“If It’s in A Word”: Intersectional Feminism, Precarity, and The Babadook

CLAIRE SISCO KING

In 2017, a perhaps unlikely queer icon emerged in the form of a black and white cartoon character from Australia with sharp teeth, theatrical makeup, and a top hat. This cultural phenomenon began with a 2016 Tumblr thread initiated by online user ianstagram who declared Mister Babadook, the eponymous monster from Jennifer Kent’s 2014 horror film, to be “fearlessly and proudly” gay. In this initial post, ianstagram wonders, “Whenever someone says the Babadook isn’t openly gay it’s like?? Did you even watch the movie???” Sparking what participants called a “Babadiscourse,” scores of others weighed in on the Tumblr thread, with one user proclaiming, “The B in LGBT stands for Babadook” and another posting a fake screenshot claiming that Netflix had categorized *The Babadook* as an LGBT movie. The next several months saw the proliferation of queer Babadook memes and multiple representations of Babadook at 2017 Pride festivals across the United States.

Babadook has emerged as a queer icon because he can be read as having characteristics associated with cultural gayness. For example, he wears dramatic—even scene-stealing—costuming that recalls the theatricality of drag, and he struggles against a (rather literally) closeted existence in which many disavow or reject him. While references to these characteristics abound in the typically humorous and ironic figurations of the character’s queerness, this essay takes Babadook’s queer iconicity quite seriously, arguing that this character and the film from which he emerges call for critical attention to normative constructions of the family, the hegemony of reproductive heterosexuality, and the implications of both for the lives of women.[1] That is, Babadook invites queer

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3
Copyright © 2018

appropriation because he voices and makes visible horrors perpetrated in the name of heteronormative family life and gender politics.

While socially conservative rhetoric, which has intensified coextensively with Donald Trump's rise to power, frequently casts the family as a site of innocence imperiled by outside forces, including members of LGBTQ communities, *The Babadook* constructs the family as a site that is too often constitutive of and constituted by myriad forms of structural, symbolic, and material violence. Likewise, the film considers how intersections among cultural constructions of sexuality, gender, dis/ability, and class place certain bodies and subjectivities in positions of precarity. Accordingly, this essay argues that *The Babadook* and its titular monster disrupt tropes associated with the family, and white motherhood in particular, to reveal their emplacement in discourses structured by heteronormative, sexist, ableist, and classist logics. At the same time, however, *The Babadook*'s exclusive focus on the experiences of white characters without consideration of their racial privilege risks undermining its intersectionality. This analysis will proceed with a discussion of intersectional feminism and its relationship to theories of precarity, a contextualization of Kent's film within feminist analyses of the genre of horror and public discourse about the film's meaning, and a close reading of the film itself.

Intersectional Feminism

The term intersectionality emerges from Kimberlé Crenshaw's work in the late 1980s, which itself has antecedents in the 19th century in the writings of such figures as Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, as well as the work of the Combahee River Collective in the 1970s—all of which understand ideas about gender as inseparable from discourses about race. Crenshaw's work aims to

---

[1] To illustrate this rhetoric, consider Karen Tongson's description of Babadook, "He lives in a basement, he's weird and flamboyant, he's living adjacently to a single mother in this kind of queer kinship structure." Likewise, Jessica Roy writes, "The Babadook is creative (remember the pop-up book) and a distinctive dresser. Instead of living in a proverbial closet, he lives in a literal basement. He exists in a half-acknowledged state by the other people in his house. The family is afraid of what he is, but finds a way to accept him over time."

redress a lack of articulation between feminist and antiracist critical practices, which have too often addressed *either* gender *or* race but not their coextensivity, or the extent to which, as Patricia Hill Collins contends, "oppressions work together in producing injustice" (18). As Crenshaw writes, "Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices" (1242). Along similar lines, bell hooks identifies a historical tendency within feminist film criticism by white women critics to atomize questions of gender and race, rarely considering the "intersection of race and gender in relation to the construction of the category of 'woman' in film as object of the phallocentric gaze" (119). Building on this work, intersectional feminism aims, as Banu Gökarıksel and Sara Smith argue, to challenge "homogenous identity categories" by calling attention to "subject positions differentially situated in relation to multiple axes of power" (629), given that the impact of a particular form of subordination may vary, depending on its combination with other potential sources of subordination" (Denis 677).

Such attention to the differential positioning of subjects in relation to multiple, often dynamic, and overlapping lines of power suggests a particular affinity between intersectional perspectives and analyses of precarity. The concept of *precariousness,* or *precarity*, has roots in labor activism in Europe in the early 2000s, responding to the casualization of labor and the consequent instability of employment for workers (Neilson and Rossiter 51-52). Since that time, academic considerations of precarity have broadened and expanded the concept to include conditions of insecurity that extend beyond economics. For example, Judith Butler defines precarity as illustrating "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (*Frames of War* ii). In addition to what might be considered spectacular and evental forms of violence, those in positions of precarity also experience what Lauren Berlant calls "slow death," or "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (754).

While Butler defines vulnerability as a condition experienced by all humans, precarity is an uneven distribution of vulnerability caused by structural forces and systemic inequalities. Butler further argues that precarity should be understood as "directly linked with gender norms," given that "those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence"

(“Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics” ii). Likewise, Eileen Boris and Leigh Dodson understand economic insecurity as tied inextricably to “ideological constructs of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, ability, age, and citizenship” (3). An intersectional understanding of precarity, therefore, considers not only how these various ideological constructs might impact economic security but also how the overlaps and articulations among them may affect a subject’s experiences of vulnerability and inequality. “Intersectional identities,” Sarah Mosoetsa, Joel Stillerman, and Chris Tilly contend, “bring with them not just a set of stereotypes and other aspects of marginalization, but also a set of actual and potential relations—economic and political” (14). For example, Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall remind us that “analysis of the overlapping structures of subordination” can illuminate “how certain groups of women [are] made particularly vulnerable to abuse” and failed by “inadequate interventions” that ignore “the structural dimensions of the context” (797).

Questions of structurally-engineered vulnerability maintain a central place within *The Babadook*, and the trope of monstrosity offers unique resources for considering intersectional forms of precarity. Just as monsters themselves frequently occupy interstitial sites between seemingly incompatible categories—animal/human, living/dead, material/immaterial, hero/villain—their conflicted positionalities recall the double-binds and paradoxes that often characterize life lived in precarity. That is, monsters like Babadook offer particularly fruitful ground for considering the experiences of those for whom precarity means being both held hostage by *and* excluded from structures and systems that do not consider their bodies or subjectivities fully legible. And yet, while *The Babadook* encourages productive consideration of the ways that intersections among gender, sexuality, class, and ability may engender conditions of precariousness, its inattention to the politics of race risks reinforcing the normativity of whiteness, deflecting attention from the ways in which racial and ethnic differences also impact precarity, and becoming complicit in what Sirma Bilge describes as the “whitening of intersectionality” (412). Before turning to in-depth analysis of Kent’s film itself, this essay will now offer a brief introduction to the text and consider the various discursive frames used to interpret *The Babadook* in order to highlight the importance of reading the film intersectionally.

Intersecting Babadiscourses

Kent's *The Babadook* received limited release in Australia, the country in which it was produced, in 2014. It fared well with reviewers but not audiences. Traveling through the international film festival circuit, including Sundance, the film received critical accolades, bringing it considerable attention in the U.S. and in Europe, and also leading to its revival in Australia. Narratively, *The Babadook* is the story of Amelia, a white single mother, and her only son Samuel, who has both emotional and behavioral struggles. On the day her son would be born, Amelia and her husband Oskar have a car accident on the way to the hospital, and Oskar dies. The film opens with Amelia literally dreaming about this nightmare scenario almost seven years later, just days before Samuel's birthday and the anniversary of Oskar's death. Having given up her career as a writer to earn wages as a nursing home attendant, Amelia has been Samuel's only caregiver—an isolating experience exacerbated by both other people's uneasiness with her grief and by their ableist discomfort with Samuel's differences.

Amelia's ability to care for her son becomes severely constrained when she decides she must remove him from his school, which seems unwilling or unable to accommodate Samuel's needs. At the same time, Samuel becomes fixated on an invisible monster that he warns lives in their house and aims to do harm to his mother. When a mysterious and violent children's book appears, Amelia begins to fear that the monster is not a figment of Samuel's imagination, and soon she and her home are tormented by a bogeyman known as Babadook, who lives under her child's bed and in his closet. As anxiety, sleeplessness, and trauma take a toll on Amelia, she first directs her anger at Samuel, toward whom she becomes violent, before eventually confronting Babadook. Realizing she can never fully rid their lives of the monster that now resides in their home, she determines to make relative peace with Babadook, locking him in their basement but keeping him well fed and alive. As illustrated by a line in Babadook's book—"The more you deny, the stronger I get"—the monster certainly operates as a signifier of Amelia's grief over Oskar's death; the more she represses this trauma, the more power it has to return and disrupt her life. This allegory is not, however, the only one at work within *The Babadook*.

Depicting a mother who is raising a son in the wake of immense personal loss and in the face of economic instability, the film operates as an allegory about the intersectional politics of white motherhood. *The Babadook* deploys familiar

conventions of the horror genre in ways that shed unexpected light on the affective registers of motherhood; and yet, while the narrative centers on Amelia's experiences, *The Babadook* expands its attention beyond the individual figure of the mother to consider the cultural and structural constraints that render some bodies more vulnerable than others. Although *The Babadook*'s story of a supernatural threat is presumably dissimilar to its imagined audiences' actual lives, the film spends a great deal of time and visual energy depicting material conditions and experiences that are likely quite familiar to audience members who care or have cared for children. In this way, *The Babadook* resembles a number of films interested in mother-child relationships, which have been the subject of much feminist film criticism; and this relationship occupies a central space in much of the public discourse about Kent's film. What follows, then, is a survey of the lineage of feminist film criticism that precedes and, perhaps, helps shape this film, as well as a consideration of contemporary responses to it.

The figure of the mother—especially the white mother—looms largely within horror cinema and feminist scholarship about the genre. In particular, the late 1960s and 1970s offered especially fertile ground for films attentive to gender politics and discourses of maternity, which have typically been understood as anxiously responding to second-wave feminism. Scholarship that addresses representations of maternity in such horror cinema often falls into one of two categories: feminist criticism of the representations of "bad", if not monstrous, maternity or allegorical interpretations of horror films as expressing proto-feminist sensibilities. The former body of scholarship often deploys Freudian and/or Kristevan psychoanalytic theories to explore Oedipal anxieties in the cinematic constructions of mothers and/or abject figurations of them.

For example, Barbara Creed's *Monstrous Feminine* contends that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions," citing such tropes as the "archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed mother" (7). Examples of such films include: *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Carrie* (Bryan DePalma, 1976), *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), and *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). In all of these films, the overwhelming figure of the mother threatens the autonomy of the child whose subjectivity and body the mother hopes to control, contain, and even consume, and feminist criticism of these films reads them as misogynistic expressions of

this anxiety that frequently intensify in response to shifting cultural and social norms regarding gender, reproductivity, and the family.

The second category of feminist scholarship on maternal horror films reads certain texts as offering what Lucy Fischer describes as allegorical expression of (mostly white) women's affective experiences of pregnancy and childbirth (4). As such, this category of scholarship historically attends to films that, while not necessarily articulating clearly or consistently feminist politics, speak to the various forms of material and symbolic violence exacted against women's bodies and subjectivities by patriarchal institutions—namely, marriage and medicine. Examples of such films include *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974), which Fischer reads as documenting "the societal and personal turmoil that has attended female reproduction" (4). In both of these films, for instance, a pregnant white woman suspects that something is wrong with the fetus she carries in her womb, only to find her anxieties dismissed by her husband and her medical care providers, relegating her to positions of disempowerment as well as "virtual," and sometimes literal, "silence" (Fischer 5).

The Babadook shares with these predecessors, as Fischer figures them, an interest in the affective experiences of mothers who have been disciplined and even dismissed by the institutions that should support them; but, while the latter films focus on pregnancy and parturition, *The Babadook* emphasizes the daily, mundane horrors of childrearing experienced by women who act as their children's primary (if not sole) caregivers in the often isolating context of the single family home.[2] In particular, *The Babadook* contends that culturally idealized performances of feminine maternity depend on not only heteronormative and ableist constructs about what it means to be a mother but also class privileges to which many women do not have access.

In addition to approaching *The Babadook* in line with Fischer's analysis of such films as *Rosemary's Baby* and *It's Alive*, this analysis interprets Kent's film in light of prevailing readings of it by both film critics and fans, which illustrate the film's value as a tool for making sense of the politics of everyday living. Many viewers have acknowledged the film's allegorical interest in the subjects of

---

[2] *The Babadook* should also be understood in relation to recent horror films, including *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014), and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), which take up intersectional feminist considerations of gender and sexuality.

heteronormativity, gender, *or* disability, but I want to extend and articulate these considerations of *The Babadook* because its value as a resource for intersectional feminist criticism lies in its understanding of these discourses not as *isolated* but as *imbricated*. Moreover, this essay also calls attention to *The Babadook's* treatment of the politics of class and race, which are aspects of the film that critics and fans rarely mention.

While the Babadiscourse concentrates on how "queer-coded villains" such as Babadook manifest the violence that heteronormativity enacts through practices of exclusion and othering (Turner), many responses to *The Babadook* within both trade sources and the blogosphere interpret this film as an allegory about what it feels like to be a mother. For example, multiple reviews and fan posts describe the film as addressing issues faced by all parents and mothers, in particular. Such readings note the considerable attention the film pays to the daily rhythms and frustrations of caring for children, including the fact that the first twelve minutes of the film focus almost exclusively on the quotidian rituals of parenting: dressing a squirmy and uncooperative child, waking up in the middle of the night and making room in bed for a scared child, tackling the often stressful task of grocery shopping with a child, and struggling to maintain a pleasant tone in one's voice in otherwise unpleasant interactions with a child. For example, writing for *Slate*, Tammy Oler frames *The Babadook* as visualizing the pressures placed on women to be "good" mothers and to love what they do, despite the often isolating and exhausting conditions of motherhood in postindustrial, capitalist societies that treat parenting as private, individualized responsibilities and therefore provide few networks of support. Likewise, Caroline Madden describes the film as offering an unusually candid picture of the demanding expectations placed on women to perform both emotional and material labor for the sake of their children such that, to paraphrase Mary Beth Haralovich, "too much guilt is never enough."

Many responses to *The Babadook* also cast the film as attentive to the subjects of disability, mental illness, and ableism. Such readings emphasize the film's renderings of the affective experiences of parents who care for their children while also facing their own personal losses and mental health crises. These readings frame the film as speaking to those parents suffering from trauma, grief, and attendant forms of addiction and/or depression, as Amelia herself experiences symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder and/or depression, including nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, mood disorders, and sleep disturbances. For example, in her review for *Bitch Media*, Monica Castillo notes

that, in addition to the film's depiction of Amelia's acute trauma, *The Babadook* also names such "unspeakable horrors of motherhood" as post-partum depression and anxiety. Castillo's response also notes how abelist cultures exacerbate the harms of trauma and mental illness by stigmatizing these experiences and failing to offer adequate resources for support.

Other critics and viewers of the film have suggested that *The Babadook* not only speaks to the affective dimensions of motherhood generally but also addresses the experiences of parents who have children with disabilities. For example, Alexander Pape interprets Samuel as having an autism-spectrum disorder, citing Samuel's trouble relating to his peers, his difficulty performing in a traditional school setting, his sleep disorders and anxiety, his fixation on mechanical weapons and repetitive behaviors, and his experience of seizures. Such interpretations, which were frequently offered by authors who describe themselves as parents of children with autism, including Pape and Jeremiah Dollins, emphasize the amount of labor caregivers must perform to advocate for children in the context of an ableist society, in addition to navigating their own personal responses to and feelings about their children and their parental role.

Ultimately, there is merit to each of these readings of the film, which are (of course) not mutually exclusive from one another and which illustrate the film's polyvalence and allegorical richness—not to mention the resourcefulness of audiences who deploy the text as a sense-making tool. Moreover, when taken together, these readings point toward the ways in which expectations about motherhood are constrained by heteronormative expectations about gender and ability, wherein a "good" mother is expected to be "physically attractive, heterosexual and not disabled" (Kendrick 259). As Ora Prilleltensky notes, ableist discourse has often positioned disability as incompatible with both heteronormative femininity and motherhood, figuring "women with disabilities…as child-like, dependent and asexual" and therefore as incapable of "fulfilling traditionally feminine roles" (22).

Largely absent from the responses to *The Babadook*, however, is acknowledgment of the film's interest in the politics of class and conditions of economic instability. To demonstrate, most of these reviews identify Amelia as a "single" mother; in addition to characterizations of her relational status as isolating and taxing on her as a parent, which itself risks reaffirming heteronormative dictates that all individuals should be coupled, discussions of Amelia's status as a "single mother" also abound with references to her lack of

resources to care for herself and her son. That is, "single" also operates in this rhetoric as a metonym for being economically insecure, a slippage that owes to the fact that Amelia is the sole income-earner for her family. While this material reality matters, singular attention to Amelia's marital status inhibits consideration of the failures of larger social structures and the state to support her and her child. That is, this rhetoric focuses attention on Amelia's lack of a partner at the expense of considerations of the lack of structures of opportunity made available to her and others in positions of disenfranchisement.

This essay, therefore, aims to redress this inattention to the politics of class within discourse about *The Babadook* by reading the film as considering how socioeconomic precarity and the "organized abandonment" of marginalized people (Kelly 237) compound the harms of heteronormativity, sexism, and ableism. Specifically, *The Babadook* addresses how class precarity conflicts with normative and ableist expectations about performances of white femininity and maternity. However, as I will argue later, attention to these interlocking registers of identity, difference, and power without attention to the politics of race undermines *The Babadook*'s critiques, given that whiteness is articulated with and through a chain of "unspoken privileges," including those associated with sexuality, gender, ability, and class (Nayak 738). I turn now to aspects of the film's *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and narrative that encourage interpretations focused on how socioeconomic insecurity interarticulates with other forms of inequality. I will structure my analysis around three salient thematics throughout the film: constructions of the home, depictions of various surveillance cultures, and the figuration of monstrosity via Babadook.

"Let Me In!"

Central to *The Babadook*'s consideration of the politics of class is the film's figuration of Amelia and Samuel's home—a Victorian-style house that Kent had constructed specifically for this film and that operates as a character in the film in its own right. Specifically of note are the ways that the home in the film diverges from both idealized constructions of the home and the role of the home within the horror genre. The signifier of the home often functions as a synecdoche for heteronormative, sexist, ableist, and classist figurations of the family. Consider, for instance, how often home-ownership functions as a milestone marker for

success and stability along heteronormative timelines and within constructions of middle-classness, how often the home acts as a site for the production and regulation of bodies that are normatively gendered and sexed, and how consistently the "culture of suburban home life" and typical design practices presume that a house's inhabitants will be non-disabled, thereby rendering these spaces inaccessible to many (Hamraie). Note also the extent to which figurations of the single family, private home often stand in contrast to other, less culturally idealized types of homes, such as public housing, group homes, nursing homes, or institutions, which are often imagined as sites of containment for bodies and subjects deemed to be disruptive or "misfitting" (Hamraie). The trope of the home also plays a significant role within the horror genre, which frequently inverts constructions of the home as a site of safety and security. As Carol Clover notes, horror films abound with images of homes as "Terrible Places," whose dreadfulness owes less to the "Victorian decrepitude" of the houses themselves than the "terrible families" that occupy them (30).

In some ways, Amelia and Samuel's home recalls the Terrible Places that Clover describes, particularly in its "Victorian decrepitude." Rather than figuring the home as an insular site for the incubation of monsters, however, Kent's film locates it within the larger sociocultural context and political economy in which Amelia attempts to make her life. Kent's camera and intricately staged *mise-en-scène* emphasize the age and deterioration of the home—chipping paint, stained wallpaper, worn floors. The film does not treat such details as signifiers of the home's innate horror or the horror of the house's inhabitants but, instead, deploys them to call attention to conditions that may make "proper" home life inaccessible to many and to make visible those forms of (invisible) labor often associated with women and the economically insecure. In one scene, for example, Amelia discovers thousands of roaches streaming into her kitchen. Pulling back her refrigerator, she is horrified to find a hole in a water-damaged wall through which the insects have gained entry; and without financial resources or outside assistance, Amelia must tend to this problem in isolation—not through spectacular heroics but through banal and tedious labor.

The Babadook's attention to the house's process of decay disrupts bourgeois constructions of the home as a signifier of success and stability, thereby challenging heteronormative timelines and their interarticulation with class hierarchies. This image of Amelia's aging home also makes visible the extent to which metonymic associations between femininity and domesticity depend on and

reinforce classed fantasies about womanhood. Further, the emphasis on the gradually decaying home calls attention to Amelia's experience of Berlant's concept of "slow death," wherein her economic precarity amplifies the coextensivity of her everyday attempts at lifebuilding and her experience of the mundane process of dying. In contrast to Oskar's sudden death, which the film represents only briefly in flashback form, *The Babadook* offers prolonged attention to the sluggishness and constancy of Amelia's experience of what Butler describes as "precaritization as an ongoing process" (Puar 169).

The labor of tending to others is not only definitive of Amelia's life at home but also becomes the primary modality with which she moves through the world. For example, Amelia cares for her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Roach, an elderly woman who lives alone and who has the neurodegenerative disorder Parkinson's Disease—a fact the film makes explicit. Amelia, the film implies, has made a habit of looking after her neighbor and helping with mundane tasks such as trash removal. Of course, in the context of the scene described above, it matters that this character bears the surname *Roach*. This naming choice signals the extent to which ableist cultures often treat those who are elderly, ill, and/or disabled as pests or nuisances to be done away with. This choice also recalls the very banality—which is to say ordinariness and routineness—of a situation like this one in which, absent proper systems and structures of care, one individual is left to the mercy of another. At the same time that Amelia looks after her neighbor, she must also depend on her for occasional childcare; this aspect of the narrative highlights the extent to which conditions of interdependence often typify the lived experiences of those in positions of precarity and simultaneously emphasizes the lack of reciprocal care from institutions that are, in fact, in the position to offer such support.

Amelia's job in a nursing home—or, aged care home as it would be called in Australia—also requires the labor of caring for others. As such, on the rare occasions in *The Babadook* in which Amelia is able to leave her home, she finds herself doing much of the same labor that she provides for Samuel (and Mrs. Roach). What is more, Samuel's needs require that she take time off of work to care for him, cutting her off from life-sustaining wages and from some of her only opportunities for interacting with other adults. In the absence of institutional resources, such an interruption to Amelia's work schedule has incredibly high stakes for her family, even if her employer imagines her as disposable. *The Babadook* makes clear that, without accessible and stable options for childcare,

Amelia must make the choice of potentially sacrificing her family's already uncertain financial stability to care for Samuel's immediate needs; but rather than linking this situation to Amelia's status as a "single mother," *The Babadook*'s attention to Amelia's myriad forms of labor—both public and private—invite consideration of the larger context of life in postindustrial societies in which the casualization of labor, the "rise of the service economy," the weakening of labor unions, and the deregulation of labor markets have contributed to cultures of socioeconomic insecurity (McGann, White, and Moss 768).

The Babadook also offers protracted representations of Amelia's own deterioration as she grows increasingly undone by the demands of her care for Samuel and by her fear for his wellbeing and her own. For example, early in the narrative, the film depicts Amelia making rather small sacrifices for the sake of her child, relinquishing in one scene the pleasure of masturbation when a nightmare drives Samuel into her bed. As the narrative develops, these sacrifices grow more severe, and Amelia struggles physically and psychologically, becoming increasingly anxious, irritable, and exhausted. To demonstrate, throughout much of the film Amelia experiences a toothache, which gradually worsens because she does not have the temporal, financial, or emotional resources to engage in acts of self-care, such as going to the dentist. At her most exhausted state, the pain becomes so formidable that she rips out the infected tooth with her bare hands, leaving her speechless and bloodied. In this scene, Amelia's painful removal of her festering tooth synecdochally signals the ongoing process by which she has been expected to give up and discard parts of herself for the sake of others. In contrast to those horror films that depict the spectacular horrors of parturition as an isolated event, *The Babadook* envisions the cumulating traumas of a different kind of labor, visualizing how, as Berlant argues, the ongoing "labor of reproducing life itself exhausts the bodies that perform it" (Puar 171).

"If It's in a Look"

Significantly, *The Babadook* refuses a clean distinction between material and immaterial forms of labor as it demonstrates the exhausting effects of Amelia's manual labor in the service of home maintenance and the emotional labor she must perform for her son and those positioned to monitor and assess the value of her labor. For example, in conversations with her socioeconomically privileged

sister Claire, Amelia consistently receives the message that she should hide her grief and struggles in order to make others more comfortable. In one scene, Claire complains about the tradition of sharing a birthday party for her daughter and Samuel, which was a practice aimed at protecting Amelia from having to celebrate her son's birthday on the anniversary of her husband's death and insulating her from the costs of the celebration. Claire claims that this ritual inconveniences her by making her "feel awful." In response, Amelia must do the work of regulating her own feelings to accommodate her sister, while she also feels compelled to apologize and atone for her sister's discomfort. Claire, who refuses to visit her sister's house because it's "too depressing," later chastises Amelia for not being able to "cope" with Oskar's death and for not having "moved on" from her grief.

This attention to Claire's feelings about Amelia's feelings makes clear that *The Babadook* does not understand trauma and depression as entirely private or individualized experiences. Rather, the film casts depression as what Ann Cvetkovich might call a "public feeling" constituted in the context of social relations and power inequities, wherein depression develops in the context of "political failure[s]" including histories of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism (7). For instance, by juxtaposing Claire's ableist impatience toward her sister with conspicuous representations of her socioeconomic privilege and by coupling Claire's disdainful remarks about Amelia's grief with her blithe suggestions that her sister should "just get back into" her writing, the film emphasizes that Amelia's grief is not unrelated to or unaffected by her economic insecurity. As such, *The Babadook* also demonstrates that health and trauma are not apolitical and that the "economically and politically marginalized are uniquely exposed to preventable risks to health and safety" (Kelly 237).

As much as Amelia must spend her time watching over Samuel, she also becomes the object of various institutional gazes. At his school, for instance, Amelia must face the scrutiny of Samuel's teacher and head of school. Insisting on a monitor to oversee Samuel throughout the school day, these officials approach Amelia with condescension, if not hostility, when Samuel acts out. Likewise, after Amelia chooses to remove Samuel from this school, she finds herself under surveillance by the state, as representatives of the Department of Community Services make multiple, unannounced visits to Amelia's home to inspect its condition and assess Samuel's well-being. The fact that one visit occurs in the midst of Amelia's efforts to manage the roach infestation

underscores the state's investment in surveillance over and against providing support for those in need. Claustrophobic cinematography in the scenes featuring the DCS agents highlights the various disciplinary gazes aimed at Amelia, and the film's attention to these institutional forces illustrates the extent to which low-income families and/or single mothers are subject to more state supervision, surveillance, and discipline than others.

This depiction of the state echoes through another scene in the film in which Amelia asks for but does not receive help from local law enforcement agencies. As Babadook's presence becomes increasingly menacing, Amelia presumes that she has a stalker. Having received no support from Claire, who dismisses her sister's fears, sighing that she "just can't help [her] right now," Amelia seeks help at the police station. The officer to whom she speaks and others who watch her skeptically from across the room are largely nonresponsive to her distress and pleas for help. One officer even laughs condescendingly when Amelia mentions having received threats in the form of a children's book. A shot/reverse shot sequence in which one officer stares blankly and silently at Amelia as she describes being stalked visualizes the tactics of gaslighting that lead her to doubt her own experiences and her attendant feelings of helplessness or isolation. Having been dismissed by the officer, Amelia runs from the station after seeing what she believes to be Babadook's cloak and top hat hanging on a coat rack in the station, illustrating her understandable fear that institutions may exacerbate, rather than lessen, the threats she faces. This scene echoes the history of "organized abandonment" by lawmakers, law enforcement agencies, and the judicial system (to name a few) in their treatment of violence against women as private issues to be dealt with in the home or as acts committed by individual bad actors outside the context of "broader structures of patriarchal dominance" (Enck-Wanzer 6).

Amelia also finds herself the target of another disciplinary (and condescending) gaze: that of Claire and Claire's friends. At her daughter's birthday party, Claire's friends, clad in expensive suits, stare at Amelia with a mixture of pity and horror in their eyes. As the women complain about their husbands' work schedules and their lack of time to go to the gym, the cinematography—including wide framing and low-angle shooting—embodies the hierarchy that structures the scene. One woman attempts to forge an identification with Amelia by claiming to know how "hard" her situation is because of her volunteer work with "disadvantaged women." This reference to volunteer, or

charity, work further highlights the failures of the neoliberal state to care for its marginalized citizens, shifting such labor onto individuals and private institutions. This conversation also points to the metonymic equation of "good" femininity and motherhood with acts of caretaking and the extent to which the conspicuous volunteer work of privileged (white, heterosexual, nondisabled, wealthy) women may carry more cultural capital than the invisible but life-sustaining labor of women in positions of precarity.

Accordingly, *The Babadook*'s rendering of Amelia's and Samuel's trauma demonstrates the importance of differentiating states of vulnerability from conditions of precarity, visualizing the "politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure" (Butler *Frames of War* ii). The struggles Amelia faces are not solely her own, but they are the result of cultural, social, and political forces that precede and exceed her; and the traumas she experiences do not result solely from the sudden loss of her partner, as a quick synopsis of the film might suggest, but also from the ongoing lack of resources for her and her son.

"You Can't Get Rid of the Babadook!"

Just as this essay begins by referencing online texts that have made Babadook a queer icon, it is also a text in the film that introduces the monster into Amelia and Samuel's home. When Samuel finds a mysterious book, *Mister Babadook*, on his bedroom shelf, he asks his mother to read it to him at bedtime. The pop-up book, bound in red cloth and featuring crude black and white lettering and drawings, begins with these words, "If it's in a word, or it's in a look, you can't get rid of the The Babadook." Amelia reads the book to Samuel, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with its references to fear and sleeplessness, and its illustrations of a black and white creature staring at a sleeping child in his bed. The book, which contains many blank pages toward the end, frightens Samuel to the point that he curls up in his mother's lap, screaming as she tries to read a more soothing bedtime story.

That night, Amelia hides the book, only to later discover that it has reappeared in Samuel's room alongside a vandalized picture of her and Oskar. After tearing up the book, Amelia finds that it has returned with its pages taped back together, and this reappearance corresponds with an increase in erratic and even violent

behavior from Samuel. This version of the book also has its missing pages filled with illustrations of a woman who resembles Amelia being taunted by Babadook before killing her pet and her child. A final attempt to destroy the book by burning it appears to work on the text itself, but other manifestations of Babadook begin to taunt Amelia: she receives a prank call, she has visions of his cloak and hat, and she hears various noises in her home. As Babadook occupies more and more space in their lives, the escalation in Samuel's violent behaviors is redoubled in Amelia's own increasingly unpredictable, angry, and aggressive conduct.

This brief narrative synopsis likely illustrates why many reviewers have come to understand Babadook as the manifestation of Amelia's repressed grief about the loss of Oskar. More detailed attention to Kent's construction of Babadook in her film lends additional insights into how this monster gives shape to *The Babadook*'s critique of the precarious conditions of white motherhood in postindustrial society. It matters, for instance, that the Babadook almost never appears in any corporeal form in the film; audiences see illustrated representations of him within the diegesis (such as the drawings in the book) and encounter traces of his presence (including hearing noises and seeing items that seemingly belong to him). But, the monster is never fully materialized as an actual presence in the film, as audiences only hear him or see his shadow, and his face only appears onscreen in the briefest of flashes. Babadook is no thing—or, more precisely, no one. In fact, so "unimportant" is the corporeal presence of Babadook that the actor who plays him (Tim Purcell) does not appear in the credits until the very end of the cast list, after the lead actors' stunt doubles and such tangential roles as "Fast Food Mum" and "Car Guy."

Babadook's origination in a pop-up book (not to mention his construction as a queer icon via online memes) suggests Bernadette Calafell's observation that "monsters are made, not born" (1). That is, monsters do not exist innately or naturally but are produced by discourse, culture, and structures of domination. They are the constructed outcomes of power and its often-unequal distribution. The immaterial materiality (or material immateriality) of Babadook also signals a concept akin to what Casey Ryan Kelly describes as "ambient horror." In his analysis of the horror film, *It Follows,* Kelly discusses how the film depicts horror not as "gory spectacle" but through a diffusion of affects that collectively "cultivat[e] dread" to signify the "steady intensification and precarity" and the organization of bodily vulnerability and death along lines of power (238). Babadook is everywhere and nowhere at once; he cannot be located in any single

context or at any one site. Rather, like precarity, he exists interstitially, along lines of division and stratification. He resides in thresholds and in borders, and can only be seen if, as *Mister Babadook* says, "you know what it is to see."

At the end of Kent's film, Babadook finds a kind of "queer kinship" with Amelia (Tongson); or, as Tim Teeman puts it, the two live together in a "queer community of mutually accepting perversity." Babadook remains there, but not there; hidden in the basement but acknowledged as a part of everyday life; dreaded but also cared for; material but also immaterial; physical but also polymorphous. Babadook's not-quite-materialized presence in Amelia's home serves as a constant reminder of the structures of inequity that shape her life—never quite visible but felt all the same. Babadook does not come to stand in for an individualized bad actor who has made Amelia's life more difficult; there is, in fact, no single bogeyman to whom she could point a finger or from whom she could demand redress. Rather, Babadook signals the confluence and accretion of structural forces that have precaritized Amelia's (and Samuel's) life. Just as the Babadiscourse emerges from those who "know what it is to see" heteronormativity and homophobia, *The Babadook* asks audiences to see the various intersections among heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and classism and how these im/material forces take shape in the lives of the precarious. Of course, at the same time, Babadook's continued presence in Amelia's home and the attendant forms of (maternal) labor she must perform on his behalf remind viewers of the enduring and exhausting conditions of living precarious lives. That is, the film's purported resolution of Amelia's trauma is anything but; she may be less acutely in crisis, but her responsibilities for Samuel, Mrs. Roach, and now Babadook will continue to accumulate as conditions of her slow death.

"And Once You See What's Underneath"

Despite its productive attention to forms of precarity that result from the overlapping of heteronormativity, sexism, classism, and ableism, an intersectional reading of *The Babadook* reveals the film to be haunted by presumptive whiteness. The film's figuration of the home with Victorian stylistics, for instance, resounds with signifiers of whiteness that are never acknowledged as such; neither does the film attend explicitly to the legacy of colonialism in Australia, which included both the exploitation of impoverished and incarcerated

British citizens that were transported to the colony and enslavement and genocide of Indigenous people in Australia. Further, the film's depictions of the institutional gazes that scrutinize and discipline Amelia leave no space for considering the privileges her whiteness (and presumed heterosexuality) might afford her. To wit, one might imagine that women of color (and queers of color) may have experienced even harsher treatment by representatives of the state or found even fewer resources for support. Inattention to this racial inequity is particularly problematic given the history of colonialism and that fact that for most of the twentieth century the Australian government forcibly removed Indigenous children from their homes with the aim of assimilating them into white society and, effectively, destroying Indigenous populations.

In the context of the film's exclusion of people of color, however, the figure of Babadook does perhaps offer a moment of rupture within the film's presumptions of whiteness. Quite literally, Babadook is illustrated mostly in black with conspicuous white makeup on his face. Suggesting an inversion of racist tropes of blackface—while also referencing well-circulated imagery of Indigenous people from Australia wearing white body paint—this aesthetic figuration of the monster suggests conflicting possibilities regarding the politics of race.[3] On the one hand, a suspicious reading of this film might suggest that it harbors racist fantasies of Black and/or Indigenous men's bodies posing threats to white women, invading their bedrooms at night. On the other hand, a generous reading might interpret this depiction of Babadook as literalizing the film's whitewashing of its story of precarity. That is, the black and white animation of Babadook serves, purposefully or not, as a signal and contestation of the film's inattention to racial difference, reminding the film's characters and imagined viewers that race, like the Babadook, cannot be ignored. In fact, one line within

[3] Images of Indigenous people in Australia engaging in practices of body painting and ornamentation have circulated widely in a range of sites, including photojournalism, art, and cinema. While some of these images have attempted to offer respectful depictions of these cultural practices and the spiritual traditions they reflect, other representations have participated in exoticizing and Othering Indigenous bodies. For examples of the latter, consider such films as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978) and *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986)—both of which are films directed by white men that have been decried as racist for having deployed the bodies of Indigenous people as resources for bolstering white hegemony.

The Babadook book encourages such a reparative interpretation, imploring readers to "see what's underneath" the monster's disguise.[4]

It is perhaps no accident, then, that queer appropriations of Babadook in the U.S. have explicitly referenced signifiers associated with cultural performances of Black queerness, including frequent use of the tagline, "Get Ready to be Babashook"; representations of Babadook voguing; and, in one of the most high-profile iterations of Babadook's queer iconicity, the appearance of Miles Jai, a queer person of color and social media star, at the finale of RuPaul's *Drag Race* in costume as the top-hatted monster. While some of these representations reflect the histories of white appropriation of Black cultural performances of queerness, we might also read them reparatively as signaling (perhaps unwittingly) what *The Babadook* itself does not see: its own investment in the normative invisibility of whiteness, even as tries to make visible other forms of discrimination and inequity. To this end, the figure of The Babadook offers an important reminder about the tropological richness of monstrosity. Just as monsters themselves often defy easy containment and exceed the categories aimed at defining them, monsters as signifiers have rich capacity to invite interpretations and identifications, often at interstitial, overlapping, and even contradictory registers.

---

[4] I borrow the language of suspicious, or paranoid, and generous, or reparative, reading practices from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on queer feminist hermeneutics.

Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren. “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2007, pp. 754-780.

Bilge, Simra. “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionalist Studies,” *Du Bois Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, pp. 405-424.

Boris, Eileen and Leigh Dodson. “Introduction.” *Working at Living: The Social Relations of Precarity*, 28 July 2013, escholarship.org/uc/item/6bk5x0j5. Accessed 15 Feb. 2018.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso Books, 2016.

Butler, Judith. “Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics,” *AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana,* vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. i-xiii.

Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.

Castillo, Monica. “The Horrors of Motherhood Creep Through ‘The Babadook,’” *Bitch Media,* 31 Dec. 2014, bitchmedia.org/post/the-horrors-of-motherhood-creep-through-the-babadook. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. “Toward a Field of Intersectional Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 785-810.

Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd edition. Routledge, 2000.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. New York and Routledge, 1993.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Denis, Ann. "Intersectional Analysis: A Contribution of Feminism to Sociology," *International Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2009, pp. 677-694.

Dollins, Jeremiah. "Review: The Babadook," *Letterboxd,* 26 Nov. 2014, letterboxd.com/ambivalentman/film/the-babadook/. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

Enck-Wanzer, Suzanne Marie. "All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-18.

Gökarıksel, Banu and Sara Smith. "Intersectional Feminism Beyond U.S. Flag Hijab and Pussy Hats in Trump's America," *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2017, pp. 628-644.

Hamraie, Aimi. "Designing Collective Access: A Feminist Disability Theory of Universal Design," *Disability Studies Quarterly,* vol. 33, no. 4, 2013, dsqsds.org/article/view/3871/3411. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

Haralovich, Mary Beth. "Too Much Guilt is Never Enough for Working Mothers: Joan Crawford, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Mommie Dearest*," *The Velvet Light Trap,* vol. 29, 1992, pp. 43-52.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, 2015.

Fischer, Lucy. "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in 'Rosemary's Baby," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1992, pp. 3-18.

Kelly, Casey Ryan. It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2017, pp. 234-249.

Kendrick, Karen. "'Normalizing Female Cancer Patients: Look Good, Feel Better and Other Image Problems," *Disability & Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2008, pp. 259-269.

Madden, Caroline. "'The Babadook and the Horrors of Motherhood," *Bitch Flicks,* 26 May 2015, btchflcks.com/2015/05/the-babadook-and-the-horrors-of-motherhood.html#.WiG7F0trxBx. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

McGann, Michael, Kevin White, and Jeremy Moss. "Labour Casualization and the Psychosocial Health of Workers in Australia," *Work, Employment, & Society*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2016, pp. 766-782.

Mosoetsa, Sarah, Joel Stillerman, and Chris Tilly. "Precarious Labor, South and North: An Introduction," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 89, 2016, pp. 5-19.

Nayak, Anoop. "Critical Whiteness Studies," *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 737-755.

Neilson, Brett and Ned Rossiter. "Precarity as a Political Concept, or Fordism as Exception," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 7-8, 2008, pp. 51-72.

Oler, Tammy. "The Mommy Trap: Four Recent Horror Movies by Women Explore the Most Troubling Aspects of Motherhood," *Culturebox*, 24 Nov. 2014, slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/11/horror_movies_about_mothers_and_children_the_babadook_lyle_and_other_films.html. Accessed 25. Nov. 2017.

Pape, Alexander. "The Babadook and Autism," *Medium*, 24 Nov. 2015, medium.com/dispatching/the-babadook-a-horror-film-or-an-autism-metaphor-6975b2f9eb85. Accessed 25. Nov 2017.

Prilleltensky, Ora. "A Ramp to Motherhood: The Experience of Mothers with Physical Disabilities," *Sexuality and Disability*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2003, pp. 21-47.

Puar, Jasbir, ed. "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2012, pp. 163-177.

Roy, Jessica. "The Babadook as an LGBT Icon Makes Sense. No, Really." *Los Angeles Times,* 9 June 2017, latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-babadook-gay-icon-lgbt-history-20170609-story.html. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

Teeman, Tim. "Scene by Scene, This is What Makes the Babadook Such an LGBT Icon," *Daily Beast,* 6 Aug. 2017, thedailybeast.com/scene-by-scene-this-is-what-makes-the-babadook-such-an-lgbt-icon. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017

Turner, Kyle. "Why Pennywise and the Babadook Were Reclaimed by the Queer Community," *Teen Vogue*, 31 Oct. 2017, teenvogue.com/story/pennywise-babadook-horror-queer-reclaiming. Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.