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Separation of Social Spaces in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*

In Ransom Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, Jacob acts as a free agent between the present, linear universe and the "loop" or stagnation in time that Miss Peregrine creates to protect the peculiar children. Inhabitants of the linear, temporal world not possessing peculiar traits are unable to cross over into the loop, and children who have lived extended lifetimes within Miss Peregrine's cyclical universe are unable to leave. Jacob, however, creates a bridge between both worlds, both linking and creating distance between the social spaces established in each. As Miss Peregrine explains to Jacob when he first discovers the loop, "The composition of the human species is infinitely more diverse than most humans suspect" (Riggs 153). This diversity, while celebrated within the loop, also creates much of the conflict between the peculiars and the outside world. The novel deals with themes of belonging and exclusion due to differences, and Jacob's position teetering on the edge of both worlds illuminates this struggle to belong. While advantageous for a time because it widens Jacob's perception of the universe, it is also the source of his struggles when he must commit to living in one world. The photos and Jacob's evolving reactions and perceptions of them further illuminate his position and map out the social spaces within the loop and outside of it. They document the visual history of a group of outsiders that gradually become like family as their stories are revealed.

Because of the loop's isolation from the real world and the normal progression of time and movement, the inhabitants are left to define their own social space in perhaps a more

deliberate and intentional fashion than what is permissible in the outside world. Social spaces, in any context, necessarily “promote particular kinds of social relationships, creating the conditions for contact or isolation, integration and exclusion” (Nealon and Giroux 127). These processes occur organically in the outside world, evolving and shifting due to the uncontrollable elements of advancements in technology, changing social paradigms, new political powers, climate changes, and different ways of understanding the world. These factors all influence each other to bring about societal changes, whether good or bad that trickle down to each individual’s life. The pace of change within the loop is incremental in comparison because advancement is impossible within a cycle of a single day endlessly repeating itself. Jacob initially objects to the peculiars being referred to as “children” because he perceives age as the movement through linear, accumulating time rather than a continuous, stagnant present, but Miss Peregrine corrects him, pointing out that “It is how they regard *themselves* as well” (Riggs 209). The children lack certain experiences that those in the outside world may identify as pivotal moments of growth that require interaction with those outside a person’s immediate family and often in places outside the home. Because of this, they remain in a childlike state, but they are not without challenges unique to their circumstances.

Because their narrative of the outside world is cut off on September 3rd 1940, the peculiar children must substitute the immediate history with one of their own, documented in the form of photographs. Through this narrative, themes of belonging and exclusion are woven in their history. They all use photos as guides to explain their culture to Jacob. When he meets Miss Peregrine, she shows him photos of other ymbrynes, her peers and teachers, that reveal insight on how she views herself: “I was the youngest Miss Avocet took on,’ she said proudly” (Riggs 157). Shortly after, Jacob remembers a photo from their album that represents a fundamental

component to their culture—the freezing of time and photo-like flash that resets the loop every night and shapes their cyclical existence. This photo, of bombs exploding in the night, is captioned “Our beautiful display” (Riggs 173) to show how they have reassigned a destructive and nightmarish image to be a symbol of their safety to have averted the one fatal bomb through manipulation of time. Although it isn’t referred to in this way, it acts as an origin story, a symbolic way of capturing the first moment they began this form of existence.

The photo narrative also grasps at the outer abilities and personality traits that make them “peculiar” and creates a sense of belonging amongst them. Emma uses the photos to introduce the children to Jacob. She explains the moment of when Bronwyn was photographed, saying, “She was in foul mood because the Bird made her ‘dress like a lady’ for the picture” (Riggs 187). Most of the photos are staged in this way, to celebrate the abilities of each individual and conceal the darker aspects of their existence. These narratives are created for the dwellers of the loop, not necessarily for outsiders like Jacob, in order to remind them of their safety and happiness isolated from the outside world.

As Jacob straddles the line between his world and the children’s home, the photos, and his various encounters with them throughout the text, create a very different impression for him initially than they were intended to create. The spaces in both time and space that an individual lives in influence how he experiences the world and where he places himself within society (Nealon and Giroux 126). In the very beginning, the photos his grandfather shows him exclude him not necessarily from the true narrative that Abe is trying to include him in, but from a logical, “real” story that Jacob thinks his grandfather is hiding from him and substituting with fantastic stories of peculiar children. When Jacob stops believing in Abe’s stories, he feels betrayed by his grandfather: “I couldn’t understand why he’d made up all that stuff, tricked me

into believing that extraordinary things were possible when they weren't" (Riggs 21). He also tries to ground these "myths" in something concrete and consistent with the reality of his world by explaining the stories as coping mechanisms for his grandfather to deal with his tragic past and the atrocities of war (Riggs 21). He sees the photos as fakes and the stories as fabrications because these are the conclusions his location in time and space (wealthy suburban American during the 21st century) lead him to reach in order for his world to continue making sense.

When Abe is attacked, and Jacob witnesses the aftermath, he begins to believe he witnessed the monster that killed his grandfather, but diagnoses indicating he only had an "acute stress reaction" cause him to doubt his own sanity. He feels isolated by family and friends who are uncomfortable with his "delusions" and even less willing to believe he is telling the truth. His uncle tiptoes around the subject, saying, "So, your mom tells me you're really turning the corner with, uh...on this whole Grandpa thing.' My thing. No one knew what to call it" (Riggs 57).

When confronted with something strange and incomprehensible to the narrative of their world, Jacob's family and peers try to define it using psychiatric diagnostics, the scientific reasoning the modern time period follows, hence Jacob's diagnosis of "acute stress reaction." This is a natural reaction because "the commonsense assumption that 'everything has a place and a time' naturalizes how spatial and temporal meanings get mapped into the fault lines of social conflict," (Nealon and Giroux 136). Miss Peregrine's children likely experienced similar responses, albeit appropriate to their specific time periods, from their families when their "peculiarities" were discovered. Many became part of sideshows to make a living, like Miss Peregrine's children, because this was the only choice society gave them (Riggs 186).

Jacob does not know that his feelings of exclusion are brought about by his existing "out of place" from where he belongs because he doesn't know there is any alternative existence. The

photos he finds, rather than acting as windows into a place where he can easily and immediately identify himself as a part of, instead bar him from it because he has believed them to be fakes for so long. In a last attempt to position himself as one who belongs in his world, a set of peculiar photos cause him to recall: “I remembered how betrayed I felt the day I realized his stories weren’t true. Now the truth seemed obvious: his last words had been just another sleight of hand, and his last act was to infect me with nightmares and paranoid delusions” (Riggs 55). Like his family, he tries to reject any ideas that do not align with the reality he is familiar with.

His grandfather’s image is only restored once the world of the peculiars is opened up to him. At first Jacob only sees the good parts of their world that they want him to see, and he only feeds them the less dismal lie that Abe died of natural causes rather than at the hand of hollows. As Jacob spends more time in the loop, however, the darker parts of it are revealed in the form of a shriveled apple signifying the danger the children face if they were to leave (Riggs 208), the image of Victor in his bed after he was killed by hollows, and finally the discovery that they are all being hunted by wights and hollows. The peculiars, although not recognized as a collective group by society, have all faced discrimination in the past, and many were accused of being “shape-shifting ghosts” or “changelings”, leading to their condemnation and abuse (Riggs 154). This forced them to retreat into their loop, a temporal construction that appears almost as an example of “racial time” (Nealon and Giroux 124) taken to the extreme. Their loop is stagnant, making it impossible for their subordinate group to ever have the same opportunities that those living in linear time have access to. Instead of waiting for these things, Miss Peregrine has cut them off from these chances to advance in society completely in order to protect them from the dangers lurking in the outside world. Jacob creates a disturbance in their social space by reminding them of the things they can’t have, and Miss Peregrine reprimands him for it,

explaining, ““Yours is a world they can never be a part of, Mr. Portman. So what’s the use in filling their heads with grand talk about the exotic wonders of the future?”” (Riggs 210).

Although the destruction of the loop breaks off their barriers of protection, it also finally reunites them with the temporal world of 1940. Jacob chooses to stay with their group, but he is thrust away from his social space where he lived with his family in the 21st century and is also removed from the loop he was beginning to grow accustomed to. The time and space of the little island of Cairnholm the day after September 3rd, 1940 is a new world for all of the children, including Jacob. A new narrative begins when they leave behind their photo album and take the first new photo as they began their journey away from the island. Jacob reflects, “And yet my old life was as impossible to return to as the children’s bombed house. The doors had been blown off our cages,” (Riggs 352). While Jacob was a free agent before, now his experiences and perspectives have merged with the children’s narrative, and with his new knowledge of the world, he is forced to face the dangers that have always existed despite his former ignorance. His past, together with the children’s histories, exist at the base of their new narrative and the new social space they have created.

Works Cited

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