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Kill the Bugger: *Ender's Game* and the Question of Heteronormativity

Here's a message: Every man in the city is with you. Kill the bugger!—Moises Kaufman (72)

Ender's Game is full of buggers. While Ender Wiggin, the protagonist of Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel, has no face-to-face encounter with the alien invaders apparently bent on colonizing humanity's solar system until very late in the book—in fact, only after he has utterly defeated them—the mental image of this insectoid enemy (colloquially called “buggers”) haunts Ender and his military schoolmates and motivates everything they do and everything that is done to them. Memories of a bugger invasion and fear of its recurrence prompt the authorities to draft Ender and mold him into the perfect tactical commander. And this fear of the absent Other eventually leads the powers that be to trick Ender into committing “xenocide,” the annihilation of an entire sentient alien species. At first lionized as the savior of humanity, Ender is later redefined as a pariah for his violent transgression. At the end of the novel he reinvents himself as the Speaker for the Dead and, through the temporal wonders of near-light-speed travel, spends the next several thousand years atoning for his crime.

Although primarily a British term, “bugger” as slang for either a male homosexual or the practice of sodomy is not entirely unknown in Card's native US. I will contend in this essay that *Ender's Game* is haunted by the image of these real-world buggers as much as by the fictional aliens that threaten Card's future humanity. Despite its lack of overt homosexual acts, the novel is thoroughly homosocial: the Battle School to which Ender is sent is, with only one apparent exception, an all-male establishment; and its pre-pubescent students perform their share of male bonding and identification through aggressive rival groupings. The novel's vision of childhood is unsentimental: Card's boys, often including Ender, are violent, competitive, libidinous creatures, not cherubic Hummel figures in space. In this essay I will focus on the sexual cross-currents that are critical in *Ender's Game*, specifically the construction of the libidinous child, the relationship between sexuality and procreation, and the role of sexual scapegoating in community formation. I will also consider the novel in the context of Card's larger oeuvre, including the ENDER SERIES and some of his other works. I will conclude by comparing *Ender's Game*, considered as a novel about sexuality, with Card's nonfiction writings as an anti-homosexual activist.

In what follows I am not proposing to discover a coherent message about homosexuality spread across Card's sf and nonfiction. Rather, I am considering how Card's public, political voice recurs in—and is complicated by—his sf texts. I seek not to resolve these voices but to demonstrate how the sf text ultimately provides a more nuanced, layered, and responsive vision of sexuality than the voice of the social commentator. Specifically, I read the ENDER SERIES as being at

odds, on matters of sexual identity and desire, with Card's public stance as a Mormon fundamentalist. From the latter perspective, sex is seen solely a means of procreation. Yet while Card's sf, especially the *ENDER SERIES*, is indeed concerned with procreation, perhaps to a greater extent than has been acknowledged, it also recognizes sexuality's tendency towards excess, both in the way libido predates the physical capacity for procreation (i.e., the phenomenon of pre-pubescent sexuality) and in the way that sexuality serves as a focal point in the formation of social identity, including areas far removed from parentage and the passing on of genes. Excess sexuality has a place in Card's sf, but not in his nonfiction interventions.

When examining Card's thirty-year career as a novelist, it is possible to perceive a gradual—and presumably consciously considered—decline in the representation of homosexual desire. One of the most striking aspects of Card's early sf is its explicit deployment of sexuality as a central thematic element. Emphasis on the importance, construction, and repression of sex, usually bound up in the characteristic sf trope of the precocious child destined for greatness, are the distinguishing features of Card's early sf. One of his earliest novels, *Songmaster* (1980), is a far-future tale centered on a young, conspicuously beautiful male protagonist, Anset, a gifted singer who is given drugs to delay the onset of puberty. These drugs also inflict incapacitating pain at orgasm; as a result, singers like Anset are trained in the arts of repression, called "Control" in the novel. Card posits connections between singing (symbolic of any artistic endeavor) and sexuality, since singing is necessarily joined to emotional attachment, communication, and love but is also a powerful and potentially dangerous force in need of constant policing. Moreover, Anset discovers the debilitating painfulness of sex during an encounter with another man, Josif, one of the few characters Card directly identifies as a homosexual, who is eventually castrated by the government for what is generally considered the rape of Anset. But both Anset and the reader know differently: what occurred was consensual sex between men, misinterpreted as violence by a prejudiced society.¹

By the mid-1980s Card's sf is still vitally interested in sexuality, but the homoerotic has been sidetracked while heterosexuality is increasingly tied to procreation. *Wyrms*, the 1987 novel that followed *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*, focuses on an adolescent female protagonist in an allegorical tale complete with Bunyanesque names: Patience, the heroine and daughter of Peace, must unite with Will to achieve her goals, while controlling the fleshly character Sken (skin). Meanwhile, Angel, at first an able assistant, falls from grace and betrays Patience. Throughout the novel, Patience responds to an overwhelming call to come to the Unwurm and either have sex with or kill him/it. As it turns out, she does both. Libido, however, is now presented solely in terms of fertility: "her lover waited to fill her womb with life" (115); "I am hungry to have his babies" (200); the Unwurm wants "to live, to pass on his genes to his children" (323). As in *Songmaster*, this is a novel in praise of repression, this time symbolized by diplomatic restraint and the importance of Will; significantly, what needs to be channeled is now heterosexuality, seen as procreative potential (though its

representation in the form of quasi-monstrous interspecies sex somewhat taints the normalizing force of the allegory).

Card's most recent fiction has largely sought either to de-emphasize excess sexuality or else assign it to obviously pathological characters. His 1992 non-sf novel *Lost Boys*, for instance, finds the specter of pedophilia haunting small-town America, but only the homosexual variety is linked to murder and dismemberment. Card's treatment of the theme of infantile sexuality, in fact, shows the changes in his fiction over time, moving from the consensual sex mistaken for abuse in *Songmaster*, to the disguised boarding-school buggery of *Ender's Game* (as I explore below), to the lethal predatory pedophilia of *Lost Boys*. In some ways Card's latest novel, *Empire* (2006), a near-future sf work (with a videogame tie-in), represents the logical result of this developmental pattern: despite the fact that it addresses a Red State/Blue State civil war, the divisive issue of homosexuality is not mentioned in the novel itself, appearing only as an issue in his nonfiction Afterword (342-43). Increasingly for Card, sexuality shifts from being a powerful, mutable force that must be aesthetically molded to an already settled issue best handled in a nonfiction forum; excess sexuality goes from controlled song to closeted sin. But Card's most popular sf, *Ender's Game* and its immediate sequels, coming as they do at the mid-point of this arc of resolution, offer a fascinating negotiation with the complexities of sexuality.

Published in 1985, *Ender's Game* falls between *Songmaster* and *Wyrms*, both chronologically and in terms of its construction and gendering of libido. But the first factor to be noted about *Ender's Game* is its immense popularity: the novel won the 1985 Nebula Award and the 1986 Hugo; its first sequel, *Speaker for the Dead* (1986), similarly won both awards the following year. *Ender's Game* has generated (so far) three direct sequels (*Speaker for the Dead*, *Xenocide* [1991], and *Children of the Mind* [1996]), as well as a parallel series of novels that retells parts of *Ender's Game* and then extends the earth-bound storyline (*Ender's Shadow* [1999], *Shadow of the Hegemon* [2001], *Shadow Puppets* [2002], and *Shadow of the Giant* [2005]). Card has announced two additional titles in the series, and *Ender's Game* has been optioned for filming, though it has been stuck in development for several years. As is typical with cult books that turn into franchises, fan reaction has become more restrained after the initial impact of the first two books; nonetheless, interest in the series is still high more than twenty years after the publication of *Ender's Game*.²

By contrast to the fan reaction, critical response has been varied. Not surprisingly for a novel that foregrounds its ethics, much criticism has focused on Ender's status as the moral center of the story. In 1987 Elaine Radford accused Card of presenting Ender as a fictionalized apologia for Hitler: since Ender and Hitler share certain biographical details, *Ender's Game*, she argues, represents an attempt to rethink fascism from the perspective of its perpetrator. This is ultimately a simplistic reading (and it is frankly difficult to determine just how seriously Radford herself takes it), but it does raise some suggestive questions about the novel's popularity if the critic is correct that "fascist ideals remain frighteningly alive in all of us" (11). Perhaps the most cogent critique of *Ender's*

Game is John Kessel's "Creating the Innocent Killer," which locates the novel's popular appeal and its ethical failings in the same core: its construction of an ethics of pure intention. For Kessel, Ender's status as an innocent who never intends to hurt yet nonetheless kills two people with his bare hands and slaughters an entire race of aliens offers readers "revenge without guilt" (94) and thus supports an essentially adolescent fantasy of violent reprisal toward those who have failed to recognize the subject's natural superiority and innate goodness. Kessel asserts that the novel presents not merely the ethics of an adolescent mind, but an ethics that is itself adolescent.

Strangely enough, the potential double entendre of Card's naming his aliens "buggers" has garnered only a few mentions. Thomas Disch, for instance, speculates that Card's monsters are called buggers "to make them doubly objectionable" (195), while Adam Roberts merely calls them "unfortunately named" (314). But as Norman Spinrad puts it, it is "difficult to believe that [Card] was unaware of the obvious sexual connotations when he named the aliens the 'Buggers'" (26).³ And as Kate Bonin argues in her investigation of the appearance and repression of overt homosexuality across Card's oeuvre, "One might easily indulge in a wink-wink/nudge-nudge reading of *Ender's Game* in quest of hidden gay subtext: Ender must save all mankind from the hideous buggers, who are ruled by giant, scary queens" (18). To a certain extent, this is what I propose to do; however, unlike Bonin, I am less interested in representations of overtly homosexual characters, characters who "really are" gay, than I am in the homosocial world of *Ender's Game* and its more subtle evocations of sexuality as a constant, barely contained presence in the lives of all the characters, especially the protagonist.

I should point out that by dwelling on homosocial/homosexual subtext I am not necessarily making any claims about Card's conscious intentions about the sexuality of his characters or the "true nature" of sexuality as represented in his fiction.⁴ Rather, I think what we have in *Ender's Game* is further evidence, if any is needed, for the claim articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men* that homosocial and homosexual desire exist on a continuum, and that the results of homosocial bonds may be either an acceptance or a homophobic rejection of expressions of physical homosexuality. Nonetheless, the homosocial is, for Sedgwick, a matter that cannot be divorced from sexuality even when it results in homophobia: "to draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (1-2). In the case of *Ender's Game* this sexual continuum is even more radically disrupted, and so less immediately visible, yet also more potentially unruly if its presence is detected, because the main characters are pre-pubescent children.

Child protagonists are one of the distinguishing features of Card's novels and one of the primary reasons for their popularity. Ender is recruited to the Battle School at the age of six and wins his final battle against the buggers before he is twelve. With the exception of the final chapter, then, the novel's protagonist is pre-pubescent, a child among other children. The question of Card's construction

of childhood is central to the novel, and I contend—contrary to other readings—that the kids of Ender’s world are anything but cherubic innocents.⁵ Childhood in *Ender’s Game* is stripped of sentimentality: it is violent, cruel, and deeply sexualized. While the depiction is not strictly Freudian, it owes a considerable debt to Freud in that Card’s children are polymorphously libidinal creatures, not Victorian innocents waiting to have sexuality descend upon them at the onset of puberty. Freud claimed that his discovery of the libidinous child made psychoanalysis itself possible.⁶ Card’s children, while hardly Freudian case studies, are likewise impossible without a concept of childhood that acknowledges pre-pubescent desire. Moreover, this steadfast refusal to sentimentalize the child may well represent one of the primary factors in the novel’s popularity. *Ender’s Game* takes kids’ lives seriously, and part of this seriousness lies in its treatment of their desires. As Card puts it in his Introduction to the 1991 “Author’s Definitive Edition” of the novel, “never in my entire childhood did I feel like a child.... I never felt that my emotions or desires were somehow less real than adult emotions and desires” (xx). The child characters of *Ender’s Game* are, to court paradox, not childlike. They are libidinal animals in a highly structured homosocial environment. Reading the novel for sexuality, then, is not merely a matter of discovering (or imposing) some wink-wink/nudge-nudge allegory on the text, but rather eliciting the patterns of desire that emanate from its characters as sexual agents.

Perhaps the best illustration of this idea is the character “Rose the Nose” and his gigantic, computer-assisted phallus. Rose is the commander of Rat Army, one of several units to which Ender is transferred during the military’s systematic program designed to torture him psychologically into greatness. Rose greets Ender with the requisite series of insults that form the lingua franca between these boys and then forbids him to use his computer desk. Throughout this introduction Rose is pictured as having “programmed his desk to display and animate a bigger-than-lifesize picture of male genitals, which waggled back and forth as Rose held the desk on his naked lap” (101). On the one hand, this is simple childishness, and Ender reacts to it as such: “How does a boy who spends his time like this win battles?” (101), he thinks to himself. But on the other hand, this scene makes more literal the homosocial relations through which the Battle School operates. Rose uses his desk both to create and to display his masculine power while denying Ender the use of his own tool. Rose’s phallic display reinforces the constant sexualized insults and bawdy jokes that serve to establish an order of dominance in the school. True to most unsentimentalized depictions of educational establishments, Card’s Battle School is a nasty, competitive, and alienating institution mediated through a discourse centering on images of the phallus and the anus.

Phallus and anus never come together in any literal way in Ender’s experience; rather, disguised references to them are modes of communication among the boys. Anal imagery especially forms a communicative trope, a stock image around which the boys weave variations on a theme. None of their expressions are overtly homosexual, but they certainly flirt with this possibility. Ender places himself, for instance, in his first grouping by manipulating the

computer desk the children use into sending out anonymous messages about his enemy Bernard's posterior. "COVER YOUR BUTT. BERNARD IS WATCHING," reads a message sent out over the name of God (50). Following a physical assault in the shower (not overtly sexual) by one of Bernard's cronies, Ender retaliates by sending out the message "I LOVE YOUR BUTT. LET ME KISS IT" over the name of Bernard (51). Naturally, this infuriates Bernard, who sees it as a challenge to his dominance in the launch group. And so it proves to be, as we are told that "Bernard's attempt to be ruler of the room was broken" (52). Ender (the name itself now seems less innocent) never directly accuses Bernard of homosexuality, but he implicitly grasps that the way to undercut Bernard's masculine authority is to accuse him of a taste for (tacitly male) ass. This is less a serious accusation than a successful attempt to use the computer desk as a form of phallic power to question Bernard's mastery over his own desk and thus his status as a potential leader. Ender knows how to control not only his own desk but all the other students' as well; if Bernard loses masculine status by this loss of control, Ender, at least in his own mind, gains at the boy's expense. But the implicit homophobia of the anonymous message testifies that this intensely homosocial environment demands constant policing through periodic accusations of homosexuality. The quickest way to undercut an enemy is to accuse him of homosexual desire while demonstrating his lack of power over his own computer desk. Rose the Nose and his electronic phallus literally display the meaning of this trope.

This violent homophobia coexists, sometimes peacefully and sometimes not, with scenes of great homoerotic tenderness.⁷ Ender's first friend at the Battle School, Alai, sends him off on his first assignment with a kiss (69). Alai also whispers "Salaam," which Ender correctly guesses to be evidence of "a suppressed religion" (69): "Ender guessed that the kiss and the word were somehow forbidden" (69). Most directly, this exchange constitutes a hint about the points of difference between the near-future world of *Ender's Game* and the world of its writing: in the story, Islam has become an underground religion. But there is another sense of the forbidden here: loving friendship between boys, relationships built on something other than competition and demonstrations of power, cannot be supported by the Battle School. A same-sex kiss, whether as a sign of friendship, a sign of sexual attraction, or a sign of peace (the meaning on which Alai eventually settles, only to reject it [171]), cannot be tolerated.

Ender not only experiences an intense homosocial bonding, he is also the recipient of one. Bean, the recruit whom Ender sees as a surrogate of his younger self, is heartbroken when Ender is transferred out of Battle School and into Command School years before his scheduled graduation. In a poignant few paragraphs, Card describes Bean's reaction to Ender's transfer. Significantly, Card has Ender receive the news just before lights out, so immediately after discovering his loss, Bean must undress in the dark and crawl into bed. He begins to sob, then turns to self-inflicted pain to control his agony. He finally falls asleep with his fingers in front of his mouth, "as if Bean couldn't decide whether to bite his nails or suck on his fingertips" (224) The image, that of a denied oral pleasure turned into a physical pain in order to counteract a psychological loss, neatly

parallels Bean's thought process. As he struggles with his bereavement, Bean first "tried to put a name on the feeling that put a lump in his throat and made him sob silently" (224); in the next paragraph he thinks (or perhaps the narrator thinks for him) that "once he named the feeling, he could control it" (224). This is ambiguous on two levels. First, it is unclear whether Bean has in fact named the feeling and so is able to sleep, as he does within the next few lines; or whether naming the feeling remains something that Bean defers to some future time, and sleep merely intervenes as a result of his physical and emotional exhaustion. The sentence can sustain either reading, and the first ambiguity is maintained by the second: if he does name the feeling, what is its name? Love, most obviously, but that of course opens up at least as many emotional possibilities as it delimits. And if love is the missing word here, why is it a love that dare not speak its name?⁸

The figure in whom both repressed homosexual desire and homophobic violence eventually converge is Bonzo Madrid, Ender's first commander. Upon first meeting Bonzo, portrayed as something of a Spanish aristocrat, Ender notes his physical attractiveness: "a boy stood there, tall and slender, with beautiful black eyes and slender hips that hinted at refinement. I would follow such beauty anywhere, said something inside Ender" (76). In the space of a few pages, however, Bonzo has lost a power struggle to the younger and smaller Ender, causing Bonzo to utter the ambiguous threat, "I'll have your ass someday" (88). And though Bonzo does not, in fact, get Ender's end, it isn't for lack of trying: just before Ender is transferred out of Battle School (the move that causes Bean such psychological trauma), Bonzo and a few of his goons attempt to attack Ender while he is naked in the shower (207-13). Ender appeals to Bonzo's sense of honor and gains a fair fight, which eventually results in Bonzo also stripping and confronting Ender in naked and wet one-on-one combat. Ender wins the fight by literally steaming things up: he pours hot water out of all the showers, using the steam and the soap on his body to grease himself and become impossible to grasp. He then attacks Bonzo and ends the battle by delivering a "hard and sure" (211) kick to his groin. Though Ender will not know until much later, he in fact kills Bonzo in the shower.

I have stressed the erotic undertones of the fight scene to make a point: violence and the specter of gay sex accompany one another throughout this encounter.⁹ In fact, were the characters in the novel a trifle older or the tone of the work a bit darker, readers might well suspect at the beginning of this scene, with its crew of older boys descending on a younger naked male in the shower, that they are about to witness not a beat-down but a gang rape. The subtext of incarceration is never far away in *Ender's Game*: after all, the story concerns a homosocial group of young men institutionalized by the state in a situation that straddles the border between the voluntary and the compulsory. These characters are borstal boys as much as they are soldiers. Prison showers are where impromptu power struggles and revenge acts take place in popular understandings of jail culture, and such acts have both a violent and a sexual component. Ender has just dropped the soap, and Bonzo takes his opportunity to demonstrate who is the man in this relationship. Or so he thinks before Ender delivers a symbolic castration and literal death. Then, having dispatched his enemy, Ender cries over

him (213). Card first introduces sexual tension and then diffuses it into violence, leaving the reader with the question of whether Bonzo needed to be killed for attacking the protagonist or for implicitly threatening to rape him. Not that I think any of the characters in Card's fictive Battle School anticipate a specifically sexual violence; although they are clearly not innocent cherubs, they also do not think along active, post-pubescent sexual lines. It is the reader who is left feeling disturbed over the sexual violence he or she senses lurking beneath the surface of the text. The *mise-en-scène* of the shower fight connotes rape, even if the characters never name it. Homosexuality is thus the great repressed in *Ender's Game*.

As I'll point out momentarily, the overt sexual themes of Card's Enderverse (to use the name for the series within fan culture) are largely focused on reproduction and only indirectly on erotic desire and expression. But I first want to investigate what may represent the biggest nudge and wink in the novel, the battleroom itself. Most activity in the Battle School revolves around the battleroom: children are organized into teams to compete in it, and commanders are judged by their performance and by the statistics generated there. Battle is a combination sport and war simulation, taking place in zero gravity, in which participants armed with non-lethal pistols shoot their opponents in order to freeze them in place. Both armies enter the battleroom through a corridor; the object of the game is to get at least five of your own men to the opposing army's doorway so that four of them can open the door and the one remaining can float through it into the corridor (90). Whether or not a reader chooses to assume authorial intention, it doesn't take an unusually perverse reader to detect a sexual underpinning: the armies struggle until the stronger team penetrates the opponent's corridor. Though not necessarily a sodomitic image, it bears repeating that (with the sole exception of Petra) these mock battles take place between all-male armies.

The erotics of the battleroom work further to undermine the idea that the students of Card's Battle School are free of libido. The battleroom, after all, is the primary focus of the school and the novel: classes are mentioned, but only battles are given play-by-play description. The battleroom is, at least in the eyes of the officers who run the School, "status, identity, purpose, name; all that makes these children who they are comes out of this game" (98). The battleroom is the playing field of Eton on which the war against the buggers will be won.¹⁰ Ender excels in the game: he revolutionizes both strategy and tactics and establishes himself as a great commander. His tactical innovation lies in using the freezing qualities of the pistol on himself and his teammates, freezing their legs to act as shields. In this way, Ender is able to use the pistol in a practical yet symbolic fashion: "holding his pistol at his crotch, he was firing between his legs" (105), freezing his enemies and then penetrating their corridors. The war against the buggers will be won through a symbolic form of buggery.

Though the battleroom represents the most extreme form of symbolic homosexuality in the novel, it is not the only one. After moving to Command School (located on a significantly named asteroid, Eros), Ender comes under the tutelage of the famous Mazer Rackham, the only human being to defeat a bugger

invasion. Mazer explains the pedagogical structure of the Command School in terms that replicate ancient Greek conceptions of pederasty: "In this school, it has always been the practice for a young student to be chosen by an older student. The two become companions, and the older boy teaches the younger one everything he knows" (264). Just previous to this, Mazer has defeated Ender in hand-to-hand combat by surprising Ender from behind as he bends over to pick up his computer desk: "he felt a hand jab roughly between his thighs and another hand grab his hair" (262). As with the attack by Bonzo, Mazer's assault is a symbolic, perhaps even a sublimated, rape, a violent attack narrated in sexually suggestive terms. After being forced to submit to Mazer, Ender will become his pupil and constant companion. But as Mazer is at pains to point out, he can teach Ender only because he has fought the buggers and won. In learning from Mazer, then, Ender will really be learning from the buggers.

Ender's formative experience is thus fraught with all the repressed and potentially violent sexuality of an Edwardian public-school novel. Yet there is more to a reading of sexuality here than a mere tracing of Ender's personal development. The fictive world in which Card houses Ender differs from our own primarily in terms of population and therefore sexuality. Ender's Earth is overpopulated, and a strong worldwide government enforces strict birth control. Ender himself is a "Third," an anomalous third child allowed to his parents by a special dispensation from the government only because of good genetic potential. Being a Third is no great mark of distinction in Ender's world: indeed, Ender is a pariah from birth because of it. Furthermore, Ender's parents are both apostate members of churches known for their opposition to birth control: his father is a former Roman Catholic and his mother a former Mormon (22). We are spared the details of how precisely the government has achieved it, but they have clearly established a reliable but not irreversible form of birth control, embraced a policy of zero population growth, and manipulated social ideology to the extent that most people consider having more than two children inherently criminal and disgusting. Though detail is lacking, we get no hint of artificial births or *Brave New World*-style decanting. Ender still comes from a nuclear heterosexual family. So long as humanity remains bound to earth, furthermore, the restrictions on heterosexual reproduction must remain intact. And what keeps humanity stuck on earth, despite immense technological leaps in interstellar travel, is the threat of the buggers.

Put simply, the buggers represent a limitation to heterosexual procreative freedom. So long as the buggers prevent humanity from colonizing other planets, humanity will be stuck with small families and embarrassed about its third children. Only when the threat of buggery has been removed can untrammelled heteronormativity return to the cosmos. The buggers are, to belabor the obvious, not heterosexual in the human sense. They reproduce much like ants or bees: one fertile queen populates an entire hive, while the majority of her children are infertile female workers and warriors. This is a war between different reproduction styles, and human heterosexuality emerges triumphant. By extrapolation, the elimination of the buggers will mean the return of untrammelled fecundity and the religions that celebrate it; we see this in *Speaker for the Dead*,

where a group of Portuguese Roman Catholics colonizes a new planet. "Normal" heterosexual procreation will be the driving force behind colonization, and colonization will be dependent upon Ender's triumph over the buggers and their inhuman fertility. Initially, Ender's military victory is a cause for celebration: his destruction of the home world of the buggers and its implicit consequences for human expansion are literally met with cheers and tears of joy. Having been tricked into destroying the buggers as a race because he had been told the battle was just another war game, Ender now becomes the savior of humanity and the key to its renewed expansion across the galaxies. He literally makes the universe safe for normative, procreative heterosexuality.

Ender's Game, then, would seem to be a text that evokes queer sexuality for the sake of rejecting it. It conjures images of homosexual attraction between pre-pubescent boys and, à la Freud, questions the essential innocence of the child prior to physical maturation. The novel initially rejects the homosexuality it suggests by tying it to a subtly sexualized violence. Then it uses Ender as the means to restore fertile heterosexuality and normative reproduction to its rightful place as the singular norm of the universe. It writes homosexuality, in other words, only to erase it and reinscribe heteronormativity as the unquestioned Good. Viewed in this way, it is an exercise in heterosexist triumphalism.

Such a reading, however, remains incomplete. *Ender's Game* contains two surprise endings. First and most dramatically, Ender thinks that his last battle is a game, and ironically he is trying to lose it when he wins. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Ender does not regard his victory as an unmitigated good. While the adults around him celebrate, Ender immediately experiences profound remorse. He sees what he has done as a crime; eventually, the rest of humanity catches up with him, and throughout *Speaker for the Dead* Ender's name is synonymous with evil: he is Ender the Xenocide. But Ender also becomes the Speaker for the Dead and seeks to atone for his crime. Additionally, he discovers the last remaining bugger larva and guards it carefully until he can find a suitable place to allow it to mature and restart the bugger race. Ender in this way becomes the reproductive savior of two races: he allows humanity to colonize new worlds and repeal the population control laws, and he fosters the remaining bugger queen until she can begin producing eggs and repopulating new planets. Ender is as much a sponsor of non-normative reproduction as of heteronormativity. As Speaker for the Dead, he carries the narrative burden of lost life as well, becoming a kind of space opera AIDS quilt.¹¹

Ender's Game is thus not as homophobic as it might initially appear, which makes it even more incompatible with Card's anti-homosexual nonfiction writing. But before moving on to an investigation of how the fiction and nonfiction interact, I want to take up the related question of how *Ender's Game* addresses the issue of scapegoating. Throughout the novel the buggers are presented as a convenient enemy, a generic bogeyman that can easily be substituted for any opponent, real or imagined. In the first chapter, Stilson, the class bully, taunts Ender by calling him a "bugger-lover" (6). In the second chapter Ender's brother Peter forces him to wear a bugger mask while they play a violent game of astronauts and buggers in which the astronauts always win. When he first arrives

at Battle School, an older boy asks Ender if he is the bugger of his group, meaning the pariah, the “kid that nobody takes to right away” (42). “Bugger” as an epithet is repeated throughout the novel; it is clear that it has become a general curse word, a term of abuse and scorn, an all-purpose putdown—the Enderverse’s equivalent of “fag.”

This general fear and loathing is politicized by the introduction, in the middle of the novel, of a conspiracy theory that foreshadows the story’s end, when we discover, after their all but complete destruction, that the buggers were never mindlessly aggressive, did not seek the destruction of humanity, and were not the drooling incarnations of evil that humanity has portrayed them as being. Dink, a member of Rose the Nose’s army, tells Ender that the buggers are not going to invade again. The “bugger menace” is a propaganda ploy of the powers that be in order to frighten the populace, “because as long as people are afraid of the buggers, the I.F. can stay in power, certain countries can keep their hegemony” (110). The enemy is necessary for social control, for the maintenance of things as they are. The buggers are a political scapegoat that allows the politically advantaged to retain power. Though the reader never discovers to what extent the political/military authorities knew about the buggers’ non-aggression, nowhere in the novel is this idea of the buggers as scapegoats contradicted. And whether the government knew it or not, we do discover that the “bugger menace,” as such, was a useful political myth.¹²

Moreover, as the adult officers patiently explain following Ender’s triumph/crime, it is Ender’s childlike empathy that has enabled him to defeat the buggers: “we had to have a commander with so much empathy that he would think like the buggers, ... but someone with that much compassion could never be the killer we needed” (298). Hence the necessity of tricking Ender with the game that turns out to be real. Ender can defeat the buggers because he feels for them; more than this, he loves them. Just before heading off to Eros and Command School, Ender makes this confession to his sister: “In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him” (238). Ender can defeat the buggers because he is precisely what Stilson the bully accused him of being: a bugger-lover. Rather than seeing the buggers as scapegoats, Ender sees them as fellow sentient beings.

The novel clearly understands that the easiest way to form a community is to make a public spectacle out of what must be excluded. Hatred for that which is abjected from the body politic is the clearest path to unity within the group and security for its leaders. Ender’s role as Speaker for the Dead potentially undermines this process of community formation by exclusion. By loving the enemy, even after s/he has supposedly been annihilated, Ender points out the deep connection that remains between the scapegoat and the community it is instrumental in forming. In effect, he is following the doctrine of his teacher and enemy, Mazer Rackham, who tells him “There is no teacher but the enemy.... Only the enemy shows you where you are weak. Only the enemy tells you where he is strong” (262-63). If the enemy tells you things about yourself that you can discover in no other way, is your only true teacher, and (for Ender at least) is best loved at the moment s/he is defeated, then the enemy is a lover. The rescued

queen, speaking telepathically to Ender, tells him that “we ask only this: that you remember us, not as enemies, but as tragic sisters.... If we had kissed, it would have been the miracle to make us human in each other’s eyes. Instead we killed each other” (322).

To put this all together, what I am offering is a reading of *Ender’s Game* that pays close attention to its deep homoerotic undertones. It is a story of libidinal children loving and hating each other in a competitive and potentially violent environment. It offers the scapegoating of the outcast as the easiest way to community, but it ultimately rejects such tactics in favor of a more subtle conception that stresses the dependence of the community on what it excludes. I do not think it too great a leap to consider the text as potentially, though latently, perhaps even allegorically, anti-homophobic.

It is intriguing to move from *Ender’s Game* to Card’s overtly anti-homosexual nonfiction, notably his 1990 article “The Hypocrites of Homosexuality” (first published in *Sunstone Magazine*, a publication for Mormons) and 2004’s “Homosexual ‘Marriage’ and Civilization,” a reaction to the Massachusetts Supreme Court’s decision in favor of legal homosexual marriages (first published in *The Rhinoceros Times*, a North Carolina weekly newspaper). In both articles Card rejects social toleration of homosexuality on the basis of the putative damage it does to civil community. “The Hypocrites of Homosexuality” is written for a Mormon readership (Card is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), and its primary concern lies in the continued exclusion of active homosexuals from LDS membership. However, he moves effortlessly from pronouncements about LDS doctrine to application to US civil society: the danger of public tolerance for homosexuality, he argues,

applies also to the polity, the citizens at large. Laws against homosexual behavior should remain on the books, not to be indiscriminately enforced against anyone who happens to be caught violating them, but to be used when necessary to send a clear message that those who flagrantly violate society’s regulation of sexual behavior cannot be permitted to remain as acceptable, equal citizens within that society. (par 12)

Clearly this is an argument for closeting: the community must be seen to have the power to police its constituents’ lives and to deny those who opt out from participating as full and equal partners. Being seen to have that power is more important than actually wielding it, though it is clear that Card expects some people to serve time for their sexual choices. Civil society must, in Card’s view, maintain a strict control of homosexuality, forcing gay people to act “discreetly, so as not to shake the confidence of the community in the polity’s ability to provide the rules for safe, stable, dependable marriage and family relationships” (par. 13). Homosexuals can exist, but they must remain closeted. Not too closeted, perhaps—after all, one or two must occasionally be jailed to demonstrate the power of the state to protect heteronormativity. They must be hidden, but not quite invisible.

Immediately following the preceding quotation, Card generalizes about community formation:

Those who would be members of a community must sacrifice the satisfaction of some of their individual desires in order to maintain the existence of that community. They must, in other words, obey the rules that define what that community is. Those who are not willing or able to obey the rules should honestly admit the fact and withdraw from membership. (par 14)

Given the context of the quotation, it is difficult not to conclude that the community in question is the US rather than the LDS church. Card has been writing about “the polity” for the previous two paragraphs so that one wonders what precisely “withdrawing from membership” would mean in terms of US society. This is scapegoating: the buggers must be cast out of the community in order to define it; the community will cease to be meaningful if it fails to exclude someone. In terms of the LDS church, Card is clearly stating that failure to exclude practicing homosexuals will result in the destruction of the Mormon faith. But, unlike in *Ender’s Game*, Card does not go on to critique the scapegoating process, showing how the community is not merely defined by exclusion, but thrives upon it. Without the fictional buggers, the world hegemony of *Ender’s Game* cannot function. Without the real buggers, straight hegemony cannot function.

“Homosexual ‘Marriage’ and Civilization” is written for a secular newspaper and makes no appeal to the sanctity of any church. Rather, its argument is built on an essentialist notion of heterosexual marriage’s role in controlling reproductive strategies. According to this version of pop evolutionary psychology, marriage functions as a control to the natural tendency of human males to copulate with multiple partners. Interestingly, Card’s defense of this view often reads like a gloss on Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, for repression is the name of the game: “Civilization depends on people deliberately choosing *not* to do many things that feel good at the time, in order to accomplish more important, larger purposes” (par. 41; emphasis in original). One of these deferred pleasures, apparently, is homosexuality—which, as in his LDS article, is to be rushed back into the closet. Card even goes so far as to claim that homosexuals are not discriminated against in the US legal system because they can marry; they just have to marry someone of the opposite sex: “To get these civil rights, all homosexuals have to do is find someone of the opposite sex willing to join them in marriage” (par. 16). If we take Card at his word, he would seem greatly to prefer that homosexuals pretend heterosexuality, even to the point of reproducing children (par. 15). A vague Freudianism lurks also in his suggestion that homosexuality is a kind of phase that many people are able to grow out of (par. 87). But most centrally, Card’s argument against homosexuality in this article turns from religious to biological objections, creating a strange blend of James Dobson and Richard Dawkins.

To digress slightly, I think it is worthwhile to note that this entire article consists of begging the question. Card defines marriage as the union of a man and a woman for the biologically sanctioned purpose of procreation. This is “the fundamental meaning that marriage has always had, everywhere, until this generation” (par. 9). Never mind that throughout human history, various cultures

have organized procreation and primary kin relationships along different lines. Never mind that one need go no further than the Bible or the early history of the LDS church for examples. Card wants to argue for the biological necessity of a kinship structure that he assumes at the beginning of his argument. As an sf writer, one might expect Card to be open to alternative social organizations; after all, both the buggers and the piggies (from the latter three Ender novels) have radically different reproduction schemes from the human norm. Interestingly, soon after the publication of "The Hypocrites of Homosexuality," Card published the first novel of his Homecoming series, *The Memory of Earth* (1992), an sf retelling of the early chapters of the First Book of Nephi (from *The Book of Mormon*) in which Old-Testament-era Hebrew kinship is radically revised into a series of legally binding but temporary marriages that produce complex family structures of half-siblings and where two-parent nuclear households are unknown. In Card's nonfiction, by contrast, modern Western practice is presented as the perfect realization of universal biological imperatives.

In Card's view, the problem with homosexuality is its exclusion from what he calls "the reproductive cycle of life" ("Homosexual 'Marriage,'" par. 96). A society's failure to provide a clear social example of what a real family looks like will make it less likely that young people will commit themselves to sexual reproduction. Card mentions the psychological necessity of separate male and female role models for children, and (in another quasi-Freudian moment) we are told that adults tend to marry people "just like" their opposite sex parent (par. 25). But the importance of heteronormativity remains less in psychology than in biology. Neither artificial insemination nor adoption is so much as mentioned. Being non-reproductive, homosexual marriage is thus parodic: it imitates the form of actual marriage without reaching to the reproductive core of it.

Just as in *Ender's Game*, in short, the buggers must be pushed back into the closet, symbolically if not literally eliminated. Yet in the novel this elimination is seen as a crime. *Ender's Game* does take up the question of genetic destiny, but it does not content itself with an ethics of pure rejection. When Mazer Rackham explains to Ender how the bugger hive mentality works (and, incidentally, also explains that Eros is a place built by buggers), he claims that "murder's no big deal to them. Only queen-killing, really, is murder, because only queen-killing closes off a genetic path" (270). As in Card's nonfiction, genetic potential is here synonymous with real life. The real definition of murder is not so much the destruction of sentient life as the destruction of procreative potential. With the exception of queens, killing buggers (either non-procreative aliens or non-procreative humans) is no big deal.

Again, the Ender novels do not blindly accept this ideology. Ender himself never physically procreates throughout the more than 1600 pages of the ENDER QUARTET. But he does become the adoptive father of a human family and, in the final book, asexually creates two human bodies based on his memories of his brother and sister. He eventually comes to acknowledge these creatures as children of his mind—hence the title of the final volume. Ender remains outside the cycle of life, perhaps adding another level to the meanings of his name: he is a genetic dead end. Yet he is also the conscience of humanity, the Speaker for the

Dead who forces humankind to confront and acknowledge the mistakes of its past and learn from them. And he, as well as the alien species he encounters and mediates for, finds alternative, non-sexual ways to reproduce. The point is driven home at the culmination of the fourth novel: "And though there was no child with Ender's name as father on its birth certificate, he had become a father here" (*Children* 353).

A fascination with genetic potential haunts the entire quartet. In *Speaker for the Dead*, for instance, Ender congratulates his sister on her marriage by exclaiming "The Wiggin genes were crying out for continuation" (77). The narrative voice in *Xenocide* makes such blanket statements as "evolution encourages only creatures who are serious about protecting their own genes" (107), while Valentine is given a speech that closely parallels Card's theories of male and female reproductive strategies (417-19). And *Children of the Mind* presents some reductive views of marriage that see it merely as a conduit for procreation: Valentine asserts that "children are more to a woman than any man can be.... We stay with our men for the children's sake" (193). Ender's wife, Novinha, is even more blunt: "You keep the marriage alive for your children, and then when they're grown up you stay married for everybody else's children, so they grow up in a world where marriages are permanent" (231-32). This might seem like cynicism, but it is the same argument that Card will use in "Homosexual 'Marriage' and Civilization": marriage is for procreation and for the enforcement of heteronormativity through example.¹³ And yet, through all of this, Ender himself remains as a counter-argument, the childless father of children of the mind, the non-procreative creator. His children, like those of the beloved young man of Shakespeare's sonnets, are "nurs'd, deliver'd from [his] brain"—precisely the process that Oscar Wilde made the cornerstone of his theory of homosexual creativity.¹⁴

Perhaps the best encapsulation of this struggle occurs in *Xenocide*, when Ender and Valentine visit the bugger queen as she is busy repopulating her species. It is a scene of horror and disgust as the characters confront the violence and utter alienness of bugger sex. Ender articulates his emotional ambivalence in a way that resonates beyond the confines of the fictive world with its unreal buggers, perhaps into our world with its real ones: "I love her and I fear her. Because I'm not sure whether I should help her or try to destroy her" (175). Meanwhile, Valentine concludes that, despite her fear and distaste, "I must simply do my best to overcome the prejudices of my childhood" (176). In the novels, Ender does help the queen and assists in the restoration of the buggers as a species; they in turn help to rescue the humans on Lusitania from attack by fellow humans. Ender and Valentine do overcome the prejudices of their shared childhood, when buggers were defined as a monstrous enemy for the convenience of the ruling class and were all but destroyed through a dishonest manipulation of Ender's considerable skills and sincere beliefs.

Card's fiction provides a more nuanced and tolerant response to homosexuality than his more direct social commentary. Where his nonfiction revels in rejection and scapegoating, his sf takes a further step toward questioning the cost of rejecting the sexual/reproductive Other and calling attention to the

political dishonesty involved in using exclusion as a basis for community formation. And though it is easy and perhaps worthwhile to bemoan what strikes many as a reactionary stance from a celebrated imaginative writer, I think it is also useful to consider the opposite angle: sf allows people, both writers and readers, to say things they would never articulate without the mask of genre. It may require some interpretative work to read the mask, for which the reader must be prepared to take responsibility, but the things discovered are often far more remarkable than what is said *in propria persona*. This is, I think, in part at least what the genre of sf is for.

NOTES

1. Like many works of far-future sf, *Songmaster* replicates aspects of the time of its writing: the attitudes toward homosexuality voiced by the majority of the characters (i.e., those who do not know Josif well) are reflections of early Reagan-era intolerance.

2. The original seed for the first novel was a short story entitled "Ender's Game" that appeared in the August 1977 issue of *Analog* magazine.

3. Card was certainly aware of the implications of the name, since he uses the term as a verb in the pre-Ender *Songmaster* (278) and again in *Wyrms* (148). In *Ender's Shadow*, the Buggers (now capitalized) are recast as the Formics because, as a minor character claims, "Buggers is a bad word in English" (33). This does not prevent most of the characters from referring to the aliens as "Buggers" throughout the novel.

4. As Alexander Doty puts it, "the queerness of most mass-culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception" (xi).

5. Spinrad claims that Card's children are "desexualized adolescents" (24), while Steffen Hantke writes that the children are "un-gendered": "before the onset of puberty, *Ender's Game* suggests, there is no sexuality, no sexual desire, that marks the body as gendered" (503). Hantke claims that this is due to "the cultural imperative that children are non-sexual" (503), a cultural imperative that I believe Card's novel, if not Card himself, questions. Card's featuring of pre-pubescent soldiers is also what separates *Ender's Game* from the tradition of homoerotic bonding in military sf, most famously exemplified by Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959).

6. See Freud's *Three Essays*, especially the opening of the second essay, "Infantile Sexuality": "One feature of the popular view of the sexual instinct is that it is absent in childhood and only awakens in the period of life described as puberty. This, however, is not merely a simple error but one that has grave consequences, for it is mainly to this idea that we owe our present ignorance of the fundamental conditions of sexual life" (39).

7. The early relationship of the young woman Qing-jao and her "secret maid" Wangmu is portrayed in *Xenocide* with tenderness and an undertone of hidden desire. Like most of the non-familial same-sex relationships in the ENDER novels, however, this one soon turns sour. I am not suggesting that these fictional characters "really are" lesbians, but rather that their relationship, based as it is on a radical discontinuity between its public and private facets, replicates a homosexual relationship in a homophobic society.

8. When rewritten for *Ender's Shadow*, this scene loses much of its erotic charge and, to my mind at least, much of its effect as well. The darkness and Bean's nakedness are missing. The feeling, however, remains noticeably mentioned but unnamed: "He understood what the feeling was.... Now that he knew what the feeling was, he could control it" (357).

9. Bonin makes a similar point in her article but focuses only on overtly gay characters.

10. In its use of the tropes of the schoolboy novel, *Ender's Game* presages the success of the Harry Potter novels.

11. The Descolada virus, a central element in the last three ENDER novels, does not strictly parallel HIV, but it is possibly relevant that Card uses a virus as an important plot device during the mid-1980s, as public awareness of the AIDS crisis gradually increased.

12. This conspiracy theory is not mentioned in Card's re-writing of the story in *Ender's Shadow*.

13. An interesting comparison here is with the argument in Leslie Fiedler's celebrated *Love and Death in the American Novel* (see especially Chapter 11, 337-90). Fiedler identifies as a central thread in American literature the evocation of homoerotic male bonds as an attempted escape from the traps of maturity symbolized in the heterosexual marriage plot inherited from Europe. Given the vision of marriage as the social enforcement of heterosexuality that we find in both Card's fiction and nonfiction, Fiedler's thesis seems relevant. Card reinscribes it, without alternatives in his nonfiction but with alternatives in his sf.

14. See Wilde's story/literary essay "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," especially the expanded version that remained unpublished during Wilde's lifetime. The Shakespeare quotation is from Sonnet 77.

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a reading of Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel *Ender's Game* in terms of its treatment of homosexuality. After reviewing Card's handling of the topic in his earlier works of sf, where it was presented more explicitly, the essay shows how *Ender's Game* continues to engage the issue in disguised ways: through its naming of the alien enemy "buggers" to its anti-sentimental construction of childhood eroticism to the subtly sexualized violence to which protagonist Ender Wiggin is subjected. Finally, it compares the higher tolerance for sexual difference in Card's sf with his more condemnatory statements as a commentator on contemporary cultural/sexual politics.

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