PTina Kong

Prof. Christine Kim

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Proximities from Whiteness:

Negotiating White Privilege and Racialized Citizenship in Velma Demerson's *Incorrigible*

Velma Demerson's story of incarceration, loss of citizenship, and social death is a remarkable one. Convicted of being "incorrigible" under Ontario's Female Refuges Act (FRA) in 1939 due to her relationship with Harry Yip, a Chinese national, a pregnant eighteen-year old Demerson was incarcerated at the Andrew Mercer Reformatory for Women and unknowingly experimented upon.

Later on, the Ontario Association Children's Aid Society, which targeted women living out of wedlock, confiscated her son Harry Junior, with mother and son finally becoming estranged when he turned twelve (Demerson 158). In addition to this string of injustices, Demerson also lost her Canadian citizenship through her marriagera 2 24 0 0 0(s) -0.2 () 0.geheCitize(s) -0.2 (hi) 0.2 po Acid women tssmehe

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"an exemplary dedication to the struggle for the rights of minorities and immigrants and for working to eliminate racism" (Friends of Velma).

Demerson's autobiography *Incorrigible* (2004) was published two years after she received a written apology from Attorney General David Young (165). Considering the struggle towards redress that took place outside of the text, it makes sense to read *Incorrigible* as a firsthand account of a "white" body that experiences the full brunt of sexist and racist laws in Canada of the mid-twentieth century, specifically the FRA and the Citizenship Act. The narrative in *Incorrigible* might appear to begin the moment Demerson meets and falls in love with Yip, and then to progress via the wrongful persecutions and prejudice directed towards the young couple and later family after the birth of Harry Junior.

However, in addition to showing hostile social reactions towards a mixed-race relationship, *Incorrigible* also complicates this narrative by depicting how Demerson's family members, officers of government institutions, and medical authorities invoke racist logics to rationalize the injustice that they themselves are complicit in. Structurally, *Incorrigible* is a narrative retelling of Demerson's attempts T 5h (y)] TJET **Q**.2.2.2

have the power to *enact* and simultaneously to *deny* the tremendous violence meted upon herself and her son.

I want to begin by naming this racial discourse—this conviction in racial hierarchy that was used to rationalize and legitimize racial oppression—as whiteness. I refer to whiteness as a historical practice of white supremacy where the preference for white skin is institutionalized in legal and social regulations. *Incorrigible* identifies the systemic disenfranchisement of racialized groups of people, such as the Chinese, the Greek, a

"I'm thinking this can't be true. Things like this don't happen in Canada. A person can't be tortured to

points in time (i.e. Italian-Canadians, Greek-Canadians, and Irish-Canadians). Eve Mackey defines whiteness in Canada as an identity that has always "defined [itself] in relation to internal and external "others" (22). Whiteness is thus an "imagined community" in which communities that share certain similarities such as skin colour, history, and language

sought after, as seen from Demerson's mother feeling pride that she did not have "a black baby" (36), as whiteness not only acts as an invisible norm, but also confers structural privilege (Frankenburg). This is also seen in her family's troubled dynamics: her father diligently follows the narrative of a hardworking model minority as he marries her mother to make up for his lack of proficiency in English, goes on to become a successful restauranteur, and later on expresses great anxiety over risking his hard-earned reputation in the Greek community in Toronto because of Demerson's relationship with Yip. Her mother, like Demerson, is ostracized from both the British loyalist community and the Greek community for marrying "beneath the accepted standards" (36). This means that even in childhood, Demerson understands the "powerfully normative ethnocultural pairings" (Coleman 81) of whiteness, specifically its privileges, as we see these narratives informing much of her own family members' decisions.

To further interrogate what it means to be white and to get to the root of why so much joy/relief is expressed when a baby looks white as opposed to black, I turn to Sara Ahmed's "Phenomenology of Whiteness" (2007). To Ahmed, whiteness owns the mechanisms for governing the reachability of some objects, "not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, and habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do "things" with" (154). And the moment a person experiences the mechanisms of race, such as expressing relief that your baby looks white as opposed to black, Ahmed writes that it is a recording of the moment when things do not "line up" to whiteness (159). Whiteness gets invoked as the comparative measure, the figurative yardstick.

of belonging in her father's home. As someone who is considered closer to the white English imaginary

experiments that endangered the health of her foetus because he was half-Asian, and Demerson's mother's passivity indirectly contributed to these cause of events (160). Ranbir Banwait convincingly argues that the lack of civil rights afforded to Harry as a foetus is because "Harry is racialized even before birth [...] the unborn child's ontological status (as half-Asian) calls into question Demerson's access to social legitimacy". Banwait goes on to argue that colonial science combined with the discourse of racial hygiene gave authority figures such as Dr. Guest the ability to disregard the health of a mixed-race foetus, as Demerson was administered sulphanilamide, despite the controversy at the time on the drug's harmful effects (Demerson 355 qtd. in Banwait). This demonstrates how racial coding such as the shade of your skin or blood quantum continues to serve as murderous conditions for admitta0.2 (e) 0.2 (rve)6.tt

measuring, asserting, and reasserting itself" (222) because it requires the often violent suppression of alternate conceptions to civility as a marker of morality and ethics—

shaped by the actions of the State that claims to protect her, would Demerson's relative still think the same way?

which states that natural-born Canadian citizens renounce their citizenship if they become citizens of another country through the laws of that nation (Banwait). This is a fact that Demerson was already aware of (39) as were most people in interracial relationships at the time (Chenier 36). **Incorrigible* highlights the systemic disenfranchisement of racialized groups in a manger that conceptualizes citizenship as an uncanny experience.

In "Citizenship Management: On the Politics of Being Included-Out," (2015) John Erni presents a model of the included-out. This offers a framework for understanding the precarity of citizenship within modern day neoliberal conditions⁵ by moving beyond Hong Kong's immigration and citizenship landscape to examine spaces of precarious citizenship in other parts of the world, namely detention sites, refugee camps, and communities that are expressly built to house foreign workers. Erni goes on to state that the uncanny in being included-out is that "you are always included. You cannot *not* want to be a citizen, and you cannot *not* desire human rights" (emphasis my own). John Erni's uncanny citizenship is useful for thinking through the psychic dimensions of belonging, where questions such as "who gets to belong, who does not?" are discussed. In a similar vein, *Incorrigible* depicts scenes of the home where neighbours worry over who gets to enter and leave the space that they perceive as their own, often resorting to gossip and scandal. In this essay, I hope to emulate his method of using the uncanny to tease out the ideas of belonging and blurred subjectivity that is being explored in *Incorrigible*. Erni invokes the uncanny as a politically and legally induced affect. *Incorrigible* shows how exclusion is a form of

⁴ According to Elise Chenier's "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire" (2014) marriage laws at the time dictated that when women married, they would assume the nationality of their husband. As the Chinese men at the time were acutely aware of their precarious legal status in Canada, it can be assumed that is "common knowledge" for the women as well, that marrying outside of their national will mean a loss of their status as a British subject.

⁵ The model was first published in his essay "Citizenship Management: On the Politics of Being Included-Out" and then further developed in a presentation entitled "The Included-outs" (2015) which was given as part of a lecture series at the University of Melbourne.

haunting as the simultaneous experience of feeling included and excluded is prevalent in the text. This is because realistically, the experience between the two are not so easily defined, as many times the two will blur into each other out.

Freud defines the uncanny as something that is terrifying, yet familiar at the same time (1-2). Freud clarifies this to mean that "an uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (17). To analyse *Incorrigible*'s rendering of citizenship as an uncanny experience, we look at how the full rights of citizenship is revoked for racialized groups such as

Demerson and Harry were not fully accepted into the Chinese-Canadian community in Toronto because they could not speak the language. While, on the one hand, these spaces acknowledge the obvious power of white supremacy, on the other hand, they also work as coalition

doctor in person since Dr. Guest has already passed on. Demerson is also unable to accept the apologies she receives, such as the one from her mother, and the official apology from the Ontario government as she makes it a point to state that the apology neglects to acknowledge the hundreds or thousands of other women who have been wrongfully persecuted under the FRA. *Incorrigible* does the important work of making legible a paper trail of incarceration, eugenic measures, and migration policies aimed at safeguarding white supremacy. When Demerson asks, "What could be worse than a white woman willing to challenge government policy designed to "protect" her?" (51), she points her finger squarely at the absent centre of whiteness, where her and Harry's story bore the brunt of sexist and racist mindsets and legislations, despite the complete lack of protection from the Canadian state and the inability to be recognized as a Canadian citizen.

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