Identity politics: the queer nation-space in Paul Goma's My childhood at the gate of unrest

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Identity Politics: The Queer Nation-Space in Paul Goma's
My Childhood at the Gate of Unrest

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of queer, familial, and national identities within Paul Goma’s roman à clef, *My Childhood at the Gate of Unrest*. The narrator and protagonist, Paul, engages in a series of sexual relationships with young girls during the absence of his father and the invasion of his village by the Soviets. His interactions are much more than sexual encounters, however, as they reveal a queer gender identity. This paper argues that this queerness is a response to the cultural oppression Paul’s family experiences. Rather than responding with a debilitating reliance on confining stereotypes as his father does, Paul’s queerness—symbolized by his favorite place, the *calidor* or corridor of his home—allows him to refigure his identity by returning to his childhood and reclaiming his memories. Paul’s queerness not only refashions his conception of gender, but it also helps him queer the rigid conception of national identity represented in the text by his father’s oppressive need for demarcation. This paper makes use of Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender, Homi Bhabha’s work on national identity, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s assessments of the nation to show how gender, the nation, and its people are tenuous concepts, at best. Paul seems to recognize this, and his queerness offers him an alternative to his father’s vision, which ultimately allows him to recuperate his childhood from the violent experiences he witnesses and legitimizes his non-normative identity.
During the 1941-1944 Soviet-Romanian struggle for control of the Moldavian territory Basarabia, Paul, the child narrator of Paul Goma’s *My Childhood at the Gate of Unrest* (1990), engages in a series of sexual relationships with servant girls in his mother’s home. Here he describes an encounter with a girl named Balana:

The first time I saw her in our kitchen, I noticed her little boots. About two days later I pretended I had things to do in the kitchen so I could have another look at them. The thing I liked best was when she came in from outside […] and she took them off to put her slippers on. I sat there with my eyes glued to the boots. (133)

The girl and her enticing boots described in this passage come at the end of a long line of girls with whom Paul explores his gender identity and sexuality. Although he is ultimately heterosexual, his gender identity is complicated in a number of ways, including here his fetishization of Balana’s boots. Furthermore, throughout this scene we see Paul inhabiting a space in which he is constantly mediating between masculinity and femininity.

This oscillation continues as Paul thinks of a way he can possess the boots: he tells Balana he will not eat until she gives them to him (134). A confused Balana responds by asking him what he wants with the boots, which would be too big for him anyway. Paul’s answer—“They’re not for my feet. They’re for my prick” (134)—reveals his desire not only to fetishize but also to own (and “wear”) the shoes. He embodies both genders in this statement as he engages in masculine fetishization and indulgence in the feminine. It becomes apparent that he does not desire Balana while she is wearing the boots, but rather he desires to wear the boots on his penis. In
this way, he expresses a desire that is both masculinized (indicated by the presence of
fetishism) and feminized (indicated by his desire to wear feminine signifiers).

Paul goes on to desire the boots in a third way, which now includes Balana as
a sexualized female body. Once she tells him she cannot give him the boots because
they were a gift, Paul immediately asks her if they were in exchange for sex (134),
equating masculinity to the imperative receipt of sex from women. Paul takes
Balana’s tearful response to mean yes, and he responds, “If you lie with me as well,
I’ll give you them too” (135). Of course, Balana doesn’t understand, and Paul
explains:

Look, this is what we’ll do: you take them off and give them to me. If
you don’t lie with me, I won’t give them back to you. If you do, then
I’ll give you a pair of nice little red ankle boots—and besides that, I’ll
eat as well and Mother won’t beat you because you let me die and she
won’t throw you out. (135)

Here Paul positions himself as decidedly masculine. He has removed himself from
the feminine realm of possessing and wearing the boots back into a masculine
position: he now wants to reward Balana for sexual favors by giving the boots to her.
Balana confirms this masculine part of Paul’s subjectivity by telling Paul that she will
cry after they lie down because “that’s what [women are] supposed to do” (136).
Paul will eat his food. Balana’s domestic position will be affirmed, and their
microcosmic heteronormative household will be secure.

Although this dynamic appears to re-establish Paul as a heterosexual
masculine male, the following summary of his understanding of gender and sexuality
reveals otherwise: if he eats, Balana will give him the boots; then they will lie down
together, Balana will cry afterward, and he will give her the boots to comfort her. In this “game,” Paul is first feminine in opposition to Balana, who inhabits the masculine power position by giving him the fetishized, feminine object of his desire; the sexual act occurs in the in-between space—although the act is heterosexual, the couple’s genders are obscured by the shifting power dynamic, and, finally, this is followed by Paul’s assertion of masculinity.

In this scene and, subsequently throughout the novel, Paul displays a non-normative identity that can be described as “straight queerness.” Coming from Alexander Doty’s wish “to find a term with some ambiguity, a term that would describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions” (qtd. in Jagose 97), straight queerness means that while Paul sexually desires persons of the opposite sex, his gender is queer-identified. In other words, while he is not homosexual, he is certainly resisting heteronormative definitions of “appropriate” gendered behavior. While queer may be commonly associated with issues of sexuality, gender, and the body, for the purposes of this paper, I would like to adopt the perspective of queer theorists like Annamarie Jagose, who defines queer as being “unaligned with any specific identity category” (2) and “a consequence of the constructionist problematising of any allegedly universal term” (74). In addition to examining the queer construction of Paul’s gender identity, I will also apply “queer” in this larger sense that Jagose identifies, using it as a means to challenge any type of fixed subjectivity, including national identity.
I see the space in which queer theory and theories of national identity overlap as one of Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones"—both in the sense of addressing a contact zone such as Basarabia and the actual overlap of multiple modes of thinking.

I turn to Paul's explanation of the novel's title to elaborate:

The calidor of the house in Mana was the hub of the universe. The paths for running away, the roads for trekking, the corridors for moving flocks, the boulevards for incoming invasions—they all passed through here—all of them intersecting one another for the sake of good business. The threshold of my birth (equidistant between the 46th and 48th parallels—but not exactly on the 47th parallel and roughly on the 29th meridian) was such a compelling location that a writer, who at first wandered from one style to another and was mediocre, and who later became a 'realist-socialist' and downright terrible, called it with good reason: 'The Gate of Unrest.' And through this Gate, at a trot or at a gallop—but always from east to west—rode all the people from the deserts and marshes: Ostrogoths, Visigoths and pure Goths, Huns and Avars, Slavs and Bulgarians, Magyars and Petchenegs and Cumans, Tarts and Cossacks. And Russians. And Soviets. (208)

The title of the novel reflects Paul's tumultuous childhood experiences as a result of the contest for Basarabia (in which Mana is located) between Russia and Romania. His desire to articulate the exact location of his birth and his inability to definitively do so betrays a conflicted identity acted upon by numerous cultural and ethnic forces. Finally, his strict delineation of which people have crossed through the "Gate" highlights an intense need to pinpoint and thus demarcate national identities in order to secure his subjectivity. Paul, however, ultimately resists this demarcation, as I will show, and it is at this site of resistance that I examine the intersection of non-normative and national identities.

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1 I will return to Paul's definition of calidor, but for immediate purposes, a calidor is a hallway, anteroom, or foyer. Additionally, within the novel Paul sits in the calidor as a witness to important events in the novel's depiction of cultural oppression and violence.
This intersection is both an effect of and response to several factors. First, I suggest Paul’s identity originates as a resistance to national and familial desires to classify nationalities and designate borders in order to cope with the trauma of geographical annexation, political, social and cultural oppression, and vacillating boundaries. More specifically, Paul’s father has responded to this constant insecurity by desiring further distinction rather than dissolution of borders and identities. Although he is defiantly resistant to Russian occupation, he still advocates the kind of strict othering and marginalizing that often initiates cultural oppression. Thus, Paul’s queer response to his nation’s and his father’s construction of oppressive, impermeable identities is one that actively and repeatedly resists definition.

In order to trace the ways in which Paul forms his identity in reaction to the forces discussed above, I offer several definitions of what constitutes a nation and/or national identity. In highlighting the variety of definitions scholars use to articulate these concepts, I hope to show why it is ostensibly necessary for firm demarcations between and among groups and then explain how Paul fights this ideology. To begin, John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith articulate what is at stake in defining “nation”:

While it is recognized that the concept of the nation must be differentiated from other concepts of collective identity like class, region, gender, race, and religious community, there is little agreement about the role of ethnic, as opposed to political, components of the nation; or about the balance between ‘subjective’ elements like will and memory, and more ‘objective’ elements like territory and language; or about the nature and role of ethnicity in national identity. What is often conceded is the power, even primacy, of national loyalties and identities over those of even class, gender, and race. (4)
Hutchinson and Smith emphasize the difficulty of determining which elements constitute national identity and how this lack of definitive characteristics is exacerbated when one tries to privilege certain criterion over others. Additionally, they show that this problem, along with a tension between “subjective” and “objective” characteristics, is often reconciled by primary loyalty to the elusive idea of the nation without an understanding of what constitutes it.

Liah Greenfeld is more specific and offers that “a nation is defined not as a composite entity, but as a collective individual, endowed with a will and interests of its own” (104). Miroslav Hroch defines a nation using the following criteria: “a ‘memory’ of some common past, treated as a ‘destiny’ of the group,” “a density of linguistic or cultural ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group,” and “a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society” (79). While Greenfeld’s and Hroch’s definitions differ from one another, both theses emphasize the importance of the community when thinking about nationhood.

While Walker Connor also emphasizes communal thought, he ultimately privileges difference and a collective awareness of that difference from other nations as necessary to defining one’s own nation. He writes, “This essence [of the nation] is a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way” (36). He claims that in order for the people of a nation to think of their group as a nation, they must unequivocally accept this notion of difference. While this may be true, there also
seems to be danger in imaging the nation as oppositionally and fundamentally
different from other nations. Connor’s assessment crystallizes the “us-them”
mentality that is also common to objectifying, marginalizing, and repressive groups.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* addresses the trends Connor
identifies more extensively. Connor’s conception of difference is not only external to
the nation, but as Hardt and Negri show, this concept also includes internal
difference. They claim that while “nations are imagined communities,” inverting
Benedict Anderson’s statement reveals that

> the nation becomes the only way to imagine community! Every
imagination of a community becomes overcoded as a nation, and
hence our conception of community is severely impoverished. Just as
in the context of the dominant countries, here too the multiplicity and
singularity of the multitude are negated in the straitjacket of the
identity and homogeneity of the people. (107)

Hardt and Negri posit that in the process of imagining the nation, the people (defined
as a collective will and action versus the multitude composed of individual voices)
construct a community that inevitably suppresses internal difference in its quest for
stability, independence, and sovereignty. As a result, difference and otherness is
vilified and subjugated, so that while a nation must construct itself against other
nations, it is also constructing its people against any form of internal division. Thus,
as a nation attempts to gain sovereignty for itself, it may also deprive its members of
that same freedom. Presumably, Paul’s queerness would be an undesirable quality
and a manifestation of the type of internal difference the burgeoning nation fights
against. It is this very aspect that makes his subjectivity so subversive yet necessary.
Likewise, the strict separation and classification of identity in the formation of national identity that Hardt and Negri address becomes an apt site of resistance for a movement such as queer that is based on “resistance to definition” (Jagose 1). More specifically, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits that queer is being extended “along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example” (9). Recalling Gloria Anzaldua, Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon see the vital intersection of queer and theories of geopolitical space as these discourses explode ontological categories: “living on the borderlands […] symbolize[s] the inadequacy of nationalist/cultural/ethnic categories, in just the way that the experiences of transgendered people have come to symbolize the inadequacy of our binary sex/gender system” (213). Because queer holds as one of its major tenets identity as a constituted and constructed phenomenon, it resonates in places outside the realms gender and sexuality. Jagose’s, Sedgwick’s, and Alsop et al.’s visions of queer expanding to encompass all spaces of identity resonates with my argument because what Paul effectively does is to queer first his identity and, in the process, his “world.” When he puts into practice what these theorists identify above, Paul is able to envision his identity and thereby his world as fluid and open in stark contrast to his father’s rigid position. This frees him from the oppression of his familial and national identities and the hegemonic cultural oppression and violence he witnesses and allows him to write a different story.
In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha writes that “Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (213). Paul’s narrative, which encompasses both his queer identity and the novel itself, fulfills this function Bhabha identifies by interrupting the hegemonic narratives of his father, the Soviets, and heteronormative society. Furthermore, Bhabha’s statement legitimizes the authenticity of the counter-narrative, placing it on par with the grand narratives it challenges.

This is important because not only does recognizing the validity of the counter-narrative liberate the concepts of nation and national identity from their original confines, this action also legitimizes the writer of the counter-narrative. Bhabha’s statement shows that Paul’s identity is viable even without the strict regulation of difference along national borders. In other words, Bhabha shows that once borders and boundaries are made permeable, national identity can still be grounded in specific loci, including Paul’s queerness, the other criteria Greenfeld and Hroch identify—a collective will, a common past or destiny, common linguistic and cultural ties—and the multi-vocal community for which Hardt and Negri wish.

With that said, once national identity is “queered”—and here I mean reconceived to privilege a lack of boundaries—identity itself becomes freed from its traditional position as something essential and complete but not destroyed. As many queer theorists argue, queer helps us to see that the subject (or identity) is not superior
to social influence, nor is it exempt from social control. As Robert Corber and Stephen Valocchi write, the subject is not in existence “prior to social structures, but is constituted in and through them, and thus it is neither autonomous nor unified but contingent and split. Subjectivity is not a property of the self but originates outside it and therefore is unstable” (3). The consequence of realizing this, then, is that if identity is exposed as an unstable construction, it is made contestable and vulnerable to deconstruction.

In Paul’s case, once he queers his father’s conception of the Basarabian/Soviet binary through his gender queerness, he frees those terms up for re-conception and reclamation. This freeing does what Bhabha terms “politically crucial,” which is to move past “narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and [focus] on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (2). Paul’s revision of his gender and national identities produces a gap in his father’s thinking by privileging the indeterminacy his father guards against. It is such “in-between” spaces, Bhabha writes, that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). Ultimately, this allows Paul to return to his childhood at “the gate of unrest” and salvage it from the ruins of cultural and familial oppression rather than be confined and tortured by these events as his father is.
Mana, Basarabia, Moldavia, Romania

In order to fully understand the schizophrenic quality of the Goma family’s reality, I will present a brief history of the area with which I am dealing. Most of the novel takes place in the village of Mana, located in Basarabia, which is the present-day Republic of Moldova. Basarabia was formerly part of Moldavia, which joined, along with Wallachia, to form the present Romania in 1859 (Dima 15). However, a portion of Moldavia—Basarabia—was first annexed to Russia in 1812 (Dima 13). Since then, Basarabia (now Moldova) has been a highly-contested site of turmoil.

Romania itself was subject to a multitude of continually-mutating forces throughout the 20th century. While the modern state was formed in 1859, in 1918 it also acquired the territories of Bukovina and Transylvania (Dima 20). In 1940, parts of Romania, including Basarabia and Northern Bukovina, were annexed to the Russians (Dima 30). Later in 1940, Romania joined the Axis powers, recovering Basarabia temporarily (Dima 36). Following the end of World War II, Romania became Communist and was occupied by Russian troops until 1958 (Dima 47). After 1958, relations between Romania and the U.S.S.R. slowly deteriorated, and the Romanian Communist dictatorship ended in December 1989 (“Romania”).

Like its “mother” country, Basarabia experienced constant upheaval in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Moldavia joined to form Romania, the southern part of the Russian-controlled Basarabia joined the unification. Shortly after this, in the late 1870s, the Russians regained control of all of Basarabia during the Romanian War of Independence (Dima 16). During World War I, Basarabia rejoined with
Romania, and this was not recognized by Russia; this continued until World War II when Basarabia fell into Soviet territory in 1939, and the following year Romania ceded Basarabia back to the U.S.S.R. (Dima 1). In 1940, the Soviets divided their newly-gained territory into the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Dima 32). Simultaneously, Basarabia’s northern and southern parts, occupied by Romanians, Ukrainians, and Germans, were exchanged with parts of Transnistria, occupied by Ukrainians and Russians (Dima 33-36).

In the decades following World War II, several nationalist movements were founded in attempts to reunify with Romania, but they were suppressed by the Soviets (Dima 2). In 1988, Basarabians fought for Moldavian/Romanian as the official language instead of Russian; this was adopted in 1989 but not immediately implemented. In 1990, free elections made the M.S.S.R. into the S.S.R. Moldova, which eventually became the Republic of Moldova. The Republic of Moldova gained official independence and the 1940 boundaries remain unchanged to the present day ("Moldova").

While the novel addresses the time before Paul’s birth in 1935 and runs past his evacuation of Mana in 1944 through Paul’s contemporary conversations with his parents, the action which concerns Paul’s childhood takes place in the years 1935-1944. During this time the Soviets controlled Basarabia and exchanged portions of it for other acquired territories. Here Paul describes a chronologically earlier yet similar “exchange”:
In place of the villagers of Mana—savages who hadn’t yet grasped the ‘higher stage of civilisation’ (as the historians write today), they brought civilizers from the civilized depths of Russia, souls-as-far-back-as-anybody-knows, souls-from-father-to-son; then came freed convicts; then Muscovites; then veterans [...] and finally wanderers who had been free peasants and had fled from their villages [...] where Russians had cleaned up the area and installed huge colonies of German, Swiss, and French people, [...] who were colonized in newly-named villages. (26)

In an attempt to create not only a Russian identity but also Russian geographical territory, the Russians installed “civilizing” forces in the areas newly acquired from the annexation of Basarabia. To reconstruct the borders they had dissolved by reordering the area, the Russians created a network of civilizers to ensure the security and success of their empire. In this portion of the novel, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the borders of Mana as in flux and vulnerable to foreign occupation. Because his father is a history teacher, Paul knows the violent history of the region, including knowledge of the Russians’ strategic planning as they try to construct an identity from the ruins of occupation.

Like Father, Like Son?

“[...] the nation’s people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past; the people are also the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporary.”

~Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture

This epigraph articulates, according to Bhabha, what it means to be “the people” of a nation. The people is held up as both a parent and child of the nation; in
other words, the people made the nation even as the nation makes the people. The result is a fractured and conflicted ideology, built on ambivalence to use Bhabha’s term. This means that in reality neither the nation nor its people are secure in the identities they construct. In some ways, Paul’s queerness recognizes this fallacy; just as Judith Butler’s theory of performativity highlights the tenuousness of gender, Bhabha recognizes the fragility of “the nation” despite it attempts to prove otherwise.

Consequently, Paul’s father is unable to recognize the insecurity of the discourse of nationhood and national identity and, as a result, allows this discourse to govern his life. Although he recognizes the injustice of the Russian occupation, citing its dangerous adherence to the destruction and reconstruction of national identity, he can only react in ways that ultimately mimic his oppressors’ mindset. This limits Paul’s father from liberating himself from the trauma of cultural oppression. This is evident in a conversation Paul overhears between his father and their neighbor, Old Iacob. In this conversation, Father’s anxiety about correctly labeling the Russians in order to resist further incorporation is apparent. He says, “But these ones aren’t Russians any more. Old Iacob, they’ve turned themselves into Soviets. They haven’t got a God any more.” Old Iacob responds, “Once a Russian, always a Russian: scrape off a bit o’ that Sovietic skin an’ you’ll find yer true orthodox believer underneath!” (11) Although the men differ in their opinions, they both believe that Russians are fundamentally different from Romanians and must be labeled as such in order to preserve that difference. Father’s need to appropriately identify the “Soviets” suggests that without the “right” title, those fighting against the
Russians may lose sight of the differences. Old Jacob claims “once a Russian, always a Russian,” which also betrays a desperate need to believe that national identities are firmly fixed and cannot be changed or transgressed.

This is echoed later when Father tells Paul “our Romanian stupidity is stupid, noisy, petty” in contrast to “the Russian’s stupidity—which is...like his country, endless; as opposed to the German’s, swept into the corners, cubic, well-administered, you would almost think it was part of their machinery” (189).

Although Father critiques his own national identity, it is clearly to establish a stark contrast with the Russian and German mindsets. He literally equates Russian stupidity with the large expanse of Russian territory and influence, and German stupidity reflects the automaton-like precision and meticulousness of the Nazis. The people of the nations are made synonymous with what the country “looks like.”

Father is constantly setting up barriers between Romanians and other nationalities in response to the uncertainty they foster in him through their attempts to gain control of Basarabia.

In a later conversation, Father still associates certain qualities with Russians as a means of distancing himself from them. He says, “the Russian is a scoundrel who only wants you to think he’s a do-gooder; an occupier who asks you, obliges you to call him: liberator, a devil who won’t leave you in peace until you call him angel—and if you don’t want too bad for you” (43). Father is anxious to emphasize that he is not tricked by the Russians’ conflation of the terms liberation and occupation. He sees the Russians as dissemblers and tries desperately to make it known he refuses to
fall prey to them. For him, his personal sovereignty depends on his ability to vilify the Russians as a means of confirming his own knowledge of reality.

Father's need for categories and classifications is made quite apparent in his discussions with Paul about the Goma family name. Paul asks Father why he did not change their name when he was imprisoned by the Russians as other Romanians did to protect their safety. Father responds that he did not want to change the name because a person picks "something up from [a name] and it from you, and each of you gives something to the other, and you model yourselves on each other" (209). While no one can fault Paul's father for holding onto the family identity, it is still important to interrogate the implications of his statement. According to Paul's father, a name is something that is certainly subject to external forces but is also something that is ultimately, essentially, always part of a person. In changing the Goma name, Father would have been relinquishing a part of himself he holds as distinctly Romanian, Basarabian. This is clearly something he holds above all else because he says, "blood isn't important, it's the name that counts" (212). Familial identity is most important when it can be determined by a name rather than a tricky and convoluted lineage. Without the name, no one can tell if a person is "safe," is Romanian, is Russian, etc., and family becomes less important because it is vulnerable to outside manipulation and alteration. As long as a name is clearly discerned, people can remain in the places they "belong."

This rigid insistence is contrasted with Paul's mother's response when asked about her heritage. She says to Paul:
I’m Greek, Macedonian, Polish, and what else might I be? Russian, Gypsy, Serbian, Tartar, Bulgarian... That’s why I’m Romanian as well. Because I can say to myself, my mother tongue’s Romanian—okay. But wonder what my mother’s mother tongue was: Greek or Romanian? […] But look how things end up when we’re of mixed blood: we’re ashamed, we try to hide it and, in order to be taken for true natives (for we are true-born natives ourselves), we insult the others, especially the ones from whom we... Yes, even ourselves. (231)

Paul’s mother, who is his moral touchstone, claims that although she identifies as a Romanian, parts of her are not purely Romanian, especially those she cannot definitively identify. She criticizes those who are ashamed of their mixed heritage and seems to value those gaps in her history which make her identity slightly unstable. She sees that mixing and blending can be valued rather than rigid stratifications which serve to reinforce prejudice and shame. Paul’s mother, recognizing the instability and repressive nature of national categories, embraces her “in-between” spaces as Paul will learn to do.

The Calidor—Place, Home, Memory

“We probably think about home as something not extending very far in space—if not just a house, then perhaps a neighborhood or local community. It is familiar space because we crisscross through it again and again, perhaps even on foot. We are likely to have seen it day and night, in all seasons. It is a familiar space because we have it quite well mapped.”

~Ulf Hannerz. “Where We Are and Who We Want to Be”

Although Paul is faced with the same instability as his father, he does not retaliate by furthering classifying and separating. Instead, he responds by embracing the inconsistencies and sites of contest as freeing and enriching rather than limiting and oppressive. I argue that the calidor is representative of Paul’s non-normativity.
which includes his fluid identity and his queerness. The calidor is at once a site of stability and contestation. It is a place that anchors Paul’s consciousness; it represents his home, but its defining characteristic is its openness. In the Preface, he describes the calidor as “a passage, an entrance open on both sides, outside, an outside which was proximal and not definitive, where there was air and light and shade and warmth, exposed to attacks—but not deadly ones; and whenever I liked, I could take the step backward to safety” (4). This passage is important for several reasons. First, Paul describes the calidor as a threshold, a space that is always in the middle and never closed off from either side. Just as queer represents a “zone of possibilities” (Jagose 2), the calidor is a location always susceptible to change. 3

Secondly, the calidor is something which stabilizes Paul’s identity but also allows him the opportunity to expand that position, widening its grasp to encompass a variety of experiences. Paul observes a great deal from the calidor, and (like Paul’s identity) nationality, gender, and war are filtered queerly through this space. Finally, Paul’s association of safety with the calidor suggests that he views his non-normative identity as empowering rather than malevolent. His queerness is not something he fears or tries to repress, and instead he derives strength and security from it.

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2 Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort write that “In the sense that [belonging] circumscribes feelings of ‘homeness,’ it is also a significant determinant of identity,” which they define as “that elusive but still real psychological state of being in sync with oneself under given external conditions” (vii). Paul’s identity is firmly rooted in the symbol of his home, the calidor. Not only is it representative of his queerness, it is also representative of his childhood and his conception of the world.

3 Bhabha describes African American artist Renee Green’s use of the museum architecture in her exhibit, Sites of Genealogy: “The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, white and black. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities” (5).
Moreover, the *calidor* represents Paul’s ability to return to his childhood *because* of that queerness. It is not a regressive move because he gains strength, and this insight allows him to rebound from his traumatic childhood. He describes the *calidor* as a place to which he can return in order to reclaim his childhood from unrest: “I always return, incessantly and effortlessly, to exactly the same point of departure: the threshold of my life. […] The further I move away from it [the *calidor*], my point-of-departure, the closer I move towards it, my point-of-arrival, and time is, like my journey, circular” (4). Paul constantly returns to the *calidor* because its queerness allows him the freedom to do so. If he adopts his father’s rigidly adult position, he is forbidden to come back and reconsider what has already happened for fear that this reconsideration would jeopardize the stability of his identity. However, because he associates circular return with the *calidor*, it is a place of renewal and redemption.

Intricately tied to Paul’s *calidor* is his formation of memories, which also remains fluid and malleable. Although the acquisition of his “own” memories is very important to Paul, this is because that control allows him to render them permeable. Here he describes the moment he remembers having his first memory: “I began to record my own memories, like adults, in succession: to continuously receive and deposit the things which were happening right around me…and gaps don’t interrupt the chain of events, as they did before, now they just act as a filter” (71). Sitting on the *calidor*, Paul begins to gain control over his memories whereas he previously gathered them from his family. Although it could be argued that his insistence on the
authenticity of his own memories is reminiscent of his father, I suggest it is precisely because he gains control of his memories when and where he does—before the pivotal forest evacuation and on the queer calidor—that differentiates this desire for legitimacy from his father’s. In contrast to his father, whose memories are only limiting reminders of how he must remain invulnerable, Paul’s memories can be used to challenge the oppression that need for security can create. As Bhabha writes, “The present of the people’s history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a ‘true’ national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotype” (218). Paul’s possession of his memories rescues them from his father’s control or the dominant culture’s desire to recall an authentic “national past.” Now Paul can make his memories reflect his own conception of identity and its nascent beginnings on the queering space of the calidor.

Like the calidor, Paul sees his memories as something that brings him back to his childhood in a recuperative way: “there are [memories], passive scenes, key scenes, moments, states of mind which, although they ‘reached’ me later (even today), trigger true self-recall, a succession, a step-by-step (or stone-by-stone) descent until they go so far back. not only to the age at which. it’s said, you actually have the power to ‘form’ direct memories. but even further back, to birth itself” (54). Paul represents his memory as constantly changing—even now he is remembering. It is this constant movement back-and-forth that also allows him to descend further into the depths of his memory and reclaim memories he has heard from others. Because
his memories are always mutating and informing one another, he can return to them—like the cadior—to retain his oscillating identity. It is this ability to remember and return, return and reconsider that makes Paul’s queerness liberating rather than destructive, even though it remains at odds with his father and, presumably, his society.

**Into the Forest**

“And this our life exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in every thing.
I would not change it.”

~Duke Senior, *As You Like It*, II.i

In literature the forest often represents a space free from the confines of society and conducive to fostering an identity that resists the strict ordering of the “real” world. I think this is entirely true for Paul as the forest becomes the site of his queering. However, I think Paul’s experience differs from the traditional forest metaphor—in fact, he queers it in a sense. Although the forest appears to mean freedom from Mana’s strict gender roles, I argue the opposite is true in Goma’s novel. Because Mana divides along gender lines to combat potential absorption by the Russians, I think young Paul can never forget what it means to be “man” and “woman.” During this time, Paul learns what is masculine and, through his experiences in the nearly all-female space of the forest, what is feminine. Despite this, what he learns most explicitly in the forest is that firmly delineated gender roles are confining and debilitating. While gender roles structure everyday life, they also
expose people to conflict and pain as Paul soon learns. Instead, if he moves between
the genders, he can find a way to balance the competing definitions of masculinity he
learns and the feminine interests to which he is exposed, gaining freedom from the
resultant queerness.

In Mana society, gender is strictly enforced at all times, but it is most clearly
demarcated within the family in times of crisis. Paul’s family nearly evacuates a first
time in 1941, and although Paul is only four, he realizes that women and men have
different roles that must not overlap. In her essay, “Gendermaps,” Kathy Lowe
explains the significance of this: “Children create gendermaps based on the many and
varied contexts that they experience in their lives. The family and home context is
the first and, I would argue, one of the most powerful sites of discourse that informs
children about masculinity and femininity” (208). The family is a microcosm of
Mana’s gendered identities, and Paul learns this early on. Sitting on the calidor, Paul
watches his mother and Old Iacob, who scolds her for carrying heavy belongings
because that is “man’s work” (10). Through the explicit and immediate example of
his family, this exchange shows Paul that work is divided according to gender and
that the need for this division is increased when survival depends upon it.

During the second evacuation (due to Russian invasion), Paul is six years old,
and his society’s ideals of masculinity are firmly rooted in his conscious: “‘I’ll stay
with the men. to protect the house from those thieving beggars—that’s men’s work’”
(77). Paul clearly understands that masculinity is defined by staying behind to protect
the village whereas the women must leave. Although Paul wants to stay behind,
everyone laughs at his bravado, and he is forced to go. Paul is one of the only males in the forest (the rest are invalids) with the group of women, and from this point to the end of the evacuation he will learn how men and women are “supposed” to act in relation to one another.⁴

It is important to emphasize that while Paul is in the forest, his exposure to both genders does not produce his queerness automatically. In fact, the forest shows Paul what happens when people act in-sync with their socially-prescribed genders. Instead of undergoing an immediate transformation, he takes what he learns back to Mana after the evacuation and queers his relationships with girls there. In the forest, masculinity and femininity are, for the most part, clearly defined for Paul.

Paul’s departure from Mana teaches him one definition of masculinity predicated on the protection of women. As the group makes their way to the evacuation site in the forest, he comes to learn about another form of masculinity—the sexual domination of women. Ileana, a member of their party, exposes herself to the Russian planes, and yells, “Here y’are, you thievin’ beggar! If you’re a man, stick yer lead in here!” (80) Although Paul does not understand the meaning of this gesture, he does learn that masculinity is equated with domination of the female genitalia as well as the protection of women as he previously learned. Furthermore, when he tries to demonstrate this new type of masculinity by asking to see Ileana’s “down here,” he can’t understand why this angers his mother. Instead of explaining her anger, she leads him “away like a horse by the reins further away, somewhere

⁴ Lowe argues that “enculturation is an ongoing process through which children construct a reality that is meaningful to them within the many contexts they are exposed to” (206).
else" (81). Paul figures Ileana showed the Russians her “down there,” so she must be able to show him, but he learns here that acting as a “man” only gets him in trouble. Evidently, he sees how to enact masculinity and attempts to do so, yet he is punished for this. In the forest Paul cannot protect the women or dominate them as masculinity demands, and he receives negative reinforcement each time he tries.

Although Paul’s first expression of his masculinity is discouraged, he tries again with a younger girl in the group, Duda. To escape the mosquitoes, Duda and he crawl under a blanket, naked. At this point, Paul’s mother intervenes, this time smacking Duda, calling her a “rotten girl,” who is “ruining [her] child!” (85) Again as Paul attempts to assert his masculinity to Duda’s femininity, his mother quells it; this time, she also attacks Duda, an action which introduces Paul to the idea of women being vilified for adopting what he has come to learn as the appropriate model of femininity. Paul comes away from this encounter wondering:

Why had she bullied me about Ileana and her dress? Why had she given me a thrashing about Duda with no dress? […] And said that she was ruining me? How’s that when it was so nice it was nearly too nice, how could I be ruined? (83)

Clearly, Paul is attempting to work through what he has recently learned about gender and sexuality. According to gender conventions, Ileana and Duda were enacting femininity, and Paul was responding as a man should. He cannot understand why they are punished for acting in accordance with their genders as he understands them. This confusion affects Paul’s understanding of gender so that he sees enacting “true” gender has negative consequences for women as well as men.
This relationship between proper gender identity and punishment is compounded when Paul witnesses the attempted rape of his mother (89). In this instance Paul sees a man enacting one form of masculinity—sexual domination of a woman—and, in response, Paul attempts to assert another form of masculinity—physical protection of his mother. However, both forms are ultimately discouraged.

The man who tries to rape his mother, Ilie, is a cripple from Mana. This complicates the matter because Ilie is metaphorically impotent: his masculinity is jeopardized, like Paul's, because he cannot stay in the village with the other men. Instead, his injury prevents him from physically fighting the Russians, and he attempts to re-establish his masculinity by raping Paul's mother. However, before he can do this, Paul stops him by poking him with a stick burning with embers from the fire (89). In this scenario, Paul's mother is almost raped by an impotent man, who is attacked by Paul with a phallic weapon: Paul asserts his masculinity against a man trying to do the same. However, when Paul tries to talk to his mother about the incident, she slaps him. Rather than praising his masculinity, his mother punishes him for it. During the evacuation Paul learns the two-pronged definition of masculinity, which encompasses protection and domination of women; however, he also learns that no matter which definition he is enacting, he will be punished for it without explanation. Consequently, during the evacuation Paul engages in a pattern of asserting his masculinity only to have it discouraged.

Although Paul has been introduced to the confusion which accompanies the realization of "correct" gender roles, when he begins his "relationship" with Nora,
another little girl in the forest, he is still trying to work out the complex pairing of masculinity and femininity. This scene is pivotal as it becomes not only another example for Paul of the failure of gender, but, more importantly, I argue it illustrates Judith Butler’s concept of performative gender, which initially reveals Paul’s queerness and ultimately rescues Paul from a potentially debilitating queer space.

All of Paul’s experiences thus far prepare him for his encounter with Nora. He has been punished for enacting masculinity, but he sees a final opportunity to (ironically) experiment with heteronormativity away from his mother’s watchful eyes. He imagines interacting with Nora: “I really would have liked to talk to Nora. About our fathers. She could have cried, and I could have stroked her, her hair, her little bow, and wiped away her tears and said, in the deepest-ever voice, it’s all right, the Lord’s-Good. (94)” Here Paul assigns them their proper gender roles: Nora will play the part of the frail female and Paul will be the comforting male. He sees acting out his masculinity in this way as an affirmation of his subjectivity in accordance with his society’s ideas about gender.

Nora also demonstrates her knowledge of the gender patterns of their society as she tells and shows Paul how “grown-ups lie down”:

She lay back on the grass, lifted up her little dress and opened her legs. She said we’d pretend she was the girl and that I was the boy; and let’s say that the boy lies down to go to sleep on top of the girl—that’s what it meant when a girl slept with a boy. (98)

Like Paul, Nora sees the ways in which men and women are traditionally supposed to behave and attempts to assert herself in this manner. She sees that women are supposed to be in the passive position, while men take the dominant position on top.
Both Paul and Nora realize that men and women “must” act in a certain way in order for the appropriate gender and, thus, social order to be realized.

The children continue with these assumptions as they exchange stories about their sexual experiences, and Nora finally suggests they “lie down together” (99). Paul hesitates, remembering his previous punishments for expressing his masculinity. He acquiesces, though, when Nora tells him, “Let me show you how I lay down with a big boy! I have to lie on my back, I’m the girl. And the boy puts his little birdy on my little tummy button, that’s how you lie down” (100). As the children mime the proper roles—Paul puts his “little birdy on her little tummy button”—they highlight the gender constructs which structure their society. The Russian occupation has forced the Mana group into the forest, and their time there is spent trying to recover from this shattering experience. Ostensibly, the best way to reconstruct reality is by maintaining gender order.

Although Paul and Nora appear to be complicit in this process, Butler’s theory of performative gender is useful in revealing the reverse to be true. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler considers gender to be performative; that is, gender is a series of acts and behaviors that work externally, through constant repetition, to create the illusion of two, distinct, naturalized ways of being—masculine and feminine. She explains that

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are
Thus, Butler claims gender to be grounded in the unconscious adoption and repetition of “masculine” and “feminine” traits and behaviors. The effect of this is that “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (173). Butler argues performative reinforcement of gender is necessary in order for the heteronormative culture to regulate human gender and sexuality. The result of performative gender then becomes that “the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (179). In other words, performative gestures are internalized and practiced as “natural” or essential to the respective genders.

Butler claims an understanding of gender as non-essential leads to the possibility of manipulating gender to highlight its instability, exemplified best by drag. This chance for dissonance between gender and its “appropriate” enactment becomes a liberating space. According to her, when gender and its performance do not match up, the effect is to expose gender as it truly is, constructed:

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. (180)
An understanding of the performative reveals the fallacy of the “preexisting identity” thereby decentering its markers, such as gender. Once gender is exposed as a construct, masculine and feminine traits, behaviors, and qualities are also made transparent. We can then see that gender is neither natural nor stable. Therefore, acts that expose the performative nature of gender work to disrupt the hegemonic, heteronormative influences which force us into one of two strictly-defined genders.

More specifically, in conjunction with an understanding of these concepts and Butler’s theories of parody, we can see the actions of Paul and Nora as a challenge to the roles they appear to seamlessly replicate. To all appearances, Paul and Nora are well-versed in their culture’s definitions of masculinity and femininity. The children’s careful imitation of heteronormative sexuality, however, works in contradiction to their society. Instead of reinforcing gender, they ultimately expose it as a fictitious through their unconscious parody. Butler explains the result of such parody:

The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act,’ as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status. (187)

Butler argues that parodic repetition reveals gender to be illusory and vulnerable to exposure, deconstruction, manipulation, and reconstitution. It is this very fact that allows gender to be mimed and parodied, ultimately betraying itself to be fabricated and constructed. Thus, the children’s imperfect replication of heterosexuality—the
emphasis on pretending, the euphemisms, and the misplaced genital contact—reveals their conceptions of gender to be, like Butler’s parody, “failed copies” (186).

In addition, I turn to Bhabha’s adaptation of the performative to illustrate how Paul’s and Nora’s actions can have greater implications beyond their bodies and genders. Earlier, I discussed how Bhabha’s conception of the doubleness of “the people” exposes the fiction behind terms like “nation” and “national identity.” Here, I see Butler’s work on the illusion of gender and Bhabha’s work on the illusion of a cohesive master national narrative intersect as Bhabha claims:

The liminal figure of the nation-space would ensure that no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves. This is because the subject of cultural discourse—the agency of the people—is split in the discursive ambivalence that emerges in the contest of narrative authority between the pedagogical and the performative. (212)

The battle between the pedagogical and performative is the struggle between the objective people-as-nation and the subjective nation-as-people theories. In other words, as the nation desperately attempts to define itself as both a condition of and precursor to its people, a tension develops that ultimately undermines the stability of the nation as an ideological entity. Therefore, like Butler’s parody, challenges to the continuity and solidity of nationhood expose the fallacy of the coherent national identity.

Moreover, as Paul’s society responds to cultural crises by separating along gender lines, gender stratification becomes one of the defining characteristics of his society. If, through unconscious gender parody, Paul and Nora can disrupt a fundamental principle of Mana life, then they can also disrupt a socio-historical
identity. In summary, not only do Butler’s and Bhabha’s theories compliment one another, Paul and Nora use the former to articulate the latter. The result of Paul’s and Nora’s disruptive gender performativity works to rescue them, especially Paul, from the confines of regulatory Mana society. Like Paul’s calidor and his memories, his (unconscious) gender play allows him to escape enclosure in the impermeable boundaries of his society, exemplified by his father’s consciousness.

“Oh, The Girls!”

Once Paul and his mother return to Mana he begins to put into practice what he learned in the forest. While in the forest Paul learned that to enact masculinity as he perceives it to be in Mana is to suffer punishment at the hands of his mother and others. As I will show, Paul’s actions in Mana with the servant girls are free from this threat because he explodes traditional gender categories. While the girls are vulnerable to his mother if they are discovered, Paul manipulates the sexual scenarios through his gender identity in a way that leaves both him and the women protected from chastisement and scorn. Whereas the encounters with Ileana, Duda, and Nora in the forest are regulated by sex-gender correspondence, gender is divorced from anatomical sex in Paul’s Mana home.

In his first relationship with a girl named Tuza, she asks him to demonstrate how men warm up from the cold by lying next to a girl to “thaw him out” (127). Paul responds by telling Tuza “that for every numb man, you need at least two girls” (127). Tuza suggests they play one girl-one man first, and Paul complies; he is the
man and she the woman. Soon, though, Paul becomes the “third girl,” and exchanges
gender roles with Tuza. In this scenario, Paul’s performative enactment of gender is
important because it not only highlights the illusion of gender, but it also emphasizes
Paul’s queerness: if Paul and Tuza can exchange places and, thus, genders how can
masculinity and femininity be natural to men and women, respectively? Furthermore,
the scenario Paul and Tuza play out challenges heteronormativity in two ways. The
dissonance between biological sex and gender works to expose gender as a construct,
and Paul and Tuza imagine themselves engaging in a ménage a trois although there
are only two participants. Thus, at varying times, Paul and Tuza must play two parts;
sometimes she is the extra girl, and, more importantly, sometimes he is. The
queerness of this act allows Paul the freedom to pursue his nascent sexuality in a way
that was previously forbidden.

Midway through his recollections of these encounters, Paul reflects on his
subjectivity. He questions himself:

I wonder what the experiences of the other boys my age were like in
Mana? Even if they had them too, not one of them told me about it.
[...] Perhaps I might have been an exception? Because I was the
teacher’s son? Or because I’d became a poor little orphan? (130)

Paul wonders if his situation is similar to any of the other boys in Mana. Paul seems
to think he may be unique because his father is absent. Paul’s orphan status comes
from the Russians’ removal of his father, a move which Paul sees as a potential cause
for his early sexual encounters. Adding to this, I suggest the absence of Paul’s father
plays an extremely important role—although not how Paul imagines. I posit that
without his father. Paul is able to manipulate his gender and sexual experiences in a
way that liberates him from his society’s oppressive and repressive divisions. His queerness that is a solution to these distinctions can flourish because he has learned—through his father and the evacuation period—that absolutes confine rather than protect.

Whereas most of Paul’s encounters are motivated by heterosexual desire, a incident follows this introspection which reveals Paul’s anxieties about the female body. Paul identifies subversive potential in the body of another of his girls, Tecla. Here he describes her genitalia: “When I saw it, I was a bit scared—I hadn’t seen Duda’s and Lina’s (another girl) was pink and pretty (132).” He goes on to describe Tecla in greater detail: “Tecla might have had two eyes and two ears and two feet and two hands and two nipples, but she had lots of mouths. I asked how many she had, and she said she had what she needed and even more than she needed” (133). In this description, Paul’s masculine subjectivity is juxtaposed against the feminine power of Tecla’s hungry body. This image of a *vagina dentate* (literally, a vagina with teeth) suggests an anxiety on Paul’s part about being swallowed or consumed by Tecla. Although he is sexually attracted to her, he also views her as a monstrous figure.

I think this simultaneous desire and disavowal of Tecla’s body and sexuality positions Paul in opposition to a heteronormative reading of male-female sexual relations. Although he is male, his desire for the female body is interrupted by his abhorrence of its monstrous properties. Furthermore, Paul’s characterization of Tecla in this way speaks to the artifice of his masculine superiority and gives power to the female body, which upsets the heteronormative power dynamic. This scene is also
important because it is the one incident in which Paul considers rejecting the female body. This may suggest that while he is usually aligned with straight queerness, here his desire is complicated by his reaction to her genitals.\(^5\)

Thus, we return full-circle to Paul’s relationship with Balana. Paul’s queerness in this scenario is even more apparent than before. Throughout the scene, Paul’s gender identity vacillates between masculinity and femininity although his sexual orientation remains heterosexual. In his relationship with Balana, Paul displays and enacts all that he has learned during the development of his non-normative identity. Interestingly, he reverses the process, starting with his queerest moment—wearing the boots (which are both fetishized on Balana and desired for his own use)—devolving to his attempts to dominate Balana by forcing her to give him the boots, and finally ending with his first lesson in masculinity—the comforting and/or protection of women. During this entire scene, Paul’s gender identity is malleable, and he is always manipulating what he learned in the interim period of evacuation free from censure. He has learned that strict gender roles—like national and familial identities—are debilitating and often dangerous, while his queer appropriation of gender has taught him, albeit unconsciously, the fiction of gender (and other social categories) and how liberating it can be to embrace the in-between space that comes with the abandonment of demarcation.

\(^5\) This scenario is worth contemplating in conjunction with conventional psychoanalytic readings of adolescent male sexuality (both queer and straight) and male responses to female genitalia, including fetishism and other mechanisms.
Conclusions

The queerness Paul exhibits is deeply tied to his relationship with his own memory and the calidor. As I mentioned earlier, his memories and the calidor are representative of his non-normative identity. Like his straight queerness, his memories and the calidor allow Paul to return to his childhood and reclaim it from the desolation of war and violence. Without the freedom these avenues afford Paul, he would be resigned to the mindset of his father, who, unfortunately, cannot separate himself from his national identity nor imagine a world unregulated by exclusion. Paul’s contrary experience allows him to return to a site of conflict and salvage his childhood.

Even a traumatic event like the family’s 1944 evacuation from Mana can be recuperated in Paul’s queered schema. His memory of the departure is permeable:

And I can’t actually remember leaving. I can see myself on the calidor, waiting and looking at the silvery froth around the oxen’s mouths. And after that, I can see myself on the road somewhere, on our journey. Walking behind the cart—so it wasn’t too heavy as we went over the hill, poor oxen...But in between those two moments: nothing. As if I didn’t even get down from the calidor. (255)

Paul’s inability to remember anything from his departure except the role the calidor played is significant because it suggests that Paul can return to this moment at any time. Although it is frustrating for him to have a void here, because he is still tied to the calidor, the memory is not entirely unobtainable nor will he be limited by the partial memory he has. Paul sees this lack of memory as liberating as he writes, “Precisely because I couldn’t remember our departure and because I didn’t focus on any one particular thing, I didn’t close any doors behind me. So I can go back there
and can find things for myself to do around there, on the periphery of it all” (235).

Paul cherishes the instability of his memory and believes he can continuously return and remake it. His privileging of the periphery indicates that his queerness liberates him from the confines of a devastating memory. Instead, because he locates himself on the margins in every sense of his identity, he remains free and able to recuperate his childhood. He retains an identity, but it does not have to conform to the limits and categories to which his nation and family subscribe. Rather, he is able to retain his memories using his queerness symbolized by the calidor and rescue himself from the oppression of political, cultural, and social divisions.
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Background Information

Place and Date of Birth
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Education

Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA
M.A. in English
August 2004-present
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Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH
B.A. in English, Magna cum laude
Minor: History
August 2002-May 2004
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Miami University, Oxford, OH
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Minor: Creative Writing
August 2000-May 2002

Teaching Experience

Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA

English 7: Global Literature
Spring 2006

Lehigh University’s Global Citizenship Program (endowed by the Mellon Foundation) is designed to encourage students to examine their status as members of the global community. While the program offers a strong supplement to students’ academic interests, it also urges them to become active citizens rather than passive tourists by engaging in at least two study-abroad opportunities (during the freshman and junior years).

This composition class is a continuation of the students’ first study-abroad experience—an intersession trip to an international destination (they are accompanied by a Lehigh faculty member, a member of the Global Citizenship Program administration, and an English department teaching fellow). This particular group of students traveled to Prague, Czech Republic, and the following English 7 course is
entitled, "Exploring and Exploding Boundaries: National Identities in a Global World." Course units include, "Theories of National Identity: Prague, the Czech Republic, and Europe," "Moving Beyond the Local: Iran, Thailand, and India," and "The Global Debate." This writing-intensive course (currently in-progress) asks students to reflect on and process their experiences through three essay assignments and one final creative project.

Responsibilities include: assisting the lead faculty member in the Fall 2005 Prague practicum; accompanying group to Prague and organizing student activities while in-country; developing Spring 2006 syllabus; assisting students in the writing and revision of papers; administering all grades.

English 1: Composition and Literature Fall 2005
This writing-intensive course asks first-year students to consider popular topics and issues in contemporary American culture. Units included in this course: "Welcome to College," "Identity: Who am I and How did I get Here?", and "Representations of Mental Illness."

Responsibilities included: developing the syllabus; assisting students in the writing and revising of papers; administering all grades.

English 2: Mortality and the Living of a Life Spring 2005
At Lehigh University, English 2 is designed to build on the students' writing experiences in English 1 by asking them to consider a major topic of contemporary American culture through three units. This particular course focused on representations of mortality in popular culture. Units included in this course: "Society and Mortality," "Confronting Mortality," and "Immortality and Memory."

Responsibilities included: developing the syllabus; assisting students in the writing and revising of papers; administering all grades.

English 1: Composition and Literature Fall 2004
Units included: "What We See and Where We See From," "Consumer Culture," and "Who We (Think) We Are."

Responsibilities included: assisting students in the writing and revising of papers; administered all grades.

Relevant Experience

Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA

Tutor in The Center for Writing and Math Fall 2005-present
Assists graduate and undergraduate students from all disciplines in the Lehigh University community in various stages of the writing process, including brainstorming, development, organization, revision, grammar, and citation.
Member of the English Dept. Undergraduate Committee  Fall 2005-present

The graduate student member of this committee is responsible for attending all bi-monthly meetings; acting as a liaison between the graduate and undergraduate English students at Lehigh University; planning and hosting committee-sponsored events.

Research Assistant for Dr. Elizabeth Dolan  Fall 2005, Summer 2006


Faculty Reviewer for *The Lehigh Review*  Spring 2006

Judge for the Williams Prize Creative Writing Contest  Spring 2005

**Publications and Papers**


“Constructing the Post-Colonial Queer: Intracultural Hybridity in Paul Goma’s *My Childhood at the Gate of Unrest.*” Paper presented at “Crossing Over: Learning to Navigate the Borderlands of Intercultural Encounters” at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio. October 2005.


**Fellowships and Grants**

Lehigh University English Department Teaching Fellowship  August 2004-present

Lawrence Henry Gipson Institute for 18th Century Studies  Summer 2005

This Lehigh University organization offers funding to Lehigh faculty and students working on projects dealing with the eighteenth century. Travel grant received to attend the IRSCSL conference in Dublin, Ireland.

**Memberships**

Modern Language Association

Northeast Modern Language Association
END OF TITLE