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“Skully’s Landing” as a Closet: Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*

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Truman Capote’s first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* ends when the protagonist, Joel Knox, decides to return to Skully’s Landing, where homosexual Randolph waits for him:

Beyond one, someone was watching him [Joel]. All of him was dumb except his eyes. They knew. It was Randolph’s window.... She [Randolph dressed as a woman] beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go....(Capote 173)

This queer scene led the contemporary readers to imagine what would happen between Joel and Randolph at Skully’s Landing and played a significant role in the homophobic responses to the book’s publication in 1948. The anonymous pre-publication reviewer for *Virginia Kirkus’ Book Shop Service* observed bitingly that the novel was only “for a limited audience of initiates” (qtd. in Waldmeir 14) and *Time* unfavorably reviewed that “the distasteful trappings of its homosexual theme overhang it [*Other Voices, Other Rooms*] like Spanish moss” (qtd. in Clarke 14). These responses show clearly that some contemporary readers of the novel found it disgusting: in fact, thirty-eight were negative and often homophobic of the sixty reviews written between 1948-49 (Waldmeir 13-15). But the crucial point in this statistics is that as many as twenty-two reviews were

favorable, in spite of the homosexual theme. Arthur J. Follows compared the novel with Baudleaire, recognizing its “sexual abnormalities” and W. E. Harriss also praised the novel for “a gossamer mood of horror, perversity and poetic somnambulism” (qtd. in Waldmeir 14-15).¹

Considering the date at which *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was published, these favorable responses are quite astonishing; at that time, as a result of various phenomena overlapping, homophobia began to reappear. First, in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* also published in 1948, Alfred Charles Kinsey announced that ten percent of the American males was homosexual and gave a great shock to American citizens. Second, the postwar years saw a sharp reaction against homosexual. As John D’Emilio points out, homosexuals in America had been in a better position during the war. They had enjoyed more freedom than ever because “the patterns of daily life that channeled men and women toward heterosexuality and inhibited homosexual expression” had to be suspended (D’Emilio 31). The early postwar period was exactly the time when a backlash against such tolerance for homosexuals was provoked. Third, and more significantly perhaps, the Cold War discourse which connected Communism with homosexuality was developed during this period. As well as the publication of the Kinsey report, 1948 also saw the Alger Hiss case, which built the linkage between “political subversion and sexual perversion” (Cuordileone 534).² There is no doubt that at the time when Capote published *Other Voices, Other Rooms* homosexuality had become a more sensitive issue.

Nevertheless, the work achieved considerable success. It remained on *The New York Times* best-seller list for nine weeks, and even created space for a “Capote Corner” or “This Week’s Note on Truman Capote” in *The Book Review*. This is all the more surprising when compared with the case of Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar*, published in the same year and which also dealt with homosexuality but was banned. Why was *Other Voices, Other Rooms* accepted thus in the homophobic environment of postwar America? This paper aims to offer

one solution to this puzzle by analyzing Capote's multilayered maneuvers of the "closet" in characterizations, text structure and his self-promotion in the novel. In so doing, it demonstrates that the quoted last scene, which has been regarded as sensational, conversely signifies quite a conservative view about homosexuality; unhappy homosexuals (Randolph and Joel) remain in the closet (Skully's Landing).

1

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that "every drama of (especially involuntary) gay uncovering" is intriguing because it has "the epistemology of the closet" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 67). In this framework, we are given an excited and empowered position in respect of the closeted person, thinking that we "know something about one that one may not know oneself (ibid. 80). This relationship is necessarily "asymmetrical," "specularized" and "inexplicit" (ibid. 80), and so the motif of the spectacle of the homosexual in the closet has been exploited by homophobic heterosexuals who abuse an authorized position. Sedgwick analyzes how homophobia ardently desires such dramas, saying that "it is by the homosexual question, which has never so far been emptied of its homophobic impulsions, that the energy of their construction and exploitation continues to be marked" (ibid. 246). Thus, the concept of the spectacle of the homosexual in the closet has been greatly homophobic.

The important point here, however, is that a homosexual writer, Capote, dared to use the closet motif in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. In the novel, he made Skully's Landing function as the closet. His illustration of Skully's Landing is quite suffocating and silent. The author states that Skully's Landing is "as though the place were captured under a cone of glass" (Capote 86), and that life at the Landing has "the fragile hush of living under a glass bell" (120). Skully's Landing is a blocked and tightly shut closet or as Brian Mitchell-Peters calls it, "a post-gothic closet" (122). And then, it is Randolph who hides inside.

Randolph remains in the closet embarrassingly badly and as a result keeps performing “the spectacle of the homosexual” to dual spectators: the characters in the novel and the reader of it. Inside of the novel, Randolph gives empowered positions to those around him by hiding badly and letting them think that they know something about him. For example, truck driver Sam Radclif says, “The Landing? Sure, sure I know all about it,” while grinning (Capote 11). Radclif’s insinuating assertion and smile suggest that he is well aware of Randolph’s sexuality. This is confirmed just a few pages later when Radclif says meaningfully “And the cousin....yes, by God, the cousin!” again with “a curious smile, as if amused by a private joke too secret for sharing” (Capote 16). Crucially, his silence here signifies that Radclif witnesses the spectacle of Randolph while enjoying the empowered position that is brought about by one-way knowledge. Another example is given through Randolph’s lover Dolores. When Randolph realizes that he is in love not with Dolores but with male prizefighter Pepe, she says to him, “Strange how long it takes us to discover ourselves: I’ve known since first I saw you” (Capote 113). What Dolores says here may be exactly that she knows “something about one that one may not know oneself” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 80).

What is thus presented as the spectacle of the homosexual inside the novel is the case also of his relationship with the reader. We enjoy the same empowered position through observation of Randolph as a transvestite. Formally, the last scene discloses that the mysterious lady in the window is Randolph dressed as a woman, but Capote hints at it from the beginning. In addition to Randolph’s queer appearance, such as his manicured toenails and a delicate lemon scent (Capote 67), Idabel once “peeks in all the window” and “get[s] a good look at Cousin Randolph” (Capote 30). Furthermore, it is written that Randolph listens to Joel’s story about a mysterious lady as if “he seemed, in some curious manner, to have advance knowledge of the facts” (Capote 65). Readers are thus given a strong indication that the lady is Randolph in advance, and therefore, they can

watch Randolph amusingly as he embarrassingly attempts to hide his queer secret.

Every time Joel asks about and mentions the lady, readers experience perverse pleasure and an irresistible impulse to point at Randolph. The scene in which Randolph hesitates to disclose his secret represents the clearest example of this:

Randolph said ha! ha! he would show him [Joel] something really funny.... 'But if I do...you mustn't laugh.' And Joel's answer was a laugh. ... Randolph's smile ran off his face like melted butter, and when Joel cried, 'Go on, you promised,' he sat down, nursing his round pink head between his hands: 'Not now,' he said wearily, 'some other time.' (Capote 158)

In this part, readers witness Randolph's burlesque—he nearly comes out of the closet to Joel but ends in stealthy retreat. Randolph's series of actions here fully complies with the reader's request that "there is a homosexual man waiting to be uncovered in each of the closets" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 246). Exploited by both inside characters and outside readers, Randolph thus functions as a dual spectacle of the homosexual.

However, and more significantly, Capote's tactical use of such a closet is not applied only to a characterization of Randolph. The motif can be found also in the structure of the novel: overly Southern Gothic and the photograph of Capote on the dust cover. In the following sections, this paper looks at how Southern Gothic and the cover photograph contribute much to the interpretation of the novel itself as the spectacle.

2

Southern Gothic elements are quite visible in *Other Voices, Other*

Rooms. This work was published when the late Southern Renaissance produced novels by such noted authors as Eudora Welty, Flannery O' Connor, and Carson McCullers. It is often pointed out that Capote's work has many things in common with them, and just a few passages suffice to illustrate that this novel is full of settings and devices peculiar to the South. At the beginning, for example, we are informed that "once three exquisite sisters were raped and murdered here [the freakish old house] in a gruesome manner by a fiendish Yankee bandit" (Capote 17-18) and it is clear that the stale coupling of Southern Belles with Yankees is used in this scene. The novel also recounts an extraordinarily Gothic tale about a black baby, Toby: "when Toby was asleep the cat sneaked in and put its mouth against Toby's mouth and sucked away all her breath" (Capote 97). Furthermore, Randolph's famous lines, "I suppose we shall go on together until the house sinks, until the garden grows up and weeds hide us in their depth" (Capote 117), clearly echo Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher".³

Capote thus consistently emphasizes the Southern Gothic and such repetitions of the Gothic may seem to blur the work's homosexual aspects. But given what Southern Gothic signified at that time, its effect is actually the opposite. As Mitchell-Peters points out (111), Gothic offers "queer sexual spaces, where unclear or partially veiled instances of physical intimacy can be interpreted with attention to homoerotic undercurrents". Gothic is a genre which cannot be separated from the theme of homosexuality.

The more significant point here, however, is that as a consequence of various complicated processes, the South itself in the contemporary literary context was not simply a region but also a queer place. In postwar America, northern critics aimed to ensure that the South was the place of homosexuals and deviants to "assure non-Southerners of their own relative normality" (Richards 215). In the meantime, the Southern side repelled by such Northern tactics also made a desperate effort to exclude homosexuality and deviants. Denying sexual deviants in the Southern canon such as *Southern Renaissance* (1953), the Southern writ-

ing groups Agrarians and New Critics vehemently eradicated queer regionality (Richards 213). However, conversely, this movement strengthened the South as queerness, for, as Gary Richards claims, this elimination is the very logic for treating homosexuality. By so doing, the South established what it denied:

These simultaneous critical moves worked together to create something of an open secret for both individual authors and the region as a whole, one in which queerness was often not directly addressed or even addressable and yet was crucial in the negotiations of these authors, their texts, and Southern culture. (Richards 215)

These passages show that the more desperately the South tried to repress homosexuality, the more deeply did queerness become rooted there as an open secret. The emphasis on “Southernness” established literary work in a queer context rather than camouflaged homosexuality at that time. The seemingly extravagant Southern Gothicism in *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* was no exception. In this literary situation, employment of the Southern locus fully means a literary device to make readers expect the novel to be kind of queer.

3

The infamous picture on the dust-cover of *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* was taken by Harold Halma in January 1947, just a year before the publication of the novel (Fig.1). In the photograph, Capote stares into the lens sensually as if a male prostitute, reminding us of Manet’s *Olympia*. Jeff Solomon points out that “the far hand against the genitals.... indicates an unexpected, discomforting potency” and therefore the picture appears quite queerly erotic (“Young, Effeminate, and Strange Early Photographic Portraiture of Truman Capote” 319). Of course, the sensation produced by the self-portrait was extreme. An anonymous letter was sent to Random House declaring that “it is downright foolish for you



Fig. 1. The dust-jacket



Fig. 2. Max Shulman

to believe this nincompoop [Capote] is going anywhere, especially by his stupid poses” (qtd. in Clarke 158). The writer and humorist Max Shulman parodied it in the dust jacket of his book *Max Shulman's Long Economy Size* (Fig.2). Capote's picture was referred to in the reviews of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* so often that contemporary critic John Aldridge even commented that Capote would be remembered not by his works but his image (199).

While this picture was thus very well-known at that time, what should be considered is that Capote was excellent at advertising himself through his career.⁴ It is well known that on *Open End* with Norman Mailer in 1959, Capote attracted much more attraction than Mailer just by ridiculing that “Mr. Kerouac ... [It] isn't writing at all—it's typing” (qtd. in Clarke 315). Shelton Waldrep claims that such Capote “paralleled Wilde in his use of self-promotion and the ability to sell himself” (79), and that Capote to some extent desired “to fashion a sensational persona with which to promote his publications” (90). The photograph

in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was no exception.

Capote later denied that he took part in selecting the picture as the self-portrait, saying “I had nothing to do with it.... I told my editor, Mr. Linscott ... to go my apartment and in the desk drawer there were quite a few photographs of me, just pick one that he liked” (Inge 38). But as a biographer, Gerald Clarke, reveals, this was a lie. Actually, Capote



Fig. 3. *Life* June 2, 1947

had the picture taken according to the self-image he desired, telling Halma “how he wanted to look” and refusing to lend his ears to “the wiser counsel of Mary Louise, who warned him that it [the novel] was not for public consumption” (159). The self-portrait of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was obviously marked self-advertising.

Furthermore, and importantly, Capote himself appears to function as a spectacle of the homosexual in this photograph. In this sensual, flamboyantly queer pose, he stimulates the reader’s ambivalent interest in homosexuality in advance; even before reading the novel, we cannot help but ask homophobic questions about homosexuals. In fact, Capote had been described as “esoteric” in the article of *Life* June 2, 1947 (Fig. 3). Solomon suggests that Capote in this picture becomes a kind of queer spectacle in that Capote’s otherness is given to those who understand its coding with the word “esoteric” (“Young, Effeminate, and Strange Early Photographic Portraiture of Truman Capote” 310). Considering that Capote had thus already been conscious of himself as a queer spectacle before the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, albeit in a more subtle

way, it would not be wrong to regard the dust-jacket as an exaggeration of such a spectacle. In Capote's eagerness "to fashion a sensational persona with which to promote his publications" (Waldrep 90), the infamous self-portrait was taken even more sensationally, and certainly this photograph that epitomizes the spectacle of the homosexual succeeded in attracting the general reader. In the dust-jacket, Capote was willing to play the role of a homosexual as well as Randolph does in the novel, implying that the book is a story about "the closet".

4

Though it treats homosexual themes at quite a delicate time, Capote's first novel achieved astonishing success. As this paper has shown, his tactical uses of "the closet" and "the spectacle of the homosexual" made such acceptance possible. Capote, who was always aware of the heteronormative state of culture, dared to accept the contemporary homophobia. He described Randolph as the homosexual in the closet that homophobic people enjoyed, and stressed its theme by setting the story in a queer Southern Gothic mansion and making himself a queer spectacle as well as Randolph.

This homophobic image, "homosexuals remain in the closet," is crystallized in the seemingly radical last scene in the novel. Causing a sensation, by the same token, the final moment reassured the contemporary readers by presenting what was actually a conservative view of homosexuals. This is the way *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* came to be exceptionally accepted and applauded to a considerable degree. Capote did not try to break up homophobia in the postwar America at random. What he did in *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* was to smartly make use of it and get the jump on the major discourse of heterosexism.

Notes

- * I would like to express my gratitude for Professor Takayuki Tatsumi, who made very suggestive comments on this paper.
- 1 For comprehensive surveys of the critical reviews of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, see, Trimmier, Clark and Waldmeir.
 - 2 In 1948, Whittaker Chambers accused Alger Hiss of being a spy of the Soviet Union and his testimony that he and Hiss once had an intimate relationship played a significant role in establishing the connection between homosexuality and communism. For detailed discussions about the Alger Hiss Case in the Cold War discourse, see Cuordileone and Smith.
 - 3 Poe's influence on Capote is often pointed out. Robert Emmet Long suggests that Randolph and Usher resemble each other in that they are both "the master of the house" and "an artist" (40). Discussing *A Tree of Night*, Chester E. Eisinger claims that "one feels the presence of Poe everywhere in this volume, in the ubiquitous threat of death and in the easy familiarity with madness, in the exploitation of the abnormal, in the calculated striving for effect" (240). Capote himself often mentioned that he loved Poe particularly in his childhood: "At that time I loathed school, loved Edgar Allan Poe and well, loved all short stories" (Inge 34). Capote especially liked "The Tell-Tale Heart".
 - 4 Debora Davis discusses Black and white party as the most famous self-advertisement in *Party of the Century*.

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