Savage embraces: James Purdy, melodrama, and the narration of identity

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CHAPTER 4

As He Lies Dying: (Mis)recognition and the National Symbolic

As we have seen in the previous chapter about *Cabot Wright Begins*, the compulsive serial rape that Cabot Wright is accused of started when he began treatment with Dr. Bigelow-Martin to cure his chronic fatigue. What I did not discuss about this treatment is the curious diagnosis that Bigelow-Martin gives Cabot and which puts this illness in relation to the state of the United States itself. He says to Cabot Wright,

> Your case is not exceptional, Mr. Cabot Wright. Indeed it's not. Put it out of your mind that you are different. Your case is, in fact, my young man, the rule. Americans are tired. America is tired. (CWB 92–93)

In his assessment of Cabot, Bigelow-Martin presents us with two points criticizing the United States. First, he suggests that chronic fatigue is the American condition. Cabot's illness is not just something that affects him, but rather it affects the nation at large. Even worse, this condition seems to go unnoticed, as he explains that "most Americans [...] don't know they are dropping with fatigue" (90). Second, Bigelow-Martin levels critique at an important fantasy that structures the relationship between the state and its citizens: the fantasy of American exceptionalism. The American citizen is not exceptional if all citizens suffer from the same debilitating condition.

Elsewhere in the novel, Cabot reads letters written by his late Wall Street superior, Mr. Warburton. These letters, entitled "Sermons", are filled with scathing condemnations of American consumerism. One sermon reads: "the great thing about the American consumer is that it is filled before it is ever empty, glutted without knowing the feeling of either hunger or satiety, the organs of America so easily manipulated and ready for any surgical plastic, or other adjustment the Master Masturbator may believe ready" (CWB 190). Another sermon puts forward a similar accusation of American consumerism at an even more rapacious pace:

> [S]tick that product in every God-damned American's mouth and make him say I BOUGHT IT, GOD, I BOUGHT IT AND IT'S GREAT IT'S

> HOLLYWOOD IT'S MY ARSE GOING UP AND DOWN AGAIN IT'S USA, GOD, and if you can't get it in his mouth and make him SWEAR IT SWEAR IT USA, stick it in his anal sphincter (look it up in the dictionary, college graduates, on account of you didn't have the time to learn it in the College of Your Choice). (CWB 191, original emphasis)

While I mainly focused on the narrative production of Cabot's sexual identity in my analysis of *Cabot Wright Begins*, other critics have interpreted the novel as a biting commentary on the consumption culture of the United States. "*Cabot Wright Begins* is to a great degree a twentieth-century duplicate of *Gulliver's Travels*", Henry Chupack writes, "but our brand of follies and stupidities are even more despicable than those Swift lashed at in his day" (85–86). Indeed, Cabot's condition of chronic fatigue and the compulsive rape that is the result of his treatment can, and perhaps should, be read as a commentary on the relationship between consumption culture and sexual mores in American popular culture. The infinite availability of consumption goods at once desensitizes Cabot and compels him to consume: the scenes in which he rapes his victims are described, read as if Cabot were sampling a buffet.[1]

Besides this perhaps obvious observation of the relationship between Cabot's sexual behavior and the American consumer society during the Cold War, I am interested in the implication of that earlier moment in the novel in which Bigelow-Martin connects this relationship to the fantasy of American exceptionalism. More so than voicing criticism of American consumer culture, the novel can be read as a critique of the narratives that structure American social and public life, which, in turn, form the basis for the nation's obsession with consumption. Reading the novel as a critique of American exceptionalism also brings into view the ways in which Purdy interrogates the relationship between the American state and its citizens. Cabot, for instance, dramatizes the consequences of gluttonous consumption which is both promoted and discouraged by the state. When his consumption is spiraling out of control, the state intervenes by incarcerating him. This cycle is then repeated by Zoe Bickle and Bernie Gladhart who attempt to turn the story of Cabot's excessive consumption into yet another consumer product: the "great American novel". *Cabot*

1 Of particular interest is the scene in which Cabot rapes Mr. Warburton's wife, Gilda. Cabot was supposed to meet her for lunch, but instead of dining with her, he gives in to his urge to rape her. This rape is presented as the main course of a dinner, for after he has had his way with Gilda, her servant announces that dessert has been served (152).

Wright Begins thus dramatizes how narratives of sexual identity are always imbedded in narratives that organize the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The question of how the relationship between the state and its citizens structures the narration of sexual identity has so far been largely absent from my discussion of Purdy's work. Similarly to *Cabot Wright Begins*, other novels such as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *63: Dream Palace* also evidence the state's presence as an organizing principle for the production of identity. Take, for instance, Daniel's enlistment in the army as an attempt to escape the narrative of homosexuality. The interference of the state in the guise of an institution that is widely associated with the exclusion of homosexuals, creates the expectation that Daniel should be read as someone who is in denial of his own sexual identity. Daniel's turn to the army casts him as someone who wants to participate actively in the public sphere in a way that removes all suspicion of homosexual desire from his person.[2] That he fails to do so points towards the tension between the compulsory heterosexuality dictated by the state and Daniel's resistance against identity in general. Daniel's crisis does not concern whether or not he identifies as homosexual in a society that demands its citizens be heterosexual, but rather originates in the fact that he refuses to identify at all based on his sexual behavior. This position poses a problem to the state: its subjects must announce themselves either as good, heterosexual citizens or as bad homosexuals who should be stripped of their citizenship. In the guise of his army superior, Captain Stadger, the state interrogates Daniel until it obtains what it considers to be a confession and can finally punish him for his transgressions against good citizenship. For both Cabot and Daniel, then, the state structures, to a great extent, the narratives through which their identities are produced by others.

Two works that address this relationship more urgently are Purdy's 1961 play *Children Is All* and his 1960 novel *The Nephew*, the latter of which I discuss in the next chapter. These two works explicitly dramatize the consequences of identity production against the background of narratives that situate its protagonists in relation to the American nation. Both are set, for example, against the background of a national holiday: Independence Day and Memorial Day, respectively. Both works also dramatize the consequences of misreading or mistaking identities. In the case of *Children Is All* this literally results in the death of the person who is being misread. The works draw attention to the ways in which fantasies of national identity

2 See Bérubé (1990/2010) and Caserio (1997) for more detailed discussions of the possibility for active homosexual citizenship within the institution of the army.

affect fantasies of familial and sexual identity by recasting the relationships of the protagonists, both mother figures, with their son and nephew through institutions and symbols that structure narratives of national identity.

Narratives of sexual identity are, in Purdy's work, often played out against familial attachments. Purdy's attempt to undermine psychoanalytical narratives that constitute the fantasy of sexual identity also questions the way in which sexual identity is considered to originate in the family. When Eustace considers Amos's lovemaking to his own mother a confession of his sexual identity, Purdy challenges the central position that the Freudian family romance has taken up in postwar fantasies of identity production. In the literal dramatization of the Oedipal scene, we recognize a suspicion of the social construction that Amos's homosexual desire originates in the initial desire for his mother. Other critics also recognize the way in which Purdy distorts familial attachments to expose the constructed nature of theories that use these to explain sexual identity. Bettina Schwarzschild draws parallels with ancient Greek and Latin literature to discuss the complex familial relationships in Purdy's work. According to her, the actions of Purdy's characters are motivated by the absence of a father figure on the one hand, and too strong an attachment to a mother figure on the other (1–6). However, for her the true tragedy of familial attachment is situated in the mother: "if the mother keeps her son she suffocates him and if she lets him go, heroically, she abandons him to the hounds" (3). Schwarzschild is, then, more interested in analyzing the ways in which mothers represent tragic heroines whose tragedy is to see their children suffer. Frank Baldanza also zooms in on the distortion of the familial situation in Purdy's work by addressing the many orphans and relationships between patron and protégé in Purdy's work. He too regards the absence of a father figure as the primary cause for the constitution of non-normative sexual behavior in Purdy's troubled characters: "Father-substitutes and fetishistic obsessions with father-associated objects are frequent", while mother figures further cripple their sons by overburdening them with love ("Half-Orphans" 255). "Feminine sexuality is blasted by all the paradoxes of creation", he argues, "because the immense sacrifices and devotion exacted by conceiving and nurturing offspring eventuate in a possessiveness which in turn distorts and cripples the masculinity of the son" (271).

Donald Pease places Purdy's familial dramas literally outside of the family's home by addressing his work as "unhomed imagination" ("Storyteller" 63). Purdy's protagonists are not just orphaned, but also often displaced.[3] The displacement that

3 Think for example of Malcolm of the eponymous novel, who loses his father in the, for him, strange city of Chicago.

Pease identifies functions as a narrative structure that folds in on itself. Similar to my use of mise-en-scène in this study, Pease recognizes a spatial element to Purdy's narration when he argues that "the experiences that Purdy's characters would disclaim and the structures through which they would disclaim them converge into a place of no return" ("Storyteller" 78). The resistance that Purdy's protagonists perform is doubled in the structure of the narration, but in this doubling they are both displaced from and imprisoned in the narrative space that they try to resist. "The characteristic setting for Purdy's novels is composed of two intersecting yet incompatible spaces", Pease observes, "the one from which his characters have become dislocated and the one from which they must escape" (78).

The spatial narrative structure that Pease here identifies, and which has thus far guided my own analysis of Purdy's work, organizes not only the way in which sexual identity is produced, but also the production of other fantasies of identity. In this chapter, I extend my previous considerations of Purdy's project of destabilizing sexual identity to include Purdy's attempts to undermine national identity as well. Following Lauren Berlant (1991), I call the narratives that produce affective attachments between the nation and its subjects "national fantasies". These fantasies are structured spatially by the National Symbolic, which I understand in terms of mise-en-scène. The National Symbolic structures the constellation of narratives through which the subject identifies him or herself with the nation. However, as I show in my analysis of *Children Is All*, the National Symbolic not only structures the fantasies of national identity, but also organizes narratives of familial and sexual identity. Akin to Pease's assessment of narrative space in Purdy's work, I suggest that the National Symbolic produces a spatial relationship between the nation and its subjects from which his characters have become dislocated, but from which they simultaneously are compelled to escape. That is, the National Symbolic structures the narratives of familial identity to the extent that sexuality and kinship can only be understood within the framework of the national fantasy. If these do not coincide, as is the case in *Children Is All*, a character cannot be "read properly", and thus runs the risk of being misrecognized. Purdy shows that narratives of familial and national identity are codependent on each other, yet at the same time mutually exclusive. Within the greater context of his oeuvre, *Children Is All* occupies a place in which the narration of familial identity converges with the narration of national identity. Within the context of my research, the analysis of *Children Is All* helps me to think through the ways in which Purdy's work imagines the violence that is inherent in totalizing identity-fantasies.

"Be sure to recognize me now when I come home today"

Children Is All presents as its protagonist Edna, a woman in small-town Ohio. She is anxiously awaiting the return of her son Billy, who had been imprisoned fifteen years earlier, only to fail to recognize him when he finally returns. As mentioned, the setting of the play is the Fourth of July festivities. Stage directions and dialogue constantly remind the reader of this fact by alluding to the firecrackers and the sounds of a military band that punctuate the rhythm of the play. Throughout the play Edna looks for solace in her friends Leona and Hilda, since she fears that once Billy arrives, she will not be able to recognize him. Although her friends try to convince her otherwise, Edna remains ridden with anxiety. When, much later than expected, Billy does come home in the dead of night, visibly wounded by gunshots, Edna indeed misrecognizes him. While she still holds him for a stranger, Billy dies in her arms.

Billy's homecoming and death on Independence Day, and the allusions to one of the most central narratives of the American national fantasy – the birth of the nation itself – suggests that we can read significance into the play's backdrop. In my reading of *Children Is All*, I claim that this misrecognition results from the demand for familial identity to coincide with national identity, as both identity-fantasies are incommensurable, even though they cannot be taken wholly apart either. If, as I argue, the play dramatizes the incommensurability of national and familial identity, how, then, is national identity made manifest in its narrative? The obvious answer to this question is the backdrop of Independence Day, which celebrates nationalist historical narratives, and which, indeed, directly affects Edna. However, the way in which the Fourth of July interferes with Edna's daily life is not necessarily in the form of celebration. Instead, it points towards Edna's attachment to the state that belies a distrust in the righteousness of the nation. At the very beginning of the play, Edna and Leona discuss their excitement over Billy's homecoming. Edna confesses that she experienced a restless night out of excitement, but she and Leona soon conclude that their sleeplessness could also very well be the result of the Independence Day celebration. "Then I laid awake listening to the courthouse clock strike every blessed hour", Edna recounts her spell of insomnia and immediately adds, "and your firecrackers, Leona" (CIA 112). It is not just the firecrackers that keep Edna awake but, strikingly, also the courthouse clock; precisely on the day Billy receives amnesty for his prison sentence.

Edna's insomnia illustrates her uncomfortable relationship with the state, which started with Billy's conviction. Overcome with an intense sense of shame, Edna cannot bear to witness the trial of her own son, even though he asked her to stay "so [she]

would know the story, so he wouldn't be all alone with just accusers" (CIA 117). Edna is convinced of Billy's innocence, yet she also admits that, when new information about the bank embezzlement for which Billy was sentenced to prison came to light, she refused to reopen the case. Shame also overcomes Edna when she tries to visit her son in prison, to the extent that she fails to visit him for the whole fifteen years of his imprisonment. She recounts how she had made several attempts, but each time she arrived at the prison gates, she was unable to walk through them. Finally, Edna worries obsessively over the reaction of her immediate community. Even her relationship with the town in which she lives is structured by a feeling of shame, as she fears that Billy's return would open old wounds and people would remind him of the fact that he has spent time in prison. "I'd die if I heard anybody say that about him", she exclaims (120). Edna is torn by different, incompatible affective attachments. On the one hand, she feels an unbearable shame because of her incarcerated son and is unable to interact with institutions that represent the state in the process of his criminalization. On the other hand though, she is convinced of his innocence and finds it just that Billy is finally pardoned. Indeed, she thinks that the amnesty he received is the only adequate measure that the state can take, even if this measure comes after fifteen years. "Pardoned of course", she says fiercely according to the stage directions, and she continues angrily, "he wouldn't be coming home otherwise" (115).

If Edna does not already suffer enough for having a son in prison, his return is yet another reason for her anxiety. Throughout the play Edna is heard worrying about her fear that she won't recognize her son Billy after his having been in jail for the past fifteen years. Her insecurity is prompted by Billy's ominous words, which she hears in a dream the night before his arrival: "Mom … Mother … Be sure to recognize me now when I come home today, hear? Make out you know me when I come home" (114). Although her friend Leona and the visiting reverend Stover try to assure her that she, his mother, could not possibly fail to recognize her own son, Edna remains fraught with worry. This is intensified by Billy's delayed arrival and her growing fear that he might not even show up at all. This anxiety manifests itself in doubt over her steadfast belief in his innocence. Although she is convinced that the state has falsely accused him and the amnesty he received is just, she also expresses her fear that her son might have indeed stolen from the bank and mentions rumors of his attempted escape (116). The guilt that is implied in her feelings of shame makes it impossible for her to unequivocally believe in Billy's innocence. The different, incompatible affective attachments to both the state and her own son, then, manifest themselves in a melodramatic impossible plot situation. The dilemma that she faces makes her choose between either fully investing in her son's innocence, which would mean that

the state has failed both him and her, or acknowledging the power of the state, which would mean that she must also accept the state's verdict that her son is a criminal. The impossibility of this choice, which is undergirded by her feelings of shame, results in her misrecognition of him. For when he returns home, he is no longer the boy that he used to be, but neither is he the man that she would now expect him to be.

The fear of being unable to recognize her own son and the anxiety induced by rumors and shame are not wholly unwarranted. When Billy finally shows up in the middle of the night, Edna indeed does not to recognize him as either the boy that was sent to prison fifteen years ago or as the man he has become. Moreover, the rumors about his earlier escape attempts are quietly affirmed when he confesses that he got shot escaping prison. Not only is he no longer physically the boy that Edna remembers, the guilt that is implied by his escape also means that he can no longer embody the innocence that Edna had invested in him. Despite Billy's efforts to convince Edna that he is truly her son, Edna only retorts with the words: "No, no, you're not him. Billy was only a boy" (157). And, while Leona and her neighbor Hilda do recognize Billy, Edna stubbornly maintains that the man who is dying in her arms cannot be her son simply on the basis that he does not look like the boy from fifteen years ago.

Schwarzschild suggests that this final scene pivots on the different meanings of the verb "to recognize" that Billy and Edna subscribe to: "Billy asks to be *known again* and accepted for what he has become after fifteen years in prison, but Edna talks about *knowing* her flesh and blood" (47, original emphasis). Edna, prompted by her own idealized version of Billy, takes the demand to recognize him literally and panics when she fails to do so. Prison has changed Billy's appearance to the extent that he no longer corresponds to her fantasized image of him. Billy, on the other hand, asks for a different kind of recognition. Billy looks for acknowledgment, or validation of his status as Edna's son. As he lies dying in her arms, he keeps insisting that Edna already "knows him" (157) and that he broke out of jail for her to be able to "recognize" him (157). Thus while Edna is looking for a visual semblance to the Billy of fifteen years ago, Billy asks her to acknowledge something more profound: his identity as her son. Edna's failure to comply to his demand suggests that it might be an impossible demand in the first place.

Berlant reflects on misrecognition as a survival strategy. That is, instead of understanding misrecognition as failure or as a mistake, she argues that the subject who misrecognizes produces a relationship of optimism between herself and the object she misrecognizes (*Cruel Optimism* 127). "To misrecognize is not to err", she claims, "but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and

manipulate it for having those qualities – which it might or might not have" (122). Misrecognition, then, produces or maintains positive attachments between subject and object, in the sense that the one who misrecognizes is confirmed in her understanding of the world around her. As such misrecognition is a strategy that allows the subject to project fantasies onto the misrecognized object in a way that the object's ambivalence is no longer a threat to the subject's imagined coherence. In Berlant's words, "fantasy parses ambivalence in a way that the subject is not defeated by it" (122). I am interested in Berlant's understanding of misrecognition as the subject's strategy for survival because *Children Is All* takes the fantasy of the coherent subject to task by having the strategy of misrecognition misfire. That is, at the moment Edna misrecognizes her son, she also loses her mind, which I argue, can be interpreted as her strategy to remain attached to her memory of Billy, as well as the play's insistence that the fantasy of a totalizing and coherent subject is akin to insanity.

The National Symbolic and Mise-en-Scène

That Edna misrecognizes her own son is, of course, partially due to the state's interference. Their separation of fifteen years and his life in prison have changed his appearance to the extent that Edna cannot acknowledge her own son in the stranger that visits her at night. So far, critics who have discussed *Children Is All* have failed to address the state's role in Edna's tragedy, even when the presence of national symbols and institutions constantly punctuate the rhythm of the play itself. Their appearances, even those as innocuous as the Fourth of July firecrackers that are sometimes alluded to, introduce the state as a narrative element to the play. If we consider these punctuations as part of the play's mise-en-scène, we can interpret them as part of the constellation organizing narrative elements, such as place, character, and focalization, into a narrative framework that expands beyond what is represented on the level of plot. I propose to read the melodramatic scene of misrecognition that concludes *Children Is All* as a reflection on the fantasy of national identity that is introduced by this constellation of narrative elements. Or rather, I believe that a critical reading of Edna's misrecognition in relation to the ways in which the state intervenes in the play, helps us understand more fully the involvement of the fantasy of national identity in Purdy's interrogation of the idea of identity itself. For, if identity is produced through narration, then surely the power imbalance that is inherent in the narratives that bind the subject to the state will affect the way in which the fantasy of identity is constituted.

These fantasies of national identity are structured by the National Symbolic, which comprises a spatial understanding of the relationship between the nation and its citizens. In her study *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (1991) Berlant defines the National Symbolic as follows:

> 'America' is an assumed relation, an explication of ongoing collective practices, and also an occasion for exploring what it means that national subjects already share not just a history, or a political allegiance, but a set of forms and the affect that makes these forms meaningful. [...] We are bound together because we inhabit the *political* space of the nation, which is not merely juridical, territorial (*jus soli*), genetic (*jus sanguinis*), linguistic or experiential, but some tangled cluster of these. I call this space the 'National Symbolic' (4–5, original emphasis).

A subject attaches to the fantasy of national identity through a complex constellation of narratives, institutions, and symbols that are rooted in different domains that together make up a coherent fantasy of the nation. Berlant's understanding of the National Symbolic as a political space helps her map out the way in which affective attachments to the fantasy of national identity are distributed across different, and often incommensurable, institutions, narratives, and symbols. As such, the National Symbolic can be understood in terms of melodrama's mise-en-scène. The separate elements can only produce the ideal image of the nation if we understand them in terms of a melodramatic scene in which the compositional distribution of these elements indicate a greater narrative. Similar to Ernst van Alphen's reading of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, the National Symbolic organizes the separate narrative elements into a constellation that activates narrative registers outside its own frame. The sum is greater than its parts.

The practices and narratives that are organized in the National Symbolic are always collective. The fantasy through which individual citizens attach to the National Symbolic is what Berlant calls national fantasy, which translates national culture into local practices and expressions. These national fantasies take many shapes and forms: they speak of different histories associated with the foundation of the nation, and project different futures that the nation moves towards. Some of these narratives are overtly expressed, while others are unspoken and merely assumed. Some of these narratives address the physical manifestation of national practices, while others speak to the symbolic relationship these practices have with the state. As Berlant puts it, "There is no one logic to a national form but, rather, many simultaneously

'literal' and 'metaphorical' meanings, stated and unstated" (5). The National Symbolic, then, organizes a vast array of incommensurable narratives. As such the National Symbolic is burdened by the expectation of coherence and consistency, even when at its very foundations it consists of contradictions and inconsistencies.

The National Symbolic can, then, be imagined as a screen onto which different narratives, identifications, and attachments between the state and its citizens are projected and congeal into a collective ideal image of what the nation should look like. Despite the paradoxical nature of the National Symbolic, its major aim is to "[translate] the reader to the time and space of national identity" (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 168). This translation, however, comes at the cost of local attachments. As Berlant explains, the National Symbolic:

> requires each subject to shed her attachment to her other, local identities, and to enter a new synchronic political order, which has a mystical relation to everyday history. In contrast, through political parties, citizens are distributed along hierarchical lines in the political public sphere according to the value of their gender, class, ethnic, racial, and regional identities. The National Symbolic embraces everyone with a memory and a conscience. (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 180)

The investment in a national identity frustrates attachments to local identities, be they sexual, geographical, or even familial. The National Symbolic demands that the attachment to national identity comes first. Edna, too, is burdened by this demand as she refuses to unequivocally relinquish her attachment to her son. She continues to believe in his innocence even after the state has sentenced him to imprisonment, and she experiences the institutions and symbols that represent the state as oppressive. Yet, her conviction of his innocence is by no means fallible. "He stole, Leona … He stole", she cries out, only to backtrack this outcry a little later by claiming that she "never knew all the charges against Billy, or what he did exactly" (116–117). Her identification with Billy also shows signs of faltering, as is clear from her constant wondering whether she will recognize him when he comes home and her eventual failure to do so. The play thus dramatizes the dilemma in which Edna finds herself, and which culminates in an impossible plot situation. At the moment Billy does come home, Edna is forced to choose between her familial or national identification – a choice which proves to be too burdensome. As Billy dies unrecognized in her arms, her mind appears to slip away from reality and into the memories that kept her attachment to the innocent Billy alive. "The knot that's held her together all these years is broken", Leona says

when she sees Edna cherish her dead son in her arms (162). Edna forsakes her familial identification with Billy as he dies in her arms. This does not mean, however, that Edna has attached herself fully to the National Symbolic. The play does not propose a straightforward resolution to the impossible plot situation. Edna might even have found her son right at the moment in which she renounces him.

Incommensurable Identities

According to Pease, the subject attaches to the National Symbolic through the projection of desire. Using a slightly different vocabulary than Berlant, his theory of the ways in which subjects identify through their attachment to an idealized image of the nation shows strong similarities. Where Berlant speaks of the National Symbolic and national fantasies, Pease uses the terms *National Thing* and *state fantasy*. He borrows the term state fantasy from Jacqueline Rose, and defines it as a "dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity" (*New American Exceptionalism* 1). Pease's understanding of the production of national identity is deeply rooted in psychoanalysis. In his discussion of American exceptionalism as the dominant state fantasy since the end of the Cold War, he likens such national fantasies to the Freudian primal scene. Through national fantasies, citizens can imagine the nation as an "inaccessible place that could only be accessed retroactively" (*New American Exceptionalism* 17). The site that is imagined can be understood in terms of the Lacanian Thing, insofar that it is void of a signifier and produces in the subject the desire to attain it, without ever being able to do so. The National Thing, then, is "the placeholder for that which the national subject desires and at the same time that which causes the subject's desire" (17).

Pease's spatial understanding of the National Thing corroborates Berlant's reading of the National Symbolic as a screen onto which narratives about the state are projected. These narratives are often incongruent and contradictory, but can be activated, deactivated, and reactivated separately in order to justify the sense of belonging to the National Symbolic. In a similar vein, fantasies of familial identity also function as a screen onto which narratives are projected, but in this case the Thing produced is not the attachment to a phantasmatic object that is shared across a collective, but rather the attachment to a phantasmatic object that is the placeholder for the subject's persona. To make sense of the world and the people around us, we project narratives onto ourselves and others, and these narratives in turn congeal into that which is perceived as identity. This projection is always a form

of misrecognition according to Berlant, as such misrecognition is necessary to make the subject "intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness" (*Cruel Optimism* 122). In Edna's case this misrecognition is the result of different competing identity-fantasies that do not necessarily exclude one another, yet cannot fully coincide. Edna's familial identification with Billy hinges on her fantasy of his innocence. Rerouting that identification through her attachment to the National Symbolic seems impossible because it requires her to give up that very fantasy, and thus her identification with her son. Despite her strong attachment to her memory of Billy and her attempt to hold on to that fantasy through misrecognition, the National Symbolic continuously structures and organizes Edna's relationship with Billy. As the National Symbolic frustrates Edna's identification with Billy, she resorts to perhaps the most drastic measure imaginable: in losing her sanity she can continue to hold on to her misrecognition of Billy. I am not suggesting that Edna loses her mind on purpose. However, it can be construed as an act of desperation at the moment in which she realizes her image of Billy is no longer tenable. Before I address this in more detail, let me first discuss how, then, the National Symbolic frustrates Edna's attachment to the fantasy of Billy's innocence.

We have already seen how national fantasies intrude into the play's narrative in the guise of references to the Fourth of July and the American legal system. These two national fantasies tell completely different and incongruent stories, one of liberation and the other of incarceration. Still, these narratives coincide with Billy's homecoming. His return home on Independence Day can be read as a parallel to the narrative of the nation's birth. At the same time, as we learn that Billy has actually escaped from prison, we are reminded of his status as prisoner. The coincidence of these narratives allows us to reflect critically on the way in which national fantasies organize the relationship between the subject and the National Symbolic. Billy's escape from prison makes it attractive to read Billy allegorically. That is, Billy can be read as a stand-in for the newly emancipated American nation, the fantasy of which is continuously reinscribed as a staple of the American national identity on Independence Day. While this reading is not wholly unproblematic, it would corroborate Edna's belief in Billy's innocence. The United States, after all, sought liberation from unfair treatment by the British Empire, just as Billy has been treated unfairly by the state, according to Edna. The United States's emancipation is a cornerstone of national fantasies such as liberty, righteousness, and prosperity, because this emancipation functioned as a foundational moment for the production of its own national identity. As Lynette Spillman suggests, "for the United States, as we might expect, the founding moment of the revolutionary period was crucial, and the

Declaration of Independence carried special symbolic weight" (69). The foundational moment of the nation's emancipation serves as a structuring principle for most of its national fantasies. The imagining of an American national identity can hardly be imagined without a return to its own heroic emergence from the British Empire. Thus, Spillman describes the relationship between national identity and the narrative of independence as follows: "Claims about national identity almost always involve claims about liberty and its variants – independence, opportunity, political, civil, or religious freedoms, republicanism, self-government, or democratic institutions" (84).

While the coincidence between Billy's escape and the Fourth of July can be read as an allusion, this allegorical reading is, most likely, a cautionary tale. Although both Billy and the United States can be argued to have freed themselves from oppressive systems, the difference in magnitude – that is, Billy as an individual subject and the United States as a subjectivating collective – complicates this comparison. Edna's friend Leona seems acutely aware of the parallels between the current local events and the nation at large. She recalls what her mother used to say to her: "Leona, for a small place like this is, I never saw it fail, every rotten thing that happens in the country seems to happen right here first of all" (120–121). Leona inverts the comparison between Billy's homecoming and the emergence of the American nation. While chronologically the latter precedes the former, spatially the former precedes the latter. This spatial inversion suggests that Billy's escape might be read as a critical reflection on the narrative of Independence Day: Billy's escape is all but felicitous and his attempted emancipation results in his own death.

The difference in magnitude also signals a discrepancy in the comparison in that Billy is subjected to the American nation itself. After all, it is the juridical system of the United States that had incarcerated Billy in the first place. In *Children Is All*, the prison appears as a disciplinary and normalizing institution. Its function is to normalize narratives of the American nation by literally removing dissenters from the national space. In Edna's words: "He'll be like somebody come back from another world, another space!" (118). As a subject of its disciplinary system, Billy is now framed by a narrative of dissension from the nation's norm. This is particularly troublesome for Edna who, In dialogue with Leona, worries openly about whether Billy will ever again be accepted by their community upon his return. His being sent to prison constitutes him as a dissenter from the American National Symbolic. The dominance of the incarceration narrative complicates Edna's investment in Billy's innocence. She, too, has to admit that incarceration as a framing narrative device casts Billy as a potential criminal, which as an identity-fantasy is incommensurable to her fantasy of his innocence. That she nevertheless holds on to this image is an attempt

to maintain the imagined coherence of her own self. Her misrecognition, I argue, although unintentional, is certainly purposeful.

"My wanting Billy has passed so peacefully"

Edna's attachment to Billy can be understood as an obstacle to her own flourishing in the sense that she must give up her own sanity in order to continue her idealized image of him. Her attachment to Billy is also the result of a literal dramatization of identification. Elisabeth Anker explains the Freudian theory of identification as the substitution of a part of one's ego for a lost object of desire. She writes that in identification "part of the ego transforms into the lost object in order to compensate other parts of the psyche for the lost original tie with something desired" (*Orgies of Feeling* 184). Edna's lost object of desire – her familial relationship with Billy – continues to organize her subject formation to the extent that even when the object is restored to her, she refuses to let go of her fantasy of the original object. Anker considers the operations by which the subject identifies with a lost object the production of melodramatic subjectivity. In her reading of melodramatic political discourse after the September 11, 2001 attacks, she understands the production of melodramatic subjectivity as a key instrument in the legitimization of state power. "As with all identifications", she argues, "the melodramatic identification with state power arises out of an awareness of loss – a knowledge of the impossibility of having something one had loved – and functions as a mechanism in order to be similar to that which one cannot have" (184).

That Edna's identification with Billy is construed as a loss that can only be restored by the, for her, impossible gesture of giving up her idealized image of Billy, is exemplified by a scene in which the town preacher, Reverend Stover, visits Edna. As the local reverend, Stover represents the authoritative power that Edna has learned to distrust since the conviction of her son. During their conversation Stover mentions that Edna's house is situated outside of the town limits. The muddy opposition of being inside the town's social limits yet outside its governing limits is confirmed by Edna. However, she adds that she never had the intention to alienate herself from the town: "I didn't intend to be so much like a hermit when I moved out here, but the town began growing in the other direction, you see, and it's kept growing ever since" (135–136). Even though Edna believes that her displacement from the town's political space is not effected by herself, it is this very displacement that makes the backdrop of the Fourth of July festivities all the more palpable. "You pass the sign as

you drive out here", Edna says, "that's why they can shoot off the firecrackers" (135). The narrative space that is created here, just outside of the town limits, is akin to Pease's formulation of Purdy's unhomed imagination: a space from which Edna is already dissociated, yet from which she nevertheless needs to escape ("Storyteller" 78).

Inhabiting this impossible space, Edna can continue to hold on to the idea that the Billy who is coming home will be the Billy of her memories. Yet, the imagined coherence of this fantasy is disrupted by Stover's intrusion. Perhaps sensing Edna's anxiety over Billy's homecoming, he asks her outright, "Mrs. Cartwright, are you really happy Billy is coming home?" (142). Taken aback by this question, Edna seems to admit to the impossibility of her desire that Billy is still the same person from fifteen years ago. She exclaims, "I'm afraid for Billy to come home!" (142), because she is "not up to the demands he'll be sure to make" (143). Stover's unexpected question prompts the realization that Billy's demand that she recognize him will be impossible for her as long as she continues to hold on to her memory of her son. The rift in her belief makes her realize that the situation in which she finds herself is untenable, yet resolving this situation seems to be likewise wholly impossible. The possibility of eventually being confronted with her own son is just as impossible as the thought of him never returning home. Where earlier in the play Edna was mostly worried that he would indeed not show up at the promised time, instead she now fears not being strong enough to face him if he does make an appearance:

> I can't. I can't (*She sobs.*) You see how weak I am. I can't accept your thought. All I can think of is I will fail him. He will walk in, and I will say, or show my face: "*The ex-convict has come home. I've opened my house to shame and disgrace*". (144, original emphasis)

While Edna realizes that her idealized image is showing cracks, Stover implores her to accept the reality of this other image of Billy. She will find the strength when the moment arrives, he suggests, and at that same time will find herself (143). Stover never makes clear what this self should entail. Rather, his words ominously foreshadow the end of the play, where, instead of finding herself, she loses her mind when Billy finally shows up. The ending of this scene with Stover indeed seems to suggest that the inversion of Stover's words is the inevitable tragic outcome of Edna's loss of faith in her idealized image of Billy. After Edna's shattering realization, Stover coerces her to join him in prayer which ends with the phrase, "my love will be sufficient" (145). It is this last phrase which Edna finds unbearable to utter. Instead she falters on the very last word and begs Stover not to make her say it. She has realized that the

affective attachment that allowed her to hold onto her memory of Billy – her love for his memory – might not be sufficient after all. When Stover finally forces her to say the full sentence, she collapses in absolute despair: "Oh, Reverend, Reverend, Jesus, God, what shall I do? *(He holds her to prevent her from falling.)*" (147, original emphasis).

Immediately after Edna collapses, the curtain drops to indicate the end of the first scene. When the second, final scene of the play commences, we find Edna again in her parlor, still waiting for her son to come home. Between the two scenes some time has passed, because now the stage directions call for a "phosphorescent glow" indicating twilight (148). As the sun sets, firecrackers are still occasionally heard in the background, signalling that the Fourth of July is not yet over, and while Billy has not come home yet, there is still the chance that he might do so. The ellipsis created by the pause between the first and the final scenes produces the effect of temporal continuity. On a narrative level, the shattering of Edna's belief in Billy's innocence, and her subsequent paroxysmal collapse, is organized adjacent to the opening of the final scene. The spatial organization of these scenes, then, suggest that Edna's confrontation with Billy is brought into a meaningful relation with the previous scene. As I have indicated above, Edna loses her sanity as Billy finally appears in her living room and the attachment to her memory of him becomes untenable. The self that Stover suggested she would find when Billy returns, turns out not to be a coherent self, but a self that is shattered and undone. While this ending seems tragic – for indeed Billy dies in her arms – I suggest that in this moment of self-shattering, Edna finds a way to let the two conflicting images of Billy that have haunted her throughout the play congeal. Perhaps only by losing her mind does Edna find a strategy by which she can attach to her familial identification with Billy, who she believes is innocent, and restore her identification with the state, which has proclaimed Billy guilty.

That Edna's escape from the impossible plot situation comes at the cost of her own sanity points towards the relentless force with which the National Symbolic organizes fantasies of identification. The force of this identification is what Berlant has called *cruel optimism*, which she defines as the "condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (*Cruel Optimism* 24). Edna too remains attached to a problematic object in the sense that she continues her attachment to her memory of a Billy that no longer exists. This attachment leads to her inability to provide care for the adult Billy who visits her, as a result of which he dies. Still, the moment in which she seems to be losing her sanity might also allow a resolution of the impossible choice between her son and the state. After all, the choice for her was never between the state and the man who visits her, but between the state and the belief in her son's innocence. As long as she does not have to acknowledge the stranger as her son, that

fantasy remains intact. In fact, Edna superimposes the fantasy of Billy's innocence onto the stranger in her lap, so that she can remain attached to that idealized image. When she refuses to acknowledge the stranger who visits her at night as her son Billy, her mind returns to a memory she recounts at the beginning of the play. This is a memory of how Billy as a young boy came home with cuts and bruises. The blood flowed everywhere, and Edna would use a handkerchief and her own saliva to staunch his wounds (113–114). This memory returns to her as she caresses the dying stranger in her lap:

> You know what … I could almost say he reminds me of something from a long time ago … When Billy was a baby, he often fell and got hurt. He played too rough I always told him. When he come (*She draws the head of the stranger toward her lap.*) bruised and cut up, I used to take my pocket handkerchief (*She removes one slowly from her dress, like a somnambulist, and leans over the intruder.*) and I would moisten it with my … spit. (*She does so now.*) And I'd wipe away the dirt and blood. (*She cleans the stranger's forehead.*) I'd wipe away the dirt and blood when we wasn't near a place with water … That's a deep cut, there … You could lay your finger in it. (159)

The ellipses in the text mark temporal breaks. Edna is looking for words, trying to remember how she would take care of Billy when he came home wounded. The stage directions narrate her gestures. There is an automatism to the way she turns her attention to the stranger in her lap, as if she were sleepwalking. And as she recounts her memory, she reenacts her caretaking of young Billy. Yet as she seemingly absentmindedly reenacts her memory, the stranger in her lap becomes one with her projected image of Billy. She registers the stranger's wounds as if these were the wounds of her young son. And as the two Billys for a brief moment seem to collide, Edna finds her peace. "My wanting Billy has passed so peacefully", she tells Leona who has come rushing in after she realized that Billy had in fact come home that night, "I feel I almost welcomed him home and put him to sleep myself" (161).

What we have seen in *Children Is All*, then, is that the play operates on several narrative levels in which the fantasies of national and familial identity are at the core of the play's impossible plot situation. I have highlighted different possible readings in which the drama of misrecognition acts out several tensions within fantasies of both familial and national identities – Edna, the mother who doesn't recognize Billy, her own son; Edna, the mother who doesn't recognize Billy's self-image as her son;

Billy, allegorical figure for the American origin story who fails to be recognized as such; and Billy, subject to the American nation who is sacrificed to the totalizing fantasy of American national identity. Although Billy is ultimately sacrificed to the totalizing violence of the National Symbolic, Edna's attachment to her memory of the young Billy makes her oblivious to what she has just sacrificed. As he dies in her arms, Edna can finally reconcile her mistaken image of Billy – the stranger – with Billy – her son. She repeats to Leona: "my wanting Billy has passed, Leona … I feel so at ease with this perfect stranger who came in like from nowhere. For the first time in my life, Leona, I feel so close to my own son …" (162).