical straight male simultaneously laughing at and comforting the hysterical female who is overwhelmed at the prospect of being on stage with Siegfried. As he finishes the rope tricks, Siegfried addresses the audience: “now let’s return to the story and see how Roy is doing.”

At a second point in the show the action also stops as Roy and Siegfried directly address the audience. During this segment Roy describes his and Siegfried’s efforts to preserve the white tiger and explains how they became involved with this project. Their preservation efforts are based on the premise that these white tigers (they are also trying to preserve white lions) are a distinct species that will become extinct without Siegfried and Roy’s conservation efforts. This premise is one that has been widely refuted. The biological evidence suggests that the white tigers are a biological fluke or mutation and not a separate breed or species as Siegfried and Roy contend. Although Siegfried and Roy never identify as gay, nonetheless, their association with the white tigers and at times conflation with the tigers, once again, bears an uncanny resemblance to the problematics of queer identity politics. The plight of these tigers reads as a code for inscribing difference. Specifically, I mean that Siegfried and Roy’s claims to a separate identity for these white tigers and lions parallels the problematics of gay and lesbian literature and identity politics that often become entangled in binary oppositions between constructivist and essentialist viewpoints.

Siegfried and Roy’s refrain throughout their film *The Magic Box* is that everyone must find their true calling which equates with finding or creating a sense of home. Similarly, their long-term objective is to return these white tigers to their homeland. But home for Siegfried and Roy increasingly becomes dependent on inscribing and maintaining an essential difference. As Diana Fuss remarks: “[i]n both gay and lesbian literature, a familiar tension emerges between a view of identity as that which is always there (but has been buried

under layers of cultural repression) and that which has never been socially permitted (but remains to be formed, created, or achieved)” (100). In light of her words, lesbian and gay autobiography can be viewed as constructionist to the extent that it seeks to produce a gay identity. But it is also essentialist, since identity is not created but is instead realized through the actualization of a pre-existing essence.

During the preservation sequence Roy walks one of the tigers onto the stage with a leash while a video of the tigers’ homeland in Africa plays and then a video of Roy and the tigers at home in his and Siegfried’s Las Vegas mansion (It is at this point in the show where Roy was attacked by Montecore). The shots are of Roy and the Tigers frolicking in meadows and swimming in the pool. These are followed by shots of Roy riding on the back of one of the tigers and Roy in bed with one of the tigers surrounded by several hundred candles. Sequentially the shots move from resembling a scene of children playing, to a familial scene of a father and his children, and finally to more erotic shots. Nonetheless, these glimpses into the private lives of Siegfried and Roy become moments of connection for the audience as the men and their tigers function as a form of family.

This melancholic longing for a homeland and family is also repeated in the publicity and media representations surrounding Siegfried and Roy. For example, in an Arts and Entertainment channel Biography on the pair that first aired in the spring of 2000 (replayed in various re-edited versions in the intervening years), there is a segment on the kidnapping of one of their white tigers. In New York just before they were to appear on a local morning news program, the tiger was in the back of a rental truck that was stolen from in front of the studio. The drama is told in a serious tone with documentary footage and interviews with the mayor of New York (Ed Koch) and the New York police during the two-hour ordeal. Interspersed are interviews with the distraught parent/Roy who is frantic and near tears over the disappearance of one of his tigers.

The depictions allow the viewer to become interpolated into the drama via the metaphor of the family. We sympathize with Roy’s loss and await his reunion with his family. The questions and footage accompanying the news segment resemble the frequent news interviews with parents of abducted or lost children, a type of coverage that has increased in recent years. During the segment, Siegfried, for the most part, is conspicuously absent from the camera frame, although he is interviewed about the incident for the A&E biography which was filmed in retrospect. In the few frames in which he does appear he is in the background. Roy does the talking and displays maternal characteristics, while Siegfried plays the part of the stoic male. In general, and not unlike typical family portraits, the two

are framed together with their tigers in their publicity stills. While the framing of the photos pairs the two males, the family portrait format may be a point of connection and familiarity with their audience. Until it was removed in 2004, following Roy's accident and the closing of the Siegfried and Roy show, a large thirty-by-fifty foot photo appeared on the marquee outside the Mirage. The photo/marquee dominated the front of the Mirage and could be seen from several miles away as one drove down Las Vegas Blvd despite the plethora of other signs, mega hotels, theme parks, and millions of lights along the route. The look of Siegfried and Roy in the photo was extreme in its construction. The faces looked airbrushed and even surgically altered. The effect was one of wearing masks. Yet the photos did not seem at odds with the other moments of excess along Las Vegas Boulevard. The marquee was also a popular site for tourist photographs. Numerous straight couples, honeymooners, and even the occasional gay couple were photographed in front of the Mirage with the marquee containing the portrait of Siegfried and Roy in the background. And so their photo enters the homes and family photo albums of vacationers and visitors to Las Vegas.

The site of Las Vegas as Siegfried and Roy's home and work (they performed both an afternoon and evening show four to five days a week at the Mirage until Roy's accident) is significant in respect to re-configuring space with the constant demolition and reconstruction of the city as fantasy play land for adults. S&R became regular performers at the newly opened Mirage in 1990. At the time Las Vegas was beginning to lose customers to gambling establishments in other states. In response Las Vegas changed its image to appeal to the entire family. Circus hotel and casino was the forerunner of this idea but the Mirage was the first mega-hotel and the Siegfried and Roy show, although a cabaret act, was conceived to appeal to the entire family. Las Vegas changed its image from a hang out for the brat pack and late night partying to one that supported and affirmed the family structure (in the last several years Las Vegas has begun catering to a young twenty-something crowd). Queers, white tigers and "assorted freaks" become part of the capitalistic mechanizations of the city of Las Vegas. They are spectacularized for family viewing. As such Las Vegas functions as a site of containment in that Siegfried and Roy's "queerness" fits into the spectacle that is Las Vegas.

Eve Sedgwick's theoretical work on the construction of homosexuality is useful here. She traces the increased centrality of a hetero/homo divide in conceptions of male identity in twentieth century Western culture. While the dominant culture strives to maintain homosexuality as marginal or outside/peripheral to constructions of heterosexuality, Sedgwick contends that the term is actually at the center of the definition of heterosexuality.

And that with the advent of the term homosexuality or the increasing visibility of homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century a corresponding homophobic panic emerged. The continual disappearing and reappearing of Roy throughout the magic acts might then be read as a playful although clearly unintentional representation of this tension between spectacle and invisibility that is endemic to queer identity. Perhaps this is the primary distinction I draw between straight and gay representations of adolescence.

This return to childhood is important in that the movement attempts to elide sexuality. Siegfried and Roy's magic acts with their emphasis on disappearing and reappearing and its relation to the tension between revealing and not revealing their sexual identity, engages this attempted elision. The return to the innocent space of childhood within the locale of the hypersexualized Las Vegas, then, is not without irony. The film can be read as problematic in its closeting but is nonetheless interesting in terms of how S&R attempt to circumvent the labeling of their sexuality, particularly with the emphasis the film places on a return to a childhood state of wonderment. In this return to childhood, Siegfried and Roy seem to elide this homo/hetero binary that Eve Sedgwick sees as central to Western concepts of identity via a child whom culturally we conceive of as sexually innocent. Similarly, the whiteness of the tigers equates with purity and innocence. James Kincaid discusses the need for children in contemporary American culture to be seen as pure and innocent if they are to be alluring, so the child becomes both sexual and pure. He calls this an empty innocence that validates the child's story (9)—and I would add the equation of Siegfried and Roy with childhood innocence has the same potential effect. However, Kincaid's larger argument is that "our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while just as enthusiastically denying it has done any such thing" (13).

While cultural narratives of childhood repeatedly construct that site as one of sexual innocence, retroactive constructions of childhood, specifically, queer narratives, repeatedly question the conflation of childhood with sexual innocence. As such, the repressed sexual content in Siegfried and Roy's *The Magic Box*—in this case, homoeroticism—returns. This is underscored by the narrative trajectory, publicity stills, and the rubber costuming worn by the stage assistants which creates the illusion of bared pumped pecs and six pack abs—not to mention the gigantic codpiece Roy wears in the stage show footage in the film (that is a 3-D Imax codpiece).

Sedgwick contends that homosexuality can be read as a speech act of a silence that eventually accrues particularity. The repressed sexual content in the film then returns via this speech act—an instance in which the weight of the "unspoken" or "unspeakable" outweighs

the narrative. In this instance the unspoken is gay sexuality and homoeroticism. When S&R meet on a “cruise” ship headed for the United States, Siegfried, as a magician in the lounge, and Roy, as a waiter with a stowaway cheetah from a Munich zoo, the voiceover says that Siegfried got more than an assistant—

and we know he did. The sequences of images in the film quite easily slip into mourning for a lost childhood or a “normative” childhood as the concept exists in the cultural imaginary. The cruise ship becomes an intermediary space, floating between two continents, the Eastern Europe of their childhood and America the symbol of their future adulthood. Arguably the ship never arrives. It maintains a space of limbo, a cite of perpetual adolescence not unlike the manipulation of space in their stage performances where figures are suspended in space, disappear and reappear completely intact--the emphasis on reappearing unchanged, always identifiable to the audience as the same figure. The effect is one that both fixes and unfixes identity and, arguably, specifically sexual identity.

The spectator at a magician show often tries to see through the illusion, to see how it is constructed, to look for slippages in the performance that might reveal the construction of the trick. At a viewing of their show at the Mirage I observed several audience members telling their companions that they could see how the tricks were done, implying that the magic was not so skillfully executed. For this observer the magic was executed flawlessly, impressively so. And so despite Siegfried and Roy’s attempt to allude labeling, the audience is trained to do just *that*. And yet there is simultaneously a willing suspension of disbelief: the audience, the theater, the performance might also be read as a space, momentarily detached, from the more pernicious and circulating narratives of mainstream culture that attempt to label sexuality, and where one can invest in illusion. Possibly magic is the only culturally sanctioned cite where this can take place. And so perhaps S&R do return to that childhood site of wonderment and innocence as they are conceived in the cultural imaginary.

As numerous sociologists and cultural critics have noted, the category of childhood (and especially the category of adolescence or what is often labeled as youth culture) is used to subsume the disruptive elements in culture in an attempt to contain them, make them *knowable* and understood. But childhood, particularly early childhood, is also characterized as a time lived in the immediate present. Since adulthood often connotes the acceptance of an unacceptable world many adults often try to escape to the eternal “present” of childhood, particularly in straight narratives, to regain a sense of immediate experience (Calcutt 186). This is most prevalent in various artistic movements like the Romantics, the Beats, etc. Nonetheless childhood is also read as a passing phase which foregrounds the instability

inherent in the category. And as critics like James Kincaid have noted adolescence and those movements associated with adolescence are not taken seriously and that we need to find a way to reread or reclaim the oppositional energy associated with this category that cultural narratives of youth often attempt to elide (*Innocence* 35).

In her book *Outside Belongings*, Elspeth Probyn suggests we suspend the idea of childhood as origin—the tendency to inscribe a trajectory that answers the question “why are we gay” or how did we get here. Instead she says it would be more optimistic to view childhood as a site of beginnings free from moral strictures and the necessity of writing that explains the present in relation to the past. As other theorists like Joseph Natoli have noted “anything I’ve got to say about back then should absolutely be taken as comments about right now” (97), a notion that may disrupt our belief in “the past is prologue” and “if we don’t learn from history we are doomed to repeat it” views (97). The past can also function as a replacement or analogue to the present or even a dream of restoration. Culturally, Siegfried and Roy’s *The Magic Box* very much comments on the present social anxieties in the United States: the resurgence of family values and a move to restore, the somehow lost, sanctity of childhood within our culture as represented by the return to the child within. Seemingly, the site of childhood is free of the moral strictures and burdens of adulthood that prevent us from experiencing the wonderment of the world around us. Of course the play on moral strictures is not without irony; if anything our sense of moral right and wrong as concerns children is heightened. And so how do we read this flight from the present by two men who may or may not be gay? They return to the free space of childhood and adolescence where one is constantly in the process of becoming. The freedom that space affords may be just another illusion as S&R’s own childhoods attest, but nonetheless this freedom of childhood is an illusion that our culture repeatedly invests in. Perhaps like the magicians they are they get us to see what we want to see—to invest in the familiar pattern that childhood is and always will be about uncorrupted innocence and not look for slippages in the story or in the performance that undermine the illusion.

The many ways in which Siegfried and Roy’s *The Magic Box* can be read as “queer,” play to the tension between the desire for a fixed origin for identity for which the articulations often become encumbered by pathologized tropes and the desire to return to the site of childhood and immediate experience as a site of possibilities. It seems appropriate then that Siegfried and Roy should be enshrined at the Mirage in Vegas—the amusement park for adult. As Michael Sorkin has noted, cities are now ageographical because they have no sense of place and that this is all the fault of television, telephone, and computer

technologies which generate a simulated real, depriving cities of those qualities that made them places of human connection. This new realm is a city of simulations, the television city, the city as theme park. This new city he contends threatens an unimagined sameness even as it multiplies the illusory choices of the TV system (98). However, cultural critics like Jim Collin suggest that readings like Sorkin's are perfect examples of a master narrative which must totalize at all costs, a totalization that fails to recognize how categories of cultural differences might affect the meanings generated by any landscape (Collins 38). As situated in Vegas, the performances of Siegfried and Roy then might be read as a site for a return to the immediacy of childhood through the manipulation of the spatial via a "magical" reworking of the "real", but also as a repeatable point for beginnings, a point from which to re-envision possibilities.

Afterword

As evidence of this repeatable point for beginnings Siegfried and Roy's website (siegfriedandroy.com) proclaims "The Magic is Back!" The two are scheduled to perform a new "one-of-a-kind magic performance" at Keep Memory Alive's "Power of Love" Gala to benefit the Lou Ruvo's Brain Institute, February 7, 2009. This will be their first performance since Roy Horn's accident in October of 2003. Roy continues to improve and was able to walk unaided for the first kilometer of the Fall 2007 5K Great Santa Run in Las Vegas as part of a series of fundraisers to benefit Opportunity Village.

Notes

1 See Michael Moon's *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998). George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994). Aaron Betsky's *Building Sex: Men, Women, Architecture and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Morrow, 1995). Aaron Betsky's *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: Morrow, 1997) and *Queers In Space: Communities, Public Spaces, Sites of Resistance*. Eds. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997).

2 Miller defines the "open secret" as a mechanism similar to Freudian disavowal which impinges on the construction of a subject. In this schema same-sex desire becomes both marginal and central in the formation of subjectivity. See D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of Calif. P, 1988).

3 For an extended interpretation of the relationship between and the significance of the Symbolic and the Imaginary in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory see Jane Gallop's *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell UP,

1985).

4

Michael DuPlessis offers an insightful reading of the much maligned mama's boy in "Mother's Boys: Maternity, Male 'Homosexuality,' and Melancholia." *Discourse: Berkeley Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*. 16.1 (Fall 1993): 145-173.

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