

THE RURAL QUEER EXPERIENCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN
FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

A common view of nonurban areas in the United States posits that rural communities and small towns are hegemonically heterosexual and gender conforming or inherently inhospitable to queer individuals. Queer studies have often reaffirmed these commonly held beliefs, as evident in a text such as David M. Halperin's *How to Be Gay* (2012). With Kath Weston's seminal "Get Thee to a Big City" (1995), a few commentators began to question this urban bias, or what J. Jack Halberstam labels "metronormativity." Literary studies, however, have been late to take the "rural turn." This dissertation thus examines the ways in which American writers from across the century and in diverse geographical areas have resisted queer urbanism through engagements with the urban/rural dichotomy.

Chapter one focuses on Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, detailing Cather's portrayal of queer cosmopolitanism and urbanity in short stories from *The Troll Garden* (1905), and pairing Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) with Anderson's *Poor White* (1920) to show how these writers challenged sexual norms in the modernizing Midwest. Chapter two examines Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) along with Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and *The Grass Harp* (1951), centering on representations of gender and sexual nonconformity in small southern towns. McCullers's *Clock Without Hands* (1961) is paired with James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), highlighting race as a sometimes key determinant in male same-sex relationships in the midcentury South. Chapter three considers Thomas Hal Phillips's *The Bitterweed Path* (1950), *Kangaroo Hollow* (1954), *The Loved and the*

Unloved (1955), and *Red Midnight* (2002), tracing the impact of socioeconomic class on the Mississippi author's groundbreaking representations of same-sex intimacy. Chapter four looks at William Goyen's *The House of Breath* (1950), *Come, the Restorer* (1974), and *Arcadio* (1983), delineating the author's treatment of both queerness and environmental change in his native rural East Texas. The final chapter turns to two Carolina writers from the late twentieth century, Dorothy Allison and Randall Kenan. This chapter considers the interplay of regionalism, rurality, and queer identity—particularly as shaped by class and race—in Allison's short story collection *Trash* (1988) and Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992).

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INTRODUCTION: “PERVERTED ACTS IN PASTURES”

“I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with the nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life.”

Frank O’Hara, “Meditations in an
Emergency”

In his poem “Meditations in an Emergency,” Frank O’Hara draws on many common images of the countryside. His reference to nostalgia and an “innocent past” evokes images of adolescent innocence and an idealized region that modernity has left behind. Despite the delightful possibility of “perverted acts in pastures,” the speaker has “never clogged” himself with these nostalgic pastoral visions. Significantly, the countryside is not devoid of queer sexuality; instead, the speaker alludes to a romanticized view of eroticism in the countryside. Such idylls, however, do not appeal to him. The city’s minimal, controlled greenery is sufficient. How could one enjoy even the smallest piece of nature without the conveniences of the city, without signs of culture, action, and movement? As the quintessential gay “city poet” in twentieth-century America, O’Hara dismisses the country with a flippant, campy cosmopolitanism that has come to exemplify contemporary gay culture. This poem reflects other assumptions about nonurban areas that have been perpetuated in the popular imagination and in queer studies. Nonurban areas, including rural communities and small towns, are the backwards

regions of the United States, places where people must “totally *regret* life.” Queer folks are either unwelcome there or, paradoxically, not there at all. In contrast, cities are thriving cultural and political centers that offer succor for provincial queers. There, one can “enjoy a blade of grass” within the safe confines of an urban gay enclave. This prominent image of gay life in the city is somewhat understandable. Julie Abraham contends that “homosexuals became, over the course of the past two centuries, simultaneously model citizens of the modern city and avatars of the urban; that is, models of the city itself” (xvii-xix). Recognizing the important connections between queerness and the city, however, does not mean that one can dismiss the countryside and the queers who live there. As William J. Spurlin concludes, “the prominence of such cities as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in queer political and cultural achievement is certainly justified, though it is not the case that there is something *inherently* urban, cosmopolitan, and [. . .] coastal” about “queer experience” (191). This qualification about queer urbanity is crucial in challenging limited notions of the city, the country, and queers in either space while also recognizing the importance of urban centers to modern queer life.

Metronormativity, Queer Studies, and the Popular Imagination

The critique of the urban bias in queer studies and in the broader gay community was first articulated by Kath Weston in “Get Thee to a Big City” (1995). In this seminal essay, which has since become a touchstone in rural queer studies, Weston outlines the rural/urban binary that has shaped contemporary gay identity and community. She

focuses primarily on the “Great Gay Migration” of the 1970s and 1980s, when gays and lesbians migrated to the so-called urban gay ghettos, but her argument extends beyond this historical moment. The movement from rural to urban inspired a standard narrative whereby the country was perceived as “a locus of persecution and gay absence” and the city positioned as a “beacon of tolerance and gay community.” This narrative established a paradigm that “locates gay subjects in the city while putting their presence in the countryside under erasure” (262). Weston contends that gays and lesbians shape their sense of self and community through the migration narrative and the rural/urban dichotomy, most often at the expense of nonurban areas and queer people there who are marginalized or overlooked entirely. In *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (1999), John Howard sums up this narrative and its effects succinctly: “Persons of ambiguous sexuality, experiencing inchoate emotions (desire) out there in the hinterlands, move to the city [. . . .] There they find themselves (identity) and each other (community)” (12). The city thereby becomes the logical, inevitable space for queer people to express themselves, act on their desires, and find affirmation.

Other scholars have expanded on this reassessment of the gay migration narrative and its attendant meanings. In a critique of the urban bias in queer studies, J. Jack Halberstam proposed the term “metronormativity.” Halberstam points to the migration pattern as a “spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 36-7). Hence, the city becomes a primary site for the “full expression of the sexual self” as opposed to the closet associated with nonmetropolitan areas (36). Donna Jo Smith makes a similar point in her discussion of southern queer historiography. She

argues that if queer studies have “mapped visibility and outness” onto urban cultures and communities, then “it has mapped the closet onto rural areas, small towns, and small cities.” Further, rural “sites [. . .] are conceptualized as spaces of uniform, hegemonic oppression” and minimal visibility for queer people (381). This perceived metronormative bias also shapes—and limits—how gender and sexuality are perceived more broadly. Katherine Schweighofer points out that “the country-as-closet construct reinforces an urban definition of LGBTQ identity and visibility that may not be consistent with rural LGBTQ lifestyles,” thereby making those lives impossible (223). As Schweighofer observes, the experiences of rural queers are more dynamic than those dominant models of visibility, identity, and community allow. Relying on metronormative understandings of queer identity and expressions thus “effects a number of exclusions” (Howard, *Men Like That* 12) and “occludes the lives of nonurban queers” (Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place* 15). By moving beyond metronorms, queer studies can counter common and misguided assumptions about rural areas to recognize the significant gender and sexual variation in nonurban places.

David M. Halperin’s *How to Be Gay* (2012) illustrates how this urban bias limits understandings of gender and sexuality. His account of the great gay migration is forceful, almost polemical, in its denunciation of rural queers. His claims are also sometimes quite imaginative. For example, Halperin describes rural areas as sites of “delayed access” to sexual fulfillment for gay men, arguing that once a gay man moves to the city, he can satisfy what were before only “erotic daydreams” (229). Why he concludes that the countryside is a sexual void for gay men remains unclear. Halperin centers the migration narrative in his account of the development of gay male identity,

community, culture, and politics. Describing the great gay migration as the “gay equivalent of the Exodus,” Halperin reiterates the standard narrative. Gay people must escape the intense surveillance and isolation of their small town or rural area. Only then do they become part of an affirmative community (434-35). Before they can fully participate in the radical project represented by the gay ghettos, however, the “new arrivals of the provinces” must be “deprogrammed” of their “stupid, heterosexual prejudices” and must “achieve a politicized consciousness and *pride*” (436). He claims that “new recruits to the gay ghettos” in the 1970s and 1980s had to abandon “their old-fashioned, rustic, parochial, unenlightened views [. . .] including their adherence to rigid gender styles, inappropriate romantic fantasies, restrictive sexual morality, political conservatism, prudery and other small-town values” in a process of “[p]sychic decolonization” (436). Halperin reinforces the belief that country life is inherently backward, and hence, “rustic” queers must also be backward, psychologically colonized by regressive values that are seemingly *only* possible in small towns.

While this discussion of metronormativity is ongoing within queer studies, assumptions about nonurban areas and queer folks permeate American society and culture more broadly. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley contend, “Spatial metronormativity is skillfully harnessed in both popular and academic understandings of queer lives beyond the city” (13). The urban biases that have shaped scholarly discussions of gender and sexuality are taken from and/or reaffirm long-held assumptions about nonurban areas. These notions are often paradoxical. Queer people are either absent from nonurban areas, or nonurban areas are inherently unwelcoming to queers (thus implying that queer people *do* exist there). Regarding this second view, an

innate heterosexism represents the supposed backwardness and provincialism of those in rural communities or small towns. Presuming that queer folks do live in (or at least come from) nonurban places, they are assumed, at least in the popular imagination, to be closeted and vulnerable to widespread persecution. The supposition is that queers would logically move to or long for the opportunities and safety associated with urban enclaves. Of course, nonurban areas do not offer the density of a recognizable queer community, but that does not mean nonmetropolitan areas contain no queer folks. Further, while queer people who stay in the country may experience some persecution, such hostility is not limited to the countryside. These beliefs, repeated so often as to seem commonsensical, shape understandings of nonnormative gender and sexuality within and beyond scholarly discourse.

The “Rural Turn” and Literary Studies

Challenging the urban bias in queer studies and broader stereotypes of rural areas, however, is not an endpoint but rather a beginning. Gray, Johnson, and Gilley note that scholars must “move the current debate beyond a sustained critique” of the urban bias and metronormativity, because such “critique does begin to harden into dogmatic orthodoxy.” Further, while emphasizing that such critiques have not fully “played out,” they note that “critiques do eventually need to give rise to something more than endlessly reiterated variations on themselves” (9). Critique must lead to more productive scholarly pursuits. As Johnson eloquently explains in *Just Queer Folks*, scholars must do more than “name the harm that urban exceptionalism does in the context of scholarship on gender

and sexuality”; they must also “draw attention to the [. . .] potential inherent in rural queer life” (9). The rural turn in gender and sexuality studies has led to a broader recognition of and appreciation for the often-overlooked experiences of queer people in rural areas.

Regional studies have been pivotal as antecedents to rural queer studies. Studies of southern queer history have been especially productive. Howard’s *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* studies male same-sex relationships and desire in Mississippi in the first half of the twentieth century. Howard provides insight into the means by which “men like that” perceived and acted on their sexual desires in rural Mississippi in that era. Other examples include *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (1997), edited by Howard, and James T. Sears’s *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (1997). These texts center queer stories in southern history, although their focus is not exclusively the rural South. A more recent example in southern studies is *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (2010) by Brock Thompson, which charts how views of nonnormative gender and sexuality changed in Arkansas by midcentury, particularly in more restrictive ways. Other regions have received scholarly attention. Peter Boag’s *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (2003) focuses primarily on the Portland area but also traces “same-sex affairs” between men in logging camps and the countryside through which transient workers moved at the turn of the century. Beth Bailey’s *Sex in the Heartland* (1999) does not solely deal with nonnormative gender and sexuality, but her discussion of Lawrence, Kansas, and the town’s reaction to changes in sexual norms and behavior at midcentury provides insight into how such changes were

negotiated in a midwestern town. She demonstrates that the trends associated with the sexual revolution and related movements, including the gay liberation movement, were not merely urban phenomena. Together, these studies reveal that these often-overlooked locales outside the city and away from the coasts are as complex as coastal urban spaces; these places were never hegemonically heterosexual and gender conforming or exempted from changes in gender and sexual norms.

Three additional studies underscore how productive the rural turn in queer studies has been. Mary L. Gray's ethnographic study, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility* (2009), examines the ways that queer youth in rural Kentucky use familiarity, personal connections, public spaces, and "media-circulated representations of LGBT identities" to "rework the boundaries of public recognition and local belonging" (4). An important focus for Gray is visibility politics, which requires a critical mass of visibly queer people, substantial community resources, and a mobilization of economic and political power. These tools, however, may not be available in rural areas. In *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (2013), Colin R. Johnson traces changes in gender and sexual norms in rural places in the early twentieth century. His study highlights the national discourses that shaped expressions of nonnormative gender and sexuality. External influences, from sexual health training to mail-order catalogs, increasingly limited how gender and sexuality was understood or perceived in the rural U.S., which before had been, comparatively, more accommodating of difference. In *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010), Scott Herring explicates various manifestations of metronormativity as well as the strategies by which queer artists have resisted the push toward urbanity. He argues that "rurality can be and has been

redeployed to promote a critical form of queer anti-urbanism” and that “the ‘rural’ [. . .] is a premier site of queer critique against compulsory forms of urbanization” (6). This concept of queer anti-urbanism underscores the essential ways that queer artists have challenged metronorms or the process whereby the urban queer experience has become a normative model.

Literary studies, however, seem belated when it comes to the rural turn. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by examining the ways that twentieth-century American writers have written about queer characters or nonnormative gender and sexuality in rural areas. It charts how writers from across the twentieth century and in diverse geographical areas have engaged with the urban/rural dichotomy and often resisted queer urbanism.

The first chapter concerns two midwestern writers, Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson. It begins with three of Cather’s early short stories—“Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament,” “A Wagner Matinée,” and “The Sculptor’s Funeral”—from *The Troll Garden* (1905), which were then revised and republished in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920). In these stories, Cather deals directly with the rural/urban dichotomy and uses it to encode gender and sexual difference. Further, Cather shows how cosmopolitanism and urbanity in aesthetics, culture, or fashion oppose the supposed provincialism or belatedness of the country. This chapter also includes a discussion of Cather’s *A Lost Lady* (1923), particularly how the novel’s center of consciousness, Niel, diverges from gender and sexual norms, and how his movement from the rural to urban and back again invites a sexual interpretation. This novel is paired with Anderson’s *Poor White* (1920) to illustrate the manner in which both writers deal with significant changes in the

midwestern prairie. Like *A Lost Lady*, Anderson's novel also includes a character, Clara, who moves between the country and the city. This analysis explores how that movement shapes her perception of her formerly agrarian hometown, industrialism, and changing gender and sexual norms. *A Lost Lady* and *Poor White* reveal the impact of modernization on gender and sexual norms or expressions in the rural Midwest at the beginning of the century.

The second chapter turns to the small-town South in the mid-twentieth century. It focuses primarily on three major works by Carson McCullers: *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943), and *Clock Without Hands* (1961). Each work is set in a small-town and reveals how queer characters navigate these settings, thereby challenging a monolithic view of rural settings as either lacking or inherently adverse to queer people. Ambivalence characterizes each work, whether it is the ambivalence that nonconforming characters feel about their small towns (as in *The Member of the Wedding*) or a community's ambivalent attitude toward its queer residents (as in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*). McCullers's fiction is paired with Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and *The Grass Harp* (1951). Primarily, I delineate parallels between Capote's novels and *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, including their representations of gender nonconformity (such as the tomboy and the sissy) and the complicated relationship between queer folks and their communities. A discussion of James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) alongside McCullers's final novel highlights race as an important determinant in male same-sex relationships in the rapidly changing South at midcentury.

The third chapter focuses on novels by Thomas Hal Phillips, who has often been overlooked as an important twentieth-century southern writer. The lack of critical attention to Phillips's novels means that his noteworthy depictions of same-sex intimacy and relationships between men have gone mostly unnoticed. Phillips's most well-known novel, *The Bitterweed Path* (1950), is notable for its candid depiction of relationships between men, both homosocial and homoerotic, in the rural South. In this novel, Phillips also emphasizes the impact of socioeconomic class differences on relationships between men, a central concern in his fiction. An analysis of *Kangaroo Hollow* (1954) looks at the ways that Phillips encodes queerness more broadly and the relationship between masculinity and nonnormative sexuality, which is tied to family legacies and conflicts in this novel. While *The Bitterweed Path* provides an affirmative view of same-sex bonds, particularly in relation to class, *The Loved and the Unloved* (1955) offers a less positive outcome, revealing the difficulty that men have in bridging such disparities. In his final novel, *Red Midnight* (2002), however, Phillips returns to the affirmative vision he presented in *The Bitterweed Path*; here, two men can overcome substantial differences to develop a poignant affection, thus reaffirming the potential for genuine intimacy between men.

The fourth chapter looks at three novels by the Texan writer William Goyen. Goyen's first novel, *The House of Breath* (1950), which centers on the Ganchion family, includes a range of gender nonconforming and sexually variant characters living in rural East Texas. This analysis discusses how the narrator, Boy Ganchion, makes sense of these various deviant characters as well as his own gender and sexuality. It also considers the relationship between gender, sexuality, and place as presented in this novel and

developed in subsequent works. While Goyen's *Come, the Restorer* (1974) is not about explicitly queer characters like *The House of Breath* (and later *Arcadio*), it includes Goyen's most developed ecological critique; it also more directly links eroticism to nature, with rather queer results. It complements Goyen's first novel by expanding on the author's environmental concerns. This chapter accounts for Goyen's reaction to changes in his native East Texas, which he introduces in his first novel but develops more completely in *Come, the Restorer*. This chapter concludes with Goyen's final novel, *Arcadio* (1983), which tells the story of an intersexed person, one of the most peculiar characters in Goyen's peculiar region. As this final novel underscores, Goyen does for East Texas what Capote and McCullers do for the small-town South; he reveals the queerness of seemingly unremarkable places.

The dissertation concludes with two more contemporary writers, Dorothy Allison and Randall Kenan. It begins with Allison's short story collection, *Trash* (1988), in which she simultaneously embraces and resists southern identity, drawing on her own southern upbringing. This analysis specifically considers Allison's critical, anti-urban stance, such as her deployment of a regionalized, class-based "trash" identity to counter dominant stereotypes about poor southerners and the backward South. This chapter then moves to Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and stories from *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992). Kenan's work centers on a fictional small town, Tims Creek, a predominantly black community in North Carolina. Like Allison, Kenan deals with the intersection of gay identity and other forms of difference, race in particular. Both draw on rural southern settings, and both underscore the multiplicity of gender and sexual expressions. More broadly, the fiction of Allison and Kenan reflects the rigid definition

of gay identity in the latter part of the twentieth century. Their characters must deal with region, rurality, and sexual identity in ways that differ from depictions by earlier writers.

As this overview indicates, these writers address a diverse range of topics. No single issue can encapsulate the ways that gender and sexuality manifest in rural spaces or how gender, sexuality, and place interconnect. One must account for temporal and spatial differences (across the century, in different regions), the distinctive interests of each writer, the specific features of diverse rural locales (e.g., the prairie versus the Texas wilderness), and the various means by which queer characters navigate their environments. This study, then, avoids imposing another hegemonic view of gender and sexuality on nonurban spaces; instead, it is attuned to the distinct concerns of these writers while underscoring important commonalities between them and their texts. The goal is to challenge metronormative assumptions about nonurban spaces and the place of queer people there. Building on this critique, this study also explores how these writers have brought attention to and often resisted queer urbanism. More importantly, it reveals the ways that these diverse writers have brought attention to overlooked queer ways of life in rural areas and channeled the dynamic interplay between gender, sexuality, and place.

CHAPTER I: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE MODERN MIDWEST

Two of the most significant midwestern writers of the early twentieth century, Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, were preoccupied with the transformation of the region at the time. The changes associated with this period—modernization along with industrialism and urbanization—shaped the divisions between rural and urban areas. In Cather's fiction, this division is crucial, functioning in a structural way, with her fiction often considering the contrasts between the city and the country, the rugged prairie and cosmopolitan urban centers. Further, her fiction considers the impact of departures and returns and the contrasts between provincialism and urbanity, often to the detriment of the areas deemed provincial, whether it is the Midwest or urban areas outside the major cosmopolitan enclaves. The dichotomies of urban/rural and cosmopolitan/provincial are central to her first collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905). Yet, she also depicts the significant changes that were occurring in her native Midwest due to the sweeping historical transformations brought about by modernization in novels like *A Lost Lady* (1923). Anderson more directly engages with the processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization in his novel *Poor White* (1920), highlighting the impact of these changes on the formerly agrarian, rural Midwest.

More importantly, however, these three texts demonstrate how gender and sexuality interconnect with these changes. Colin R. Johnson charts the interrelated changes in rural America and gender and sexual norms; he demonstrates that new national discourses shaped the manner in which rural communities made sense of gender nonconformity and same-sex desire, often in more limiting ways (2-3). Marilee

Lindemann shows that Willa Cather was writing in an era (roughly the 1890s through the 1920s) when nonnormative sexuality was solidifying into its various categories just as America and the prairie were also being redefined; thus her texts engage with both series of changes (2). Andy Oler makes a similar point, with a focus on gender, in modernist midwestern literature. Modernist writers like Anderson were contending with the dual processes of changes in the rural, agrarian Midwest and changes within gender norms, and by extension sexual norms. According to Oler, definitions of masculinity and femininity became unstable due to change at the time, including the “parallel processes of urbanization and industrialization” (15). One could argue that sexual categories were similarly unstable and similarly bound up within these processes. All of these issues are evident in Cather’s and Anderson’s fiction from this period.

Cather and Anderson were thus contending with very significant, interconnected changes historically, regionally, and in relation to gender and sexuality. As a result, their representation of rural America is never simplistic. In her early short stories from *The Troll Garden*, Cather seems to support the division between the city and rural areas, the provincial and the urbane along with the associated meanings or standards that accompany these divides, as in “A Wagner Matinée.” More importantly, queer sexuality and gender nonconformity become intertwined with this dichotomy, as with her preoccupation with aesthetics, for example, which is both queer and urban, as is evident in “Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament” and “The Sculptor’s Funeral.” Her novel *A Lost Lady*, however, offers a more tempered vision of the prairie, reinforcing the ambivalence common in her short stories. These three stories are concerned more directly with the opposition between the city and rural or provincial areas, while *A Lost Lady*, like

Anderson's *Poor White*, considers the more sweeping changes on the prairie and Midwest following the pioneer era. Significantly, as with Cather's fiction, Anderson's *Poor White* demonstrates how the rural/urban dichotomy and the process of modernization is directly implicated in concerns about gender and sexuality. Anderson more directly connects the city and the queer in *Poor White* than Cather does in her fiction, depicting a nascent gay and lesbian identity as an urban one, but the movement between rural and urban areas further complicates these shifting norms and emerging categories. He questions what happens when an individual brings urban experiences to the country. Considering these two writers together is insightful, particularly regarding how they deal with rurality and urbanity, conventional gender and gender nonconformity, and sexual normativity and difference.

Queer Cosmopolitanism

Cather's *The Troll Garden* is preoccupied with aestheticism, which is interconnected with metronormativity and queer urbanism. Scott Herring identifies the aesthetic component of metronormativity as one of the most encompassing, bringing together many of the individual elements that elevate the urban while marginalizing or denigrating the rural (16). Herring explains that aestheticism combines three key characteristics associated with the metropolis. It includes a *cultural knowingness*, representing the epistemological component of metronormativity, which insinuates that "the closer proximity you have to a skyscraper, the more in-the-know, in-the-loop, and up-to-the-minute you must be." What makes the queer into a visible representation of

urbanity is a *sophistication* that “demarcates worldliness, refinement, and whatever counts as the ‘latest’” and *fashionability* (16). These different elements belong, according to Herring, under the broader term “cosmopolitanism.” As a norm or standard, this cosmopolitanism marginalizes any individual or cultural production that “does not take urbanity as its point of origin, its point of departure, or its point of arrival” (Herring 16). This is the deployment of aesthetics, mostly against the unfashionable, the backward, the uninformed: e.g., those from rural or “provincial” areas. The most obvious representative of such cosmopolitanism in Cather’s fiction is the eponymous protagonist of “Paul’s Case” from *The Troll Garden*, who wants desperately to live such a cosmopolitan life, judging others in his everyday life according to these standards of cultural knowingness, sophistication, and fashionability (or rather the lack of these qualities). He is also driven by a fantasy that the cosmopolitan lifestyle is rightfully his. While “Paul’s Case” may be the most overt example of how such cosmopolitanism becomes associated with urbanity and then functions as a set of standards, two other stories in *The Troll Garden* also uphold the differentiation between the city and the country based on these stylistics, to borrow Herring’s terminology. In “A Wagner Matinée,” Clark envisions the destruction of the artist by life on the harsh prairie; in “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” Henry Steavens rejects his master’s prairie origins in repulsion and disbelief. In “Paul’s Case” and “The Sculptor’s Funeral” (and later *A Lost Lady*), Cather uses aestheticism to encode gender and sexual difference, while “A Wagner Matinée” illustrates the centrality of the urban/rural division in Cather’s fiction more broadly.

“Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament,” which was published in *The Troll Garden* and revised and republished in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), is Cather’s

most overt representation of queer cosmopolitanism. In effect, Paul's singular motive is the realization of his cosmopolitan fantasy. Although the story is set in Pittsburgh, Paul's life is associated with a sort of provincialism that Cather locates in the rural Midwest in "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Wagner Matinée." Following Herring's argument, one can also see how this story conflates the cosmopolitan and the queer; it brings together gender nonconformity and sexual variance with aestheticism, sophistication, and fashionability (all of which are opposed to the provincial), represented by the dandy, for example. Paul struggles with what he considers his mundane and drab life in middle-class Pittsburgh, feeling out of place and left behind. From the beginning, Paul appears as a troubled, insubordinate, and overly pretentious aesthete, although his lifestyle does not really align with that of the dandy he aspires to be. In the opening scene, for example, where Paul is viciously chided by his teachers for impertinence, Cather sets up this contrast between reality and fantasy: while Paul has "something of a dandy about him" and he wears a fashionable tie pin and scandalous red carnation, he has almost outgrown his clothes and his collar is frayed (111). Furthermore, he is marked feminine from the beginning. His eyes have a "hysterical brilliance" that he uses in a "theatrical sort of way" that, as his teachers think, was "peculiarly offensive in a boy" (111), leading one teacher to conclude "[t]here is something wrong with the fellow" (113). Paul becomes pathologized by his effeminacy and desire for fashion and sophistication, with the two becoming so intertwined that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, his aestheticism and artificiality evoke his gender and sexual deviance ("Willa Cather" 169). Hence, Paul's gender nonconformity, with the insinuation of sexual difference, and his desire for

sophistication and fashionability are inseparable and mark him as “not a usual case” (*Troll Garden* 111).

The aesthetic realm is where Paul belongs, both because of his aesthetic temperament and because of his sense of difference from his thoroughly mundane and unglamorous life. Initially, his interest in aesthetics is mostly appeased by his job as an usher at Carnegie Hall and his friendship with people in theater. For Paul, his current life is not really true to him, and instead, the fashionable and glamorous world that he admires is where he belongs. At first, he worries that he must always act as a spectator to this world, particularly when he remains on its margins, through his job and through his unofficial connections to the local repertory theater troupe. These brief incursions into this artistic world do provide some outlet for Paul, becoming his “real” life rather than his everyday one: “It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting. This was Paul’s fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love” (120). This conflict between “fairy tale” and reality sets up the contrast that juxtaposes glamour and aestheticism with the drab and deadening. Cordelia Street, where he lives, is commonplace and backward and lacks the sophistication Paul desires. While his experience at Carnegie Hall is rapturous and awakens a “delicious excitement” (115), upon his return to Cordelia Street Paul feels a “shudder of loathing” (116) and “a sense of defeat, the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness” (117). His connection to the glamorous life in Pittsburgh is tenuous, as Paul learns when his father forces him to quit his job at Carnegie Hall and forbids him to visit the theater. Once he is cut off from that world and given up to the provincial life he loathes, his desire for an idealized lifestyle intensifies and leads

him to robbery so that he can escape to the ideal urban enclave, New York City, where he can live, although only briefly, that fantasy.

Paul's affinities with an aesthetic, glamorous world are central to the queer subtexts of this story. Here, as in other works, Cather uses an indirect and suggestive approach to encode Paul's queerness, such as his secretive use of violet water as a perfume. Larry Rubin was one of the first scholars to identify the "homosexual motif" in "Paul's Case," outlining the method Cather uses in this story and elsewhere. Rubin describes this method as an indirect one, perhaps necessary for Cather's time, that relies on the accumulation of hints to suggest Paul's "sexual nature" (127). Jane Nardin more fully captures Cather's method for such coding, arguing that Cather "use[s] displacements, code phrases, cryptic allusions, and other strategies of subtle indirection to represent the love that dared not speak its name" (33), a strategy that shows Cather's recognition of the "tacit limits" for representing sexual deviance in literature at that time (35). Cather uses Paul's preoccupation with aesthetics and effeminacy to suggest his queerness. Claude J. Summers points to the interconnection between a historically specific version of aestheticism, that of the aesthetes as most infamously represented by Oscar Wilde, showing how Cather responded, both in her journalism and fiction of the time, to the aesthetic movement and the Wilde trials. Yet, Summers makes clear that the story more broadly is a meditation on aesthetics along with "a consideration of the homosexual's problematic relationship to society" (108).

Paul's "temperament" and sensibility most centrally mark him as queer, not necessarily same-sex desire, as David M. Halperin argues. According to Halperin,

homosexuality is often as much a “cultural orientation” as a sexual identity, as evident in the common links between gay men and refinement, aesthetic sense, and a sensitivity to style and fashion (10). Halperin claims that Paul represents the sort of queer sensibility that is associated with such aspirations and attitudes toward aesthetics and refinement, a sensibility that is not limited to desire but rather aligned with a certain aristocratic lifestyle (213-4). Following Rubin and Nardin, Halperin shows how certain attributes, separate from same-sex desire, mark Paul as queer. As he explains, “His nervousness, hysteria, impulsiveness, [and] love of glamour [. . .] are all socially coded as unmanly traits, and they inscribe his gay sensibility” (214). The coded or indirect approach taken in this story is an important one, with Cather using this approach in multiple texts, including other stories from *The Troll Garden* and later *A Lost Lady*. Certainly, Cather does suggest that Paul experiences same-sex desire. First, he has a relationship with an actor from the local theater troupe. Later, he has a mysterious “champagne friendship” with a young student from San Francisco that Paul meets in New York City and who shows Paul the “night side of the town” before their “friendship” ends abruptly the following morning (127-8). This conflation of temperament and gay sensibility posits a queer identity irreducible to just same-sex desire.

What is more important, however, is how this sensibility and markers of otherness relate to the cosmopolitanism that equates the queer and the urbane. Herring’s argument regarding cosmopolitanism shows that the sensibility described by Halperin and others is a metronormative one defined through knowingness, sophistication, and fashionability (16). That connection is fundamental to Cather’s story, particularly because of Paul’s escape to New York City, where he becomes “exactly the kind of boy he had always

wanted to be” (*Troll Garden* 125), and the foundational opposition Cather establishes between provincial Pittsburgh and glamorous New York. Only in the city can Paul be his true self, the “real” self his life in Pittsburgh had suppressed. Rubin reinforces this point, arguing that New York was “the symbol of ultimate glamor and sophistication at that time” (128). Following Herring’s argument, however, one can see more generally how the metropolitan itself is associated with the queer. The “kind of boy” Paul becomes in the city shops at Tiffany’s and orders flowers for his room in the Waldorf Astoria. He also, needless to say, belongs in the city. Now, able to live his cosmopolitan fantasy, albeit briefly, Paul finds what seems his obvious destiny: he is for the first time “entirely rid of his nervous misgivings, of his forced aggressiveness, of the imperative desire to show himself different from his surroundings”; he is also at home in the metropolis because of his fashionability rather than out of place as he was in Pittsburgh, feeling that he “had only to glance down at his attire to reassure himself” that no one will “humiliate him” here (*Troll Garden* 127). Pittsburgh and Cordelia Street gradually become unreal for Paul, with this fantasy life becoming his new reality. So, when he feels Cordelia Street encroaching, what option does he have? Having lived the cosmopolitan life he has always desired, can he return? No, Paul concludes, deciding to “finish the thing splendidly” (129), which he does by throwing himself in front of a train. The distinction drawn in this story between the cultured and the backward, the provincial and the urbane is dramatic. One must remember, however, that “Paul’s Case” is not an uncritical paean to the glamorous cosmopolitanism of the young aesthete. Yet, this story does sustain many of the metronormative assumptions about places outside of urban areas regarding

culture, aestheticism, and cosmopolitanism. This story also shows how these cosmopolitan fantasies are inseparable from nonnormative gender and sexuality.

Several stories in *The Troll Garden* also focus on artists and the artistic vocation. Cather is specifically concerned with whether true artists can come from or survive the prairie in “The Sculptor’s Funeral” and “A Wagner Matinée.” As Hermione Lee explains, the central conflict in “The Sculptor’s Funeral” and “A Wagner Matinée” is that between the solitary artist and “mid-Western philistinism” (75). The visions of the Midwest offered in these stories, as Janis P. Stout explains, challenge a basic assumption about Cather, namely a view of the prairie that has been considered her “definitive expression” of prairie life, as exemplified in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. By contrast, the stories in *The Troll Garden* “convey a sense of deadness, harshness, or hostility in the prairie environment” (91). Therefore, as Stout notes, in her personal life and in her fiction, Cather “envisioned art as an escape from life on the prairie” which becomes a central motif in her early fiction (72). The stories show the effect of “the harshness of prairie life” on “a person of artistic sensibility” (92). In “A Wagner Matinée,” Cather considers whether an artist can survive harsh prairie life and what happens when the artist gets a reprieve from that wasteland. “The Sculptor’s Funeral” concerns the return, after death, of Harvey Merrick to his prairie hometown of Sand City, Kansas. Through the eyes of his pupil Henry Steavens, Cather questions how a sensitive and noble artist could come for such a background. It is important to note, however, as Stout does, that the duality of art and Midwestern philistinism is an ambivalent one in “The Sculptor’s Funeral” (93). The sculptor’s decision to return home in the end exemplifies this ambivalence best.

“A Wagner Matinée” is a visceral depiction of the artist’s struggle for survival in the desolate prairie. In fact, Cather’s depiction of life on the prairie in “A Wagner Matinée” is so dismal and jarring that it evoked widespread criticism from family, friends, and former neighbors from her hometown (Lee 78-9, Stout 112). This story is not about overt queerness, but the division that this story constructs between the East and the Midwest, the prairie and the city, is also central to “Paul’s Case” and “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” where this division is interconnected with nonnormative gender and sexuality. “A Wagner Matinée” is a first-person narrative, told from the perspective of Clark, whose aunt Georgina comes to visit him in Boston. Clark decides to take her to a matinée at the symphony, an experience that makes him ponder the effects of prairie life on his aunt, a former Bostonian and pianist. Clark must also contend with his own past, which he sees as particularly harsh in comparison to his life in Boston now. Before his aunt arrives, feeling a “gulf of recollection so wide and deep,” Clark suddenly sees himself as a “stranger” to his current life and “out of place.” As he explains, “I became, in short, the gangling farmer-boy my aunt had known, scourged with chilblains and bashfulness, my hands cracked and sore from corn husking” (102). Clark leaves that version of himself behind, but his aunt’s visit makes him face his past.

Clark’s view of his own childhood on the prairie shapes his subjective, and perhaps slightly skewed, vision of his aunt and her response to the symphony, or what he considers her reentrance into this world of culture. For example, he explains that he could feel how the concerns of farm life “sank into her soul”; after all, he explains, “I had not forgotten how they had sunk into mine when I came fresh from ploughing forever and forever” (106). As these passages show, Clark relies on his own experiences and feelings

to establish and reinforce what he sees as a clear division between Boston and the prairie. Yet, Clark's interest in the arts and culture derives from his childhood because of his aunt's tutelage. Clark recalls that his aunt was a true artist and a well-educated and talented musician, having a musical education that surpassed even that of many music teachers (107). This story implies that the artist cannot really survive this bleak life, or if so, that the artistic sensibility must go dormant, hence the significance of Aunt Georgina's intense and conflicted experience at the Boston symphony.

Clark's perception of his aunt seems particularly harsh from the beginning. He judges her physical presence (she appears "misshapen" and "grotesque") and her clothing (she has subjected herself to "the hands of a country dressmaker"), setting up a contrast between her and the Bostonian culture from which she was cut off (103-4). For him, her visit must represent the realization of one of her deepest wishes. She appears mostly to be in a "semi-somnambulant state" throughout the story, as Clark says, and she must be unaware (in Clark's mind) that she "was in the city where she had spent her youth, the place longed for hungrily half a lifetime" (104). Clark also seems to project insecurities on Aunt Georgina, hers and likely his own. He worries, unnecessarily, about "some painful embarrassment" she may feel "stepping into a world" (culture? Boston?) "to which she had been dead for a quarter of a century" (105), and he later questions, condescendingly, whether she can even "comprehend" this world (107-8). All of these rather extreme assumptions shape how he perceives her reaction to the symphony. Aunt Georgina does, however, seem to have some sort of awakening there, with her hands, now "stretched and twisted into mere tentacles" by prairie chores, mechanically following the piano score at one point (108). While Clark's impressions are doubtful

overall, Clark's assumptions may have some validity as evident in Aunt Georgina's later exclamation that "I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!" (109). At the end of the story, Aunt Georgina hesitates to leave the symphony hall, and as Clark claims, what lies beyond those doors is the harsh prairie life that is so distant from Clark's world. Such a representation of rural life in the Midwest is dismal indeed.

While "A Wagner Matinée" questions whether the artist can survive such a harsh life in the Midwest, the question in "The Sculptor's Funeral" is rather how the artist, and specifically a queer artist, can emerge from such a setting. This question is posed by two characters, the sculptor's pupil (and possible lover) Steavens, who has travelled with the body, and his friend Jim Laird, who has remained in their hometown after going East with Merrick as a young man. Although the story is told from a third-person perspective, readers often see through Steavens's point of view. As an outsider, one who was devoted to Harvey yet was removed from his origins (unlike Laird), Steavens's view of this "little Kansas town" (34) and Harvey's background is often especially bleak. For Steavens, a profound disconnect exists between his "noble" and "refined" master and his upbringing. Steavens even feels a "sickening conviction that there had been some horrible mistake, and that he had somehow arrived at the wrong destination" while seeking in the home—quite unsuccessfully—for "some mark of identification" with the Merrick he knew (37). He also cannot reconcile the "ugliness" of the town and the Merrick home with his teacher, although he tries to find the source for the sculptor's genius and artistry there. Merrick's origins are incongruous, a theme that his friend Laird picks up later and a problem that seems to puzzle him throughout the story as it does Steavens. Part of what is shocking to Steavens is not only just the small Kansas town and "the plains that reached

out into emptiness” (36) but also the troubled and volatile Merrick home. Laird shares Steavens’s disbelief. In response to Steavens’s claim that Harvey was “wonderful,” Laird responds, “That is the true and eternal wonder of it, anyway; that it can come even from such a dung heap as this” (40). Yet, as Steavens realizes, his disbelief extends beyond the Merrick home. After this statement, Laird “with a sweeping gesture seemed to indicate much more than the four walls within which they stood” (40). This gesture thus extends beyond the sculptor’s childhood home to the town and the plains more broadly.

Steavens cannot reconcile the sculptor’s appreciation for and ability to channel beauty with the ugliness he perceives around him, aligning Harvey with an aesthetic sense missing from the Merricks’ home and hometown. In awe of what he experiences, Steavens “went on and on, reconstructing that whole miserable boyhood. All this raw, biting ugliness had been the portion of the man whose tastes were refined beyond the limits of the reasonable” (42). Refinement and aesthetics are thus opposed to the Midwestern plains and Merrick’s upbringing. This moment leads to a realization for Steavens, or so he believes. Noting that Harvey was always troubled by something that remained unsaid, that he remained “detached” and “distrustful” for some reason, Steavens finds his answer in the Merrick home, a sense of shame he projects onto Merrick’s childhood memories (akin to what Clark does with Aunt Georgina). He thinks that the “real tragedy of his master’s life” was “a shame not his, and yet so unescapably his, to hide in his heart from very childhood” (42). Obviously, this secret shame seems to be connected to his home life, but Steavens also notes the “without”—prairie life itself. Rendered as “frontier warfare,” Steavens envisions “the yearning of a boy, cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness, for all that is chastened and old,

and noble with traditions” (42). This is an extreme view and one that is likely hyperbolic and colored by his own prejudices as an outsider, although that does not discount his insight into Merrick’s later life. Also, Laird—an insider—does not necessarily have an overly positive view of the town, although his reasons are different and more nuanced, based on his own experiences and memories of life there.

Merrick was also out of place in this small Kansas town for reasons other than his artistic aspirations. Alice Hall Petry describes this story as an “astute study of a family, a town, a society failing to come to terms, not with a young man’s artistic inclinations, but rather with his homosexuality” (108). For example, throughout, the sculptor is described as “gentle” or “sensitive” (obviously meant to be feminine descriptors) and misunderstood, while also spoken of as being unsuited for prairie life. As Merrick’s father tells Steavens, “He was ez gentle ez a child and the kindest of ’em all—only we didn’t none of us ever onderstand him” (39). Similarly, Laird notes, regarding the sculptor’s troubled homelife, that he “never could see how he kept himself so sweet” (40). In general, the story subverts many gendered expectations, as is most evident with Merrick’s mother and her interactions with her husband and with the menfolk, but Harvey’s deviance from gender norms suggests sexual difference. Further, in Cather’s fiction, the connection between men and aesthetics, as has been discussed, is often coded as queer. Hence, Merrick is one of Cather’s androgynous artist figures, and shows how “the yearning for beauty” is often feminized in her fiction or corresponds to an “evasion of conventional notions of gender” (Stout 91). The men who have gathered at the Merrick home deride the sculptor, providing insight into his childhood and the townspeople’s impressions of him. They openly ridicule Harvey’s gentleness, effeminacy, aversion to

labor on the plains, supposed impracticality, and artistic sensibility. As Petry notes, such a combination—the “blurring of homosexuality, impracticality, and creativity”—connects Harvey to the similarly queer protagonist of “Paul’s Case”; further, both stories connect homosexuality and the artistic temperament (114-5), perhaps particularly in the context of their provincial hometowns from which they escape. The men remember Harvey “sing[ing] out, in his ladylike voice” as a young man, while another derides him for being more preoccupied with natural beauty than his farm chores, as when Harvey stopped herding the cattle to admire an “oncommon fine” sunset (44), again, showing how an appreciation for beauty becomes feminized. The men also blame Harvey’s education in the East for his difference and supposed frivolousness. Sending Harvey away for his education, in one of the men’s opinion, was his father’s “mistake”; this education is where Harvey learned “all such folly” like traveling and, he implies, the arts (44), reinforcing an opposition between the provinces and the coast, although the latter is, significantly, the one that is deemed lesser than by these men.

Yet, in the only passage in Harvey’s own voice, albeit in Steavens’s memory, is a recognition of the need to return home. Indeed, it is easy to overlook this passage, but it is one of the most pivotal because it challenges a trend in these stories from *The Troll Garden*. In this story, the queer comes back home. Shortly before his death, Harvey anticipates the townsfolk’s derision. He knows that his artistic achievements will not inspire much respect nor “shelter” him from their mockery (45), yet he seems certain of the need to return. Steavens is dumbfounded by Harvey’s background and the Kansas town; Laird is resentful, having returned to the town and feeling tainted by his dubious lawyering for the shady men who criticize Harvey. Yet, showing a certain ambivalence in

the story's vision of the prairie, Harvey seems steadfast in his belief that one should always return home, even if only after death. Regarding a discussion on the day Harvey died, Steavens remembers,

“It's not a pleasant place to be lying while the world is moving and doing and bettering,” he had said with a feeble smile, “but it rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from in the end. The townspeople will come in for a look at me; after they have had their say I shan't have much to fear from the judgment of God.” (44-5)

In this passage, Harvey describes this return almost as a duty, even to a place that he had to leave to pursue his artistic inclinations and to flee gossip. The prairie town seems left behind or backward while the world outside is “moving and doing and bettering,” and certainly, the sculptor has found his place in that other world. Yet, he returns, committing Steavens to “send his body home” (44). In Steavens's mind, this return is an absurd mistake, as when he feels a “desperate feeling that he must get away from this place with what was left of Harvey Merrick” (41). Harvey's decision illustrates Cather's concern with departures and returns, a recurring motif in her fiction. Stout sees this motif as reflecting the author's conflicting urges, based on Cather's own sense of dislocation and ambivalence (12-3), shown in her “long textual engagement with the tropes of both departure” and return (26). Laird's perspective on this issue is crucial because he offers a reality check to Merrick's desire to return home. Laird has a better insight into what happens to one who returns to live in “a bitter, dead little Western town” (47). One must wonder whether Harvey would have felt the same if he had also returned earlier.

While Laird may resent his return to their hometown, Harvey envisions it as a duty, or at least a logical fate. Laird concludes with his wonder at how an artist like Harvey could come from this town, saying, “It’s not for me to say why [. . .] a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters” (47). Yet, the final word on this issue is Harvey’s, considering it is his feeling of the need to return that is the basis of this story. Hence, “The Sculptor’s Funeral” represents the most ambivalent among these three stories from *The Troll Garden*. Its concern with both departure and return, as well as the motivations behind and the effects of those decisions, exemplifies a central conflict between a need to escape from a place and a commitment to home. The decision to return is one of the most significant details of the story. Harvey’s view that one must eventually return home, even if it seems so at odds with one’s temperament and aspirations, is profound and marks a strong contrast to “Paul’s Case” and “A Wagner Matinée,” where escape and departure are absolute and the thought of returning seems unthinkable or even impossible.

Prairie Aesthetics

In *A Lost Lady*, Cather tempers her vision of the prairie and Midwest presented in *The Troll Garden*. At first, she seems to provide a swan song for a fading pioneer aristocracy and its romanticized legacy, yet the novel is not that simplistic in its representation of modernization. *A Lost Lady* opens during the time of transition on the now-conquered prairie, exemplified in the history of its primary setting, Sweet Water, and its main allure, the Forrester home. It becomes evident that this grander age is

waning and its representatives fading away. Primarily, Cather frames this story of Sweet Water's decline through the novel's center of consciousness, Niel Herbert. An important transitional figure, Niel is part of the newer generation that is transforming the Midwest, but he mourns the passing of the older, more mythic period, which is represented by the Forresters and the "railroad aristocracy" to which they belong (3). A small Midwestern town, Sweet Water becomes representative of the broader changes to the "prairie states" generally, a history that is intertwined with the Forresters themselves (3). The opening narrator, an apparent insider in Sweet Water, attests to the gradual decline of these "grey towns" of the prairie, long after the height of the railroad magnates, a period which is represented by Captain Daniel Forrester, his wife Marian, and the focal point of the town, "the Forrester place" (3-4). Something does not bode well, however, from the beginning. By the time Niel becomes a young adult, Sweet Water has declined: "Its future no longer looked bright," and the railroad men who had once frequented the Forrester home now "hurry" past the town (24). As Stout points out, this novel does not represent an unquestioning belief in a romanticized past; instead, Cather demonstrates how this past was never as splendid as it seemed (188), while some, particularly Niel, try to hold onto this vision of the glorified past and its continuation in the present (191). The remainder of the novel, which occurs over the next few years, charts the decline of the town, and parallel to that, the downfall of the Forresters, most poignantly, that of the "lady" herself.

Marian Forrester, the novel's enigmatic central character, becomes the ideal feminine representation of this waning aristocracy, or at least she is for those who attempt to limit her to this ideal. The novel begins at the town's period of greatest promise (as it is Marian's), in an unspecified "long ago," when "Mrs. Forrester was still a young

woman, and Sweet Water was a town of which great things were expected” (8). It is clear that Marian is the reason the Forrester home, and hence Sweet Water, is exceptional to the powerful men of the railroad aristocracy, just as she always stands out from the other women of the town for those around her. From the beginning, Marian is consigned to an idealized femininity, balancing the sophisticated and charming with the slightly irreverent. Even when she appears half-dressed, the men who visit the Forresters thought that “whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was ‘lady-like’ because she did it” (6). Lee provides a rather succinct summation of Marian as one of Cather’s “lost ladies” who possess a conflicting set of qualities. Marian is “alluring, sexual, magnetic” while also being “socially adept, [. . .] sophisticated, decorative” (193), which along with being defined primarily in terms of her relationships to men (e.g., her husband and Niel), limit Marian to a very superficial and stifled position (194). In the novel as a whole, Niel is the one most responsible for policing this ideal, one that has been imposed upon Marian by other men, such as her husband, who tends to treat her as another accomplishment or possession. Further, Marian is recognized as “different from the other townswomen” (*Lost Lady* 12), as Niel and some other boys think, which is echoed in Niel’s very naïve thought later, “How strange that she would be here at all, a woman like her among common people!” (32). This comment accurately reflects the acute limitations of his perception of her and the perilous situation of one who is so idealized. In general, this limitation is one reason Stout describes Niel as “the flawed male center of consciousness” of the novel, which includes his naïve view of Marian as well as a glorified, and illusory, history represented by the Forresters (192). This novel more broadly reveals the limitations of such idealizations. As Nina Schwartz makes clear, a central paradox exists

when it comes to ideals. Idealism and the betrayal of ideals are “mutually constitutive”: “a high ideal is such only to the extent that it is difficult to uphold and therefore likely to be betrayed” (34). Thus, it is not surprising that the central conflict of the novel centers on the ideal’s failure and falsity, particularly for Niel, whose entire perception of Marian is based on this artificial ideal before he must give it up as lost, as Marian is eventually lost to him.

Issues regarding gender and sexuality are central to *A Lost Lady*. Primarily, as numerous critics have shown, Marian’s gender and sexuality are at the forefront in the novel, from an idealized femininity and the regulation of female sexuality to her fall from grandeur through adultery and loss of class prestige. Yet, while most critics have logically focused on Marian, one must also recognize how gender and sexuality are further complicated by Niel’s characterization and development. Cather uses the indirect method found in her short stories to indicate Niel’s subtle deviations from masculine norms and his ambiguous sexual or romantic interests (or potential lack of such interests). Niel’s aristocratic masculinity, verging on the dandyish at times, contrasts with the more normatively masculine men. Further, Niel’s views of women are skewed by his masculinist tendencies, his rejection of female sexuality, and his investment in an idealized, aesthetic femininity. Niel’s sexuality remains ambiguous, and Cather employs the method described by Rubin as the “accumulation of details” to suggest such difference (127). These indirect details include physical description, his views of bachelorhood, his emphasis on aesthetics, and his snobbery and investment in aristocratic values. Many such details are also present in the stories from *The Troll Garden*. Like Harvey and Clark, for example, Niel shares an aesthetic temperament, a sense of being

out of place on the prairie, and so he retreats to the East. Most notably, though, is the aesthetic and aristocratic temperament that he shares with Marian, who both inspires and eventually violates these standards.

The only scene that occurs during Niel's boyhood is instructive here. First, this opening scene establishes the important dynamic between Niel and Marian. It also introduces one of Niel's primary antagonists, Ivy Peters, and the conflict between the masculinities they represent. Lastly, it shows how Niel is already developing his distinct sensibility early on, beginning the process whereby he rejects his prairie childhood for the milieu and lifestyle that Marian represents. In this scene, Niel and some other local boys go to the Forresters' for an afternoon of swimming and picnicking. From Marian's perspective, Niel seems to stand out among the others, just as he envisions her as above the other townswomen. Ivy's introduction establishes the hostility between them that only intensifies later in the novel, with Cather drawing important contrasts between the two boys. Ivy marks Niel as feminine. Initially, assuming the brutal and domineering posturing that he consistently affects, Ivy taunts the other boys, saying that he "thought girls went on picnics" (13). More directly, however, Ivy teases Niel for his sensitivity, although Niel rightfully objects to his cruel maiming of a bird. In a particularly suggestive exchange, Ivy indirectly identifies Niel as feminine. When Ivy describes the bird as male, Niel corrects him, saying the bird is female, to which Ivy responds, "All right, Miss Female" (16). At first, one could read this phrase as applied only to the bird, as Lee does (201), yet this phrase seems to be as much addressed to Niel, whereby Ivy can mark him as feminine and weak because of his compassion.

Cather also establishes Niel's interest in aesthetics in this early scene. After Niel's accident in this scene, he is taken to Marian's bedroom; significantly, Niel is preoccupied with aesthetic appeal of the room. He notes details of the room and its décor, such as its "old-fashioned" furniture and the "ruffled pillow shams," while he likewise focuses on the details of Marian's appearance, such as her lace collar and "glittering rings" (20). His general appreciation of this luxury shows both his early interest in aesthetics and the way that he rejects his rugged childhood for the more aristocratic lifestyle that Marian represents. Thus, he worries that "he would probably never be in so nice a place again" (20-1). As with Paul in "Paul's Case," his burgeoning aristocratic sensibility is out of line with his own homelife. He thinks, "Home was not a pleasant place to go to" because it is "set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived" (21). Like Clark in "A Wagner Matinée," Niel feels a sense of shame or detachment from that life, and later, he leaves it behind, as Clark does. He aligns himself instead with Marian and his now-deceased mother, who "hated the West" and clung to her "superior" southern origins (22). Significantly, both women are outsiders to Sweet Water, implying that they are somehow superior to the prairie town. It is not surprising, then, when later Niel leaves Sweet Water behind altogether.

As a young adult, Niel solidifies his relationship with Marian, and the unique, suggestive aspects of his personality, which are hinted at in that opening scene, only become more prominent. The relationship between Niel and Marian is the central one of the novel. Each comes to share an aristocratic worldview, which is what links them most of all. Marian's appeal to Niel is inherently superficial, and he takes on the role of the chaste romantic admirer, seeing her mainly, as Cather writes later, as an "aesthetic ideal"

(72). Notably, Niel's idealized image of Marian began with his first memory of her, in which she represents the epitome of fashionableness and grace. Thinking of how she is beyond the "common people" of the town, and that even among glamorous ladies she is the most "attractive" and "distinguished," he remembers seeing her as a boy as she arrived at church, noting every detail of her appearance and, awestruck, following her inside. Years afterward, he is "proud now that at the first moment he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known" (32-3). Under her influence, Niel begins to adopt the lifestyle she represents for him. Residing in Judge Pommeroy's offices "with monastic cleanliness and severity" (24), he also uses his aesthetic sense, arranging the offices to "suit his taste," making them "so attractive" that the Judge's friends, especially the Captain, stop by more often. It is clear from the beginning, however, that Niel is different, detached, as when he is described as reserved and "a little cold" (25). His interactions with the Forresters only intensify his feeling of being different, even superior to others, particularly if they do not live up to the values Niel believes he shares with Marian. Niel also views bachelorhood favorably. Cather writes that Niel "resolved to remain a bachelor" early on (25). Later, she writes that he is "content with the bachelor's life" and "had made up his mind that he would never live in a place that was under the control of women" (57). Although he may question his decision regarding bachelorhood after experiencing the "well-conducted" Forrester home, the question of Niel's intentions to marry never come up again. Further, whenever Marian questions him about his romantic life later, Niel strategically avoids answering her and leaves the topic intentionally vague, and at the end of the novel, one could reasonably assume that he held true to his initial intentions to remain a bachelor.

In the first part of the novel, Frank Ellinger is Niel's primary competition for Marian's attention. Ellinger's introduction disrupts the burgeoning intimacy between Marian and Niel, while also leading to the first major rupture of the novel. Like Ivy later, Ellinger represents another male rival for Niel, embodying a different form of masculinity. Ellinger is first introduced at a dinner party given by the Forresters. He contrasts with Niel because of his experience with women and his physique. Ellinger is described as having a figure that—notably, “under his clothes”—has a “restless, muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it” (37), an animalistic quality that is reiterated when later his eyes are described as having “something wolfish in them” (53). In this initial scene, Cather shows Ellinger's appeal to women and alludes to his potentially sordid past (including being seen with a sex worker in the daytime), albeit one seemingly within acceptable bounds for a charismatic, privileged man. Cather also suggests the later conflict that arises from Ellinger's affair with Marian. Niel senses something malicious in Frank. Niel cannot decide “whether he liked him or not” because he “knew nothing bad about him, but he felt something evil” (37). This uncertainty is the first indication that Niel intuitively senses the illicit relationship between Marian and Ellinger.

This tension between Niel and Frank is connected to the conflict between various masculinities in *A Lost Lady*. These issues arise in terms of Niel's rivalries with Ivy and Frank Ellinger, but in general, Cather provides different models of masculinity in the novel. These conflicts are often in relation to Marian and the various men's relationships with her, but she is really just the locus for these struggles. Seth Clabough points to the “alternate representations” of masculinity as indicative of the broader transition underlying the novel. He focuses on one dichotomy, that between Captain Forrester and

Ivy, which he describes as a conflict between the rugged “frontier masculinity” of the older generation and the “petty, emerging masculinity” of the younger one (719).

Clabough’s argument is valid, yet it misses Niel’s place—or lack thereof—within this dichotomy. Niel does not align with this paradigm. He represents a different masculinity, one that is a more passive, aristocratic (and at times even dandyish) masculinity that is neither “rugged” nor “petty,” neither from the pioneer era nor in line with his generation. Certainly, one could argue that Niel is most like his bachelor uncle, who belongs to the Captain’s generation but does not share the masculinity he represents, but that would only further underscore Niel’s difference, aligning him with an outgoing yet less rugged masculinity. In another key contrast, Frank represents sexual virility and masculine strength, both of which differ significantly from Niel’s own traits, behaviors, and attitudes. Yet, one must acknowledge, as Stout does, that Niel’s view is thoroughly and problematically “masculinist” (194), as is evident in his subtly misogynistic and increasingly oppressive view of Marian. This view is blatant later, for example, when the narrator explains that “it was as Captain Forrester’s wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in relation to her husband that he most admired her.” The attributes he values most are “her comprehension of” and “loyalty to” the “rail-road builder” (65). Overall, this view of Marian only in relation to Captain Forrester reinforces Niel’s idealized version of Marian, the one that renders her “decorative,” to borrow Lee’s descriptor (193). Thus, Niel can still remain detached from Marian as an authentic, complex woman, instead reducing her to a manageable ideal.

One of the most interesting cues that Cather uses to compare Niel and Frank is insightful when it comes to the contrasting masculinities they represent. When Frank is

introduced, he is described as having “fine shoulders” (36). Later, Cather again brings attention to this detail, notably in the private scene Frank and Marian share after the dinner party. Cather writes, in rather suggestive language, “Her touch [. . .] went through him, all the feet and inches of him” and in response, “[h]is broad shoulders lifted on a deep breath” (49). This physical detail becomes more meaningful in an exchange between Marian and Niel shortly before his discovery of her affair with Frank. In this later scene, Marian tells Niel, with a sigh, “My dear boy, your shoulders aren’t broad enough” (65), using the sort of knowing tone that she uses throughout the novel toward Niel. This passage also presages the “intrusion” of Frank in their relationship and suggests that Niel could never measure up to a man like Frank, as Niel intuitively feels: “Instantly before his eyes rose the image of a pair of shoulders that were very broad, objectionably broad [. . .] The intrusion of the third person annoyed him” (65). He cannot compare to the vigorous body of this third figure (i.e., Frank). Interestingly, although maybe unintentionally on Cather’s part, this detail echoes one from “Paul’s Case.” Paul is described as having a “narrow chest,” a detail that is included in the description of his other characteristics that were “offensive in a boy” (*Troll Garden* 111). Further, just as Niel seems self-conscious in this scene with Marian, Paul seems to feel that this feature marks him as inadequate, less robust, feeling “exceedingly sensitive” about his narrow chest (114). Just as this physical detail is part of the indirect approach Cather uses in “Paul’s Case,” her decision to bring this detail up multiple times in *A Lost Lady* is significant, meant perhaps in the same way to suggest gender or sexual variance, albeit indirectly, just as the “third person” here hovers on the periphery.

As becomes more evident, Niel's attitude toward sexuality is conflicted and problematic, particularly in connection to Marian. As he spends time with her, Niel develops a chaste infatuation with Marian, primarily based on what he considers a shared sensibility and an esteem for someone he believes is above the common and the drab. His reaction to Marian's sexuality, which comes to the forefront after her affair with Frank is revealed, has rightfully gotten much attention. Of course, Marian's sexuality has been central from the beginning, such as her appeal to the railroad magnates who visit Sweet Water or her provocative appearance in all stages of dress (6). Niel, however, seems oblivious to her sexual appeal, instead valuing her only in this superficial manner. Often, their dynamic seems like a chaste intimacy and reverence, one that as Nina Schwartz describes it, is premised on a "courtly ideal of ladyship" (35). As Lee explains, however, this "chivalric desire to idealize is [. . .] subverted" by the object of admiration (196). Further, Niel's values—a romanticized past, an emphasis on aesthetics, an investment in aristocratic appearances and pretenses—connect to his rejection of her sexuality. As Lee notes, Niel's greatest worry is that her sexual behavior will lead to the "collapse" of the artifice that is essential to his idealization of her (206). Stephanie Bower agrees, saying that Niel must "contain the danger" that her sexual behavior "poses to the values he holds dear" (60). Marian's behavior chips away at the artifice and leads to a crisis for Niel. Her affair with Frank is the first real threat to his artificial, idealized perception. Its disclosure reveals the extent of Niel's innocent and perilously naïve view of Marian. More importantly, however, is that this revelation makes sexuality, particularly forbidden or illicit female sexuality, overt for him. Thus, upon his discovery of the affair, Niel is not only dismayed by her affair with Frank, but he is also alarmed by a previously

unacknowledged fact: Marian is a sexual woman, subject to desire even at the expense of social norms. One wonders, however, if Niel's troubled and even at times ridiculously extreme reaction to Marian's sexuality is really only about Marian. Lee correctly points to possible underlying questions about Niel's sexuality. She not only points to Niel's "snobbery" and "sexual squeamishness" when it comes to Marian and her interactions with men who are not the Captain, but she also alludes to his "self-protecting frigidity" (206). This "self-protecting frigidity" is not only about containing Marian's sexuality. It represents Niel's complicated attitude toward sexuality more broadly, as best exemplified in his inexplicably disorienting and excessive reaction to the discovery of Marian's infidelity.

Leading up to his discovery, Cather emphasizes Niel's overly romantic view of Marian in the mission he assumes and then through the landscape as he envisions it. Really, "innocence" does not fully capture Niel's mindset. He could be more aptly described as shockingly naïve. At first, he has no idea why Frank would have unexpectedly come to town while Captain Forrester is away. He thinks simply that it was "very bad taste" for Frank to come and that it would unnecessarily "stir up the gossips" of Sweet Water (69). He does not consider that, first, Frank's visit during the Captain's absence was intentional, and secondly, that Marian was at all involved in his decision to come to Sweet Water. Instead, Niel believes he must protect her against Frank, whom he considers lesser than. Here, Niel takes on, for the first time, a role that he will increasingly occupy, that of Marian's protector. Niel's naivete is thus evident as he sets off on this mission. The landscape also reflects his limited perspective and anticipates the dissolution of his ideals. He evokes purity to describe the morning. The landscape is

imbued with a “religious purity” and is “unstained”; it is also “unspoiled” by “men and their activities” (a notably ambiguous and suggestive phrase) (70). Inspired by this morning handed down like a gift from the “heroic ages,” Niel decides to “make a bouquet for a lovely lady; a bouquet gathered off the cheeks of the morning,” evoking imagery of a courtly romance, and like this bouquet, he suggests, Marian would also be “defenceless in [her] beauty” (70-1). Revealing his obliviousness and snobbery, he believes that upon discovering the flowers, Marian would have a “sudden distaste for coarse worldlings like Frank Ellinger” (71). Marian, like this romanticized landscape, represents purity and untarnished beauty; Niel assumes that she belongs in a realm beyond men like the “coarse” and disreputable Frank.

His gesture, and the naïve romantic idealism that underlies it, is shattered by his discovery of the two lovers. As he flees the Forrester home in a sort of delirium, Niel realizes that “[t]his day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence” and that, in this moment, “he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life” (72). More importantly, Cather specifically notes that his loyalty to Marian was based on an aesthetic ideal, not an attachment to her as an authentic, complex woman. She writes, “It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal” (72). That aestheticism takes precedence over any moral qualms is significant, with adultery becoming the betrayal of aesthetic values and ideals, which have served as the basis for his admiration of Marian. Further, Niel considers how Marian’s violation of his ideals may extend to other women, or at least women like Marian. As he thinks, “Beautiful women, whose beauty meant more than it said... was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? Was that their secret?” (72). The artifice thus

becomes suspect, and he can only envision sexual desire as something “coarse and concealed” within it. His reaction is somewhat tempered after this scene, but his departure from Sweet Water for the East is made easier by his disillusionment with Marian. Soon after this incident, Cather reveals that Niel has decided to become an architect (77). Once his aesthetic idealization of Marian has been challenged, he must find another way to retreat into an artificiality that is impersonal, not intimate.

Niel’s primary competition in the first part of the novel, Frank, is replaced by another and earlier rival, Ivy Peters, from the opening scene that occurs during Niel’s adolescence. At the beginning, Cather sets up a contrast between Niel and Ivy, who is uncouth, presumptuous, and cruel. Ivy has always resented the Forresters and what they represent. In the opening scene, for example, he defies the Forrester and hunts on their land, walking about with a “rude, arrogant stride” and with an “unnatural erectness,” suggesting masculine posturing (13). Even as an adolescent, Ivy declares himself as “just as good” as Marian, and he seems determined to prove it (14). From the start, Ivy rejects and challenges the aristocratic values that Marian represents and that Niel tries to uphold. Their meeting on the train upon Niel’s return two years after he had left Sweet Water solidifies the key contrast between the two. During this two-year break, Niel has changed, certainly, but so has Sweet Water under the sway of these new “petty” men like Ivy, who have gradually supplanted men like Captain Forrester or Judge Pommeroy. Modern business, with its lack of integrity and emphasis on power, differs from the aristocratic values represented by Captain Forrester and the other men who subdued the prairie. Yet, those earlier values are not inherently positive, as numerous critics have shown: they gloss over the brutality of expansionism and are predicated on a rigid hierarchization.

In the modernizing Midwest, towns like Sweet Water will also change, a vision that Sherwood Anderson shares in his novel *Poor White*, as will be discussed later. This transition is evident, for example, in the often-cited example of Captain Forrester's swampland, which the Captain had left untouched, but which Ivy has drained for cropland. Niel recognizes Ivy's motive for draining the swampland that the Captain had valued for their aesthetic appeal, saying that Ivy did so to assert his power over the Forresters (89). Thus, Niel perceives the transformation of the Midwest as one between a pioneer aristocracy and a new generation that rejects those values. As he concludes, this "generation of shrewd young men" would "cut up and destroy" this land of the pioneer "into profitable bits" just as a match factory "splinters" the forest (90). Interestingly, Cather had already begun to explore this concept of generational change on the prairie in "A Sculptor's Funeral." In that story, however, readers' sympathies are more aligned with Jim Laird, the self-described "shyster." Just as Niel decries the behavior of this new generation, Laird himself rails against his own actions after he returns to his prairie hometown. In *A Lost Lady*, Niel, with his sense of superior tastes and values, sees himself as apart from his generation, instead looking back toward the age of the noble pioneers he sees fading away with the Forresters.

Niel's sense of difference is accentuated by his time away from Sweet Water. Ivy is the first to see Niel on his return, and from his perspective, Cather shows the effect of Niel's time in the East. Cather very subtly but pointedly draws a contrast between the two men based on their appearance, but with the suggestion of more fundamental differences between the two in terms of masculinity. Niel is described as almost dandyish, wearing a suit with "a silk shirt of one shade of blue and a necktie of another." Further, Ivy

perceives this “urban figure” as lesser than in comparison, “glanc[ing] down at his own clothes with gloating satisfaction” (87). Niel’s “haberdashery” also gets Ivy’s attention (88). This urbane figure is much different from the young boy who was ashamed of his prairie home and instead sought solace with the aristocratic Forresters. Marian also recognizes the effects of his time away. Later comparing him to the other boys of Sweet Water, who are crude and uncivilized, she explains to him, “You wouldn’t be the boy you are if you’d never gone to Boston” (133). What Cather suggests is that the East can offer the opportunities that such young men with such sensibilities need, as she also implies in “A Wagner Matinée” and “The Sculptor’s Funeral.” Niel’s romantic experiences in the city, if there were any, are left notably ambiguous. Marian reveals a certain knowingness about this issue. Earlier, upon his departure, Marian had suggested he take a “chorus girl” out, and if he got “into a scrape,” that the Forresters could help him out (83). Niel does not respond, just as he also later avoids commenting on his romantic life. Marian’s knowingness and Niel’s evasion of the issue come up again when, upon his return, Marian inquires about his “sweethearts,” but Niel strategically dodges the question, answering only “perhaps.” Marian concludes that he must not have a sweetheart because Niel “would not have come home at all” (93). Altogether, these details—from Niel’s urbanity and sophistication to the mystery of his romantic life—mark him as deviating from the expectations of normative, heterosexual masculinity.

Niel believes that he can return to Sweet Water and find nothing truly changed, but that assumption is quickly dispelled. Niel returns with the intention of just staying during his break, yet he stays longer, first, to take care of Captain Forrester because of his ill health, and then to look after Marian following her husband’s death. Marian becomes

increasingly desperate due to financial hardship and her feelings of being trapped in Sweet Water. Niel envisions himself as her guardian, and not in an entirely altruistic way. His goal is to maintain her aristocratic standing, no matter her economic situation, and to prevent any impropriety. Yet again, he is still naïve and unable to face his severely limited view of Marian and the unsustainability of his ideals. In part one, the Forresters had lost most of their fortune, but when he returns, Niel finds them even more destitute. Over the course of Marian's subsequent downfall, Cather shows that her status as an ideal relies also on class standing, thus Niel's investment in this hierarchical system.

Sexuality is interconnected with Marian's loss of aristocratic prestige. As Stephanie Bower makes clear, Niel's idealized vision of Marian is predicated on and validates class distinctions (67). While her sexual allure to the railroad magnates is mostly accepted because she is protected by class privilege, once she loses that status, her sexual license is less acceptable and becomes crasser, as Niel perceives it, particularly after Captain Forrester's death. This difference in the acceptability of her behavior is especially important when it comes to Ivy. Niel himself draws this distinction quite emphatically. Cather echoes the opening scene of the novel, explaining that, to Niel, "It was one thing to greet the president of the Colorado & Utah *en déshabille*, but it was another to chatter with a coarse-grained fellow like Ivy Peters" with his "cool, impudent eyes" gazing upon her half-dressed body (100). Although Marian's affair with Frank is troubling to Niel, her behavior once she is not protected by her aristocratic position is truly unacceptable to him. Her affair brought her sexuality to the forefront, but in the second part, she becomes more of an "erotic spectacle" subject to Niel's surveillance (Bower 60). When he returns, Niel discovers the extent of Ivy's influence, both generally

and on the Forresters, who now rely in part of Ivy for their finances. More importantly, he witnesses the new relationship between Marian and Ivy, which becomes increasingly sexual. When he goes to visit the Forresters one morning, he sees Ivy telling an “improper” joke and Marian responding with “her naughtiest laugh.” Further, to show his new influence over her, Ivy merely watches as Marian labors, to Niel’s dismay, “as if she were a kitchen maid” (101). Their relationship becomes an exploitative one in many ways, representing Ivy’s broader agenda to prove he is “just as good” as Marian.

The novel’s conclusion shows Niel’s complete break with the past and a more important moment of historical change. He understands that his return to Boston, after his year as caretaker to the Forresters, signals that this period of his life is done with. It is not only his past, however, that is fading away: “he had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer” and “nothing could ever bring it back” (144-5). In this final chapter, Cather uses a parallel structure, punctuated by a crisis that yet again involves Marian’s sexual behavior, leading Niel to leave Sweet Water altogether. This time, however, is even worse for Niel because, to him, this scene represents Marian’s complete degradation and the total collapse of the values and ideals she represents for him. Echoing the moment that Niel inadvertently found out about Marian’s affair with Frank, he witnesses Ivy groping her breasts in private. Although later he can nostalgically mourn for “his long-lost lady” (147), Niel can only think of her as a “common woman” after witnessing this scene (146). The scandal of this episode is further compounded by Marian’s independence. In line with his consistently misogynistic view of Marian, Niel believes that she has also not fulfilled her proper role as widow and member of the pioneer aristocracy. Cather writes that Niel “most held against Mrs. Forrester” the fact that “she

was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged” (145). Yet, despite Niel’s opposition, Marian’s life does not end in this way. Instead, she finds a new life elsewhere. Earlier, Cather had alluded to Niel’s life afterward, showing how Marian’s memory remained with him. She writes that “Long, long afterward [. . .] [w]hen he was dull, dull and tired of everything, he used to think that if he could hear the long-lost lady laugh again, he could be gay” (59). In the end, Niel is comforted when he learns that Marian had a good life after they both left Sweet Water, although a mournful tone—for her and for what she represents—underlies the novel’s conclusion. Such mournful nostalgia tempers Cather’s depiction of the prairie in *A Lost Lady*, although Cather suggests that this romanticized perspective is misguided and unsustainable in the end.

Back to Bidwell

Sherwood Anderson’s *Poor White* tells the story of Hugh McVey, a Missourian who eventually becomes an inventor and settles in the town of Bidwell, Ohio, where he, along with a few shrewd businessmen, ushers in the Industrial Age, which transformed the rural Midwest. The novel is set in this pivotal moment of the 1890s and early twentieth century. Anderson, unlike Cather in *A Lost Lady*, more directly engages with the impact of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization, while he likewise evokes, to a lesser extent, the passing pioneer era. *Poor White* shows how industrialization and urbanization would eclipse the small-town, agrarian region. Anderson describes this time as a period of “great awakening,” during which America,

specifically those from the rapidly changing rural Midwest in this novel, were “rushed pell-mell into a new age” (128). Industry becomes representative of this era and the transformations occurring throughout the region and nation. It is described as a “giant” who “awakens” (131), looming menacingly over the region. Anderson uses this metaphor of the giant to capture the pervasiveness and power of industry. Further, it is seemingly omnipresent, reaching beyond the towns and cities to “lonely farm houses” (61). The progress narrative and the symbolics of industrialism are portrayed ambivalently, with the novel neither fully rejecting nor accepting the potential of industry and this new age. Thus, the “roar and clatter” of this “terrible new thing” was “half hideous, half beautiful in its possibilities” (61). In *Old-Fashioned Modernism: Rural Masculinity and Midwestern Literature* (2019), Andy Oler examines the tension between urban and rural, the industrial and agrarian that is not easily nor completely reconciled; this irreconcilability and coexistence is central to modernist rural midwestern literature. This literature, like Anderson’s *Poor White*, counters the simple binary between progressive urbanism and retrograde rurality (6). The ambivalent view of progress and industrialism in Anderson’s novel reflect that tension.

Urbanization, like industrialism, is often seen as threatening in *Poor White*. The fear that urbanization will eclipse the small towns of the Midwest is underscored by the stark representations of the city, which become an important symbol of modernity. This point is evident in Hugh’s perception of the city as “the great complex dwelling-place of modern Americans” (32). The expansion of cities also signifies the general madness that Anderson ascribes to this new age, an age in which industry and “progress” eclipses the “sleepy places” not only of the Midwest, but also other formerly rural areas (129). Hugh,

the small-town boy who is looking for his place in the world, is not “tempted to become a city man” (30), and most comfortable alone, as the country allows, experiences “the nameless fear of multitudes, common to country boys in the city” (31). In the city, people lose their singular identities, which Anderson emphasizes in his very stark language and in extended metaphors. The people rush around “like disturbed insects” and come in droves “like distraught cattle,” with the result being “a whirling churning mass of humanity” (30). The city represents a loss of individualism and a separation from the land. Regarding the new city dwellers’ separation from the land, Anderson explains, again using animal metaphors, “Modern men and women who live in industrial cities are like mice that have come out of the fields to live in houses that do not belong to them” (112). This image of the houses foreign to those used to fields is crucial, indicative of an estrangement from the agrarian, rural past for a mass produced, deindividualized modernity. Thus, although they may remember the time “when they lived in the fields,” evoking the image of the field mouse, “they do not go out of the walls of the houses,” now afraid of the expansiveness (represented by the “emptiness” of the prairie skies) of the rural areas from which they came (112). These very stark images of the city and its effects on those who have left rural, agrarian areas for its enclosures render the processes of modernization and urbanization monstrous and dehumanizing. Although Clara will later embrace the city in many ways, Anderson portrays the changes brought by urbanization to the Midwest and its people in almost dystopic ways.

Anderson’s novel captures this transitional age through Bidwell, which becomes representative of the zeal of this era as well as the dual processes of industrialization and urbanization. Before it became a manufacturing town, the narrator explains, it was a

typical small-town and agrarian community (41), which is described in almost idyllic terms. It was part of an age prior to the “constant and confusing roar of machinery” that overcame such communities (45), yet “the hand of the giant, industrialism” eventually reaches Bidwell just as it does the rest of the Midwest and nation (51). Determined not to be left behind, the powerbrokers of Bidwell embrace and actively pursue industry and expansion, using Hugh’s talent and inventions. The townspeople, who are at first baffled by and then mythologize Hugh, envision the aspiring inventor as “the instrument of [industry’s] coming to Bidwell” (71), which is for the most part true given his inventions are later manufactured in the town, beginning with his failed plant-setting machine. Anderson then describes, over the remainder of the novel, the town’s expansion in population and size, movement away from traditional agriculture, and cultural and social transition into this new age. As it expands, the narrator explains later, an observer may see it as a “tiny section of a giant modern city” rather than a “quiet town filled with people who live quiet lives” (109). Bidwell, however, still retains some of its rural, agrarian ways. Anderson’s novel thereby captures the tension between industrialism and agrarianism, urbanization and rurality and then their tenuous coexistence.

Bidwell and the novel as a whole demonstrate the complexities of these processes and their impact on the Midwest; these changes, however, are also interconnected in essential ways with other transformations, namely changes in gender and sexual definitions and norms. Due to these social, economic, and political developments, former certainties are troubled or challenged, as with the emergence of the New Woman, the development of new models to describe nonnormative gender and sexuality, and changes in marriage and its associated norms. These three changes are central in *Poor White*,

particularly for Clara Butterworth. Clara becomes increasingly uncertain about her own and others' sexuality, marriage, and the status of women. Oler shows how the changes associated with industrialism and urbanization coincided and became intertwined with changes in gender construction and norms. As he explains, just as Midwestern literature of the time challenges the easy binaries of urban/rural and industrial/agrarian, these texts often construct seemingly contradictory and ambiguous masculine identities (and really, gender identities more broadly in *Poor White*). In *Poor White*, Hugh represents such a contradictory masculinity. Elsewhere, Oler more directly engages with the queerness of this novel. He points to the breakdown of strict categories, such as the urban/rural division and normative gender roles, and the resistance to normative definitions of rural people and spaces ("Rural Masculinity" 69). These challenges to gender norms and categories are important in Hugh's story, yet they are also central to Clara's development, where alternative models of sexuality and gender result in significant challenges for her.

Clara's story warrants a more extensive reading in terms of the connection between changes in the rural Midwest and shifting notions of gender and sexuality. Clara is not introduced until book three, or roughly halfway through the novel, yet she becomes one of its central characters, both individually and in relation to Hugh and her father, Tom, who is one of the inventor's key backers. Furthermore, Anderson uses her unique perspective, shaped by her time in both rural and urban areas, to gauge the changes in the Midwest and in Bidwell. Her mentality is an ambivalent one: she appreciates modernization and the possibilities of urbanization while also becoming nostalgic about her lost rural hometown and resentful of industrialization. What is crucial here is Clara's movement between her rural hometown and Columbus, where she goes to college, and

how it drastically transforms—and even queers—her views of gender and sexuality; her time there also has a lasting impact on her when she returns to Bidwell. This experience in the city is much more formative than her early life in Bidwell or her life once she returns there. Her friendship with the masculine lesbian and radical feminist, Kate Chancellor, exposes her to new ideas about gender and the potential for love between women. Their relationship shapes her perspective regarding gender and sexual norms, just as her time in the city transforms her view of Bidwell and the age of industrialization. Her development and the trajectory of her narrative shows, to borrow from Oler, how Anderson “queers the countryside” by juxtaposing “normative gender identities of a small, ruralized community with the new ones developed in the process of industrial urbanization” (“Rural Masculinity” 76). For Clara specifically this juxtaposition is between the norms of traditional, heterosexual womanhood and the “modern” and “urban” New Woman and a nascent lesbian identity, represented by Kate. Clara’s movement between the country and city and back again is central to this juxtaposition.

Clara’s development is not straightforward. First, the novel presents a common narrative of the transition from tomboyishness into adult femininity. She is described as being “tall, strong, hard-muscled” until her seventeenth year (137), yet now an “awakening girl” (140), she is undergoing bodily changes, with her figure that “had been boyish and strong” becoming more feminine (139). She had “always passed for something of a tomboy” before, wrestling with the farmhands in hayfields and barns, yet now, becoming haughtier, she sees the men as “vulgar” (146). Her prior tomboyishness does not preclude her “natural” transition into adult femininity; instead, it reinforces the commonplace acceptance of tomboyishness as an adolescent phase which a woman

abandons as she matures. These changes in her gender expression parallel the emergence of a sexual self. Early on, she has a sexual experience that occurs appropriately in an orchard, a site of growth and fecundity. This episode merely complicates, as one would expect, her emerging view of herself. She feels uncertain about men's sudden interest in her, both sexually and romantically. She uses their interest in a confusedly utilitarian way, trying to "find out, without risk to herself, the things she wanted to know about life" (154). All of these changes and the resulting confusion set the stage for her further development in Columbus, which rather than merely reinforcing traditional gender and sexual norms actually challenge those in significant ways.

Exposure to the broader world and different expressions of gender and sexuality leads to significant changes in Clara's view of such norms. This change plays out upon her return home, when she more directly faces the demands of marriage, traditional womanhood, and sexuality. Because of Kate's influence, Clara becomes a quasi-feminist, and their relationship prompts Clara to question patriarchal norms, although Kate's impression wanes somewhat without her presence. Clara's troubled perception of traditional womanhood is shaped by the zeitgeist and the ongoing changes in the Midwest and nationally through industrialism and commercialism. Gender and the subjugation of women are rendered as another aspect of modern industry and economics. Clara feels that, through courtship, "she was being merchandized" and the men who visited had "come to look at the goods" (160). Kate echoes this industrial language, saying that men "manufactured the rules" to control women, just "as they manufacture can-openers" (165). While she seems to want to rebel against these demands, she is paradoxically consumed, almost to the point of monomania, by the thought of marriage. She admits,

however, that this imperative toward marriage is in part based on the limited opportunities for women, concluding, “It’s the only thing I can do. What else is there a woman can do?” (186). This conflicted position toward marriage is not settled in Columbus, nor is it even reconciled after her marriage to Hugh upon her return to Bidwell. Instead, she continues to oscillate between the opportunities held up by an independent, nonconforming woman like Kate and the demands of traditional and heteronormative femininity, marriage, and reproduction.

Kate Chancellor is a striking figure in *Poor White*. She is the typical New Woman and ardent feminist, offering Clara another perspective on the position of women in society, a perspective that has a long-term impact on Clara. More pivotally, Anderson does not obscure the fact that Kate is a masculine lesbian, nor does he conceal the (seemingly chaste) romance between her and Clara. Anderson evokes the concept of inversion or the “third sex” model, borrowed from contemporary sexology, to inscribe Kate’s lesbianism. According to the inversion model, which was central in defining the relation between the gender of homosexuals and same-sex desire, a gay man would have an essentially feminine nature, and the opposite is true for lesbians; hence, the often-repeated phrase of the “woman trapped in a man’s body,” and vice versa (*Epistemology* 87). The inversion model also connects with the idea of the intermediary sex, with gay people falling somewhere in between male and female. Anderson evokes inversion to describe Kate’s sexuality and Clara’s attempts to make sense of it. Kate and her similarly queer brother, described as a “studious, quiet man” who is artistic, are introduced through this concept: “The truth was that the brother was like a woman and Kate Chancellor, who wore skirts and had the body of a woman, was in her nature a man” (165). Significantly,

this impression is Clara's and represents one way she tries to understand Kate's sexuality (and her subsequent close bond with Kate). Kate embraces this intermediary status, telling Clara that "men are such fools and I suppose women are just as bad. They are both too much one thing. I fall in between" (167). For Clara, Kate's ambiguous gender identity or expression, while somewhat confusing, is also empowering. She perceives their relationship, while akin to that between a man and woman, as being free of the baggage that usually hampers such relationships. Clara could "talk as to a man" with Kate, yet "the antagonism that so often exists between men and women did not come into and spoil their companionship" (166). Kate, while she wants more opportunities for Clara, understands that Clara feels she must marry. Anderson writes, "The woman who was so essentially a man wanted to talk of marriage and condemn it, but continually fought the impulse" (187). Withholding her criticism, although she really "want[s] to keep Clara" for herself, Kate recognizes the limitations of their relationship and with compassionate deference tries to encourage Clara to find the best and most equitable marriage possible.

Overall, Clara's time in the city transforms her, both generally and because of her relationship with Kate. Sensing a major change in herself, she believes that she was "far removed from the green, unsophisticated girl" she was before (190) and later resents being perceived, at least in her mind, as "a green country girl" by a city man (245). So, Clara's story echoes the expected outcomes of rural to urban movement, with urbanity providing knowledge and sophistication and transforming this simple country girl. More significantly, urbanity becomes connected with same-sex romance through Clara's relationship with Kate. Often, sensing the limitations of her life and frustrated by the imperative to marry (both imposed by others and by herself), she thinks of Kate and the

better opportunities for women that she represents. In a passage that shows her confusion, she imagines fleeing to the city and becoming a professional woman as Kate intends to do, but she is also drawn in by her father's hopes that she will marry soon (195-6). After a young man from the city tries to court her, which is forced by her father, Clara becomes frustrated with marriage, and as she does later, reflects on the good qualities of her relationship with Kate. Clara's thoughts regarding their relationship are unambiguous, and unexpectedly, readers learn that it was Kate who held back. She thinks, "Kate Chancellor would have loved her. She was not unconscious of the fact that their friendship had been something more than friendship." Yet, the "inclination" toward physical intimacy "had been put down by Kate herself" (243).

Clara is conflicted, of course, but Kate remains an example of unselfish intimacy; same-sex romance is a valid possibility. Hence, while she cannot commit to it and instead resolves to marry, Clara does consider having relationships with women. These thoughts occur before her marriage, but significantly, Clara is again reminded of Kate *after* she marries Hugh, a marriage that is for the most part unsatisfying and frustrating for both. In a sensual passage that is worth citing at length, the narrator explains,

Her mind [. . .] began to caress the memory of her one woman friend, Kate Chancellor. Often on late spring afternoons as she and Kate had walked together something very like love-making had happened between them. They went walking along quietly and evening came on. Suddenly they stopped in the street and Kate had put her arms about Clara's shoulders. For a moment they stood thus

close together and a strange gentle and yet hungry look came into Kate's eyes.

(298-9)

The memory of this sensual moment, significantly, comes after Clara's spontaneous marriage to Hugh and the similarly spontaneous, and very frustrating, celebration thrown together by her father. Both of these events have compounded the disappointment that she anticipated while she also pursued marriage. It is Kate who could have brought optimism about the "sweetness of marriage" back for Clara (299). She and Hugh never really share such a moment, and instead, this sort of intimacy remains in the past. Thus, as the narrator has already explained, Clara's final weeks with Kate in the city would remain the most satisfactory of her life (184), contrasting with the dissatisfaction she often feels in Bidwell after her return.

Clara's marriage to Hugh is complicated, just as Clara's views of industrialism are conflicted. Driven by the imperative to marry, Clara romanticizes and mythologizes Hugh. Thinking of Hugh, she is "touched" by "the romance of industry" like the other Bidwell residents (246), and his factory represents a "powerful animal" that he has "tamed" (247), projecting a sense of virility and strength that in reality Hugh mostly lacks. Later, in an inexplicable turnabout, she blames her seemingly failed marriage on the frenzy of industrialism and mechanization. She decides that the "making of machines" was the reason for Hugh's inability to communicate with her, leading her to "[r]evolt against the whole mechanical impulse of her generation" (326). This mechanical coldness she attributes to Hugh relates in part to the sexual impasse of their marriage. This impasse is partially connected to Hugh's vexed sexuality (which remains oddly

immature throughout the novel) and masculine ineffectuality. His perplexing gender and sexuality are evident in his physical awkwardness, the “queerness” others associate with him, his passivity, and his conflicted perceptions of his own sexual desires. Even as an adult and after his success as an inventor, Hugh has a conflicted view of women and his sexual desires. Shortly before Clara’s return, the narrator describes Hugh as believing that “women were for other men but not for him” despite “an almost overwhelming physical hunger in himself” (230). Hugh seems mostly unable to act upon his desires, resisting having sex with Clara even after they marry. Failing to consummate his marriage, Hugh considers himself different than other men. Instead, it is Clara who must instigate their sexual relationship. Their marriage, then, makes Clara’s capitulation to traditional gender norms more difficult. In Columbus, as Oler explains, Clara had been offered “diverse opportunities for her career, her sexuality, and where she might live”; yet, ultimately, Anderson removes all three, leaving her with no other option than traditional gender norms (*Old-Fashioned* 48). The story’s conclusion gestures toward a new life for Clara and Hugh, although the ending itself is oddly unsatisfying. Now pregnant with what she triumphantly announces *must* be a male child, unlike their first child, Clara’s seems reassured that her resolution to marry was the correct one.

Yet, this triumph does not ease her struggle to reconcile the opportunities represented by Kate Chancellor and the city with the demands of heteronormative womanhood upon her return to Bidwell. The point is not that her rural community offers less opportunities for women but that her transition between rural and urban environments has shaped her views of gender and sexuality, which are ultimately never stable, even with this ending in mind. Clara’s movement between Bidwell and Columbus

only reinforces the complex negotiation between divergent influences or changes in this novel. These include the conflict between agrarianism and industrialism, rurality and urbanization, but more importantly, these also include the negotiation between different forms of gender and sexuality. Clara's time in the city shapes how she perceives gender and sexual expressions and norms, thus reinforcing to some extent the alignment of queerness with an urban environment. The novel engages with urban queer identities, as with Kate and her brother. Sexuality and gender are not straightforward in the small-town Midwest, however, as is apparent with Hugh and Clara's marriage to him. What is most important is the exchange between rural and urban, exacerbated by industrialism and urbanization, in this novel and how those forces shape gender and sexuality.

Departures and returns, rurality and urbanity, modernity and the agrarian prairie—all of these dichotomies are interconnected with shifting understandings of gender and sexuality in these works by Cather and Anderson. At this time of historical change, these writers also engaged with these shifting identities, categories, and perceptions of nonnormative gender and sexuality. Certainly, their representations of gender nonconformity and sexual difference contrast with current, more rigid constructions of such variance, but this does not mean their representations are less advanced, as the common progress narrative of queer identification and community would suggest. Instead, their portrayal of queerness—such as Cather's indirect approach and use of the urban/rural contrast and Anderson's engagement with the discourse of sexology—correspond with their complicated engagements with rurality and urbanity, modernity and

the past. While these texts may seem regionally and historically specific, the issues they raise, especially regarding the perception of rurality and the connections between place and gender and sexuality, apply beyond the modernizing Midwest.

CHAPTER II: QUEERING THE SMALL-TOWN SOUTH

The small-town South may at first seem like an unremarkable setting, mundane and lonesome, backward and uninteresting. The fiction of Carson McCullers and Truman Capote, however, offers a more complicated representation of southern small towns. Both writers also challenge the competing views that gender and sexual difference are either absent from such settings or that rural areas are inhospitable to queer people and queer ways of life. McCullers portrays small towns that at first may seem as expected: lonesome, sad, estranged. Yet, these towns are really more complex. McCullers shows how queer characters navigate their towns, as in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), and how their communities respond to them, most notably in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943). Queer characters in these two works exist on both the margins and at the centers of their communities. The first most intimately deals with the pressures that a young tomboy faces, seeing her small-town life as one source of that angst. Yet, her community is neither narrow nor prohibitive when it comes to nonnormative gender and sexuality. The latter shows how a commanding, gender-nonconforming woman can take the most central place in her community. Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) is similar to *The Member of the Wedding* in that it shows how gender nonconforming adolescents navigate their small town, the perhaps misleadingly named Noon City. *The Grass Harp* (1951) is more akin to *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in its focus on the town itself and its reaction to three misfits' odd decision to live in a tree house, a strange occurrence that reveals the oddest elements of this town and its unique operations, thus echoing McCullers's novella. These texts show that one cannot view the mid-century South

monolithically, nor can one ignore or view queerness in this setting simplistically. This last point is further complicated by McCullers's final novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961), which explores racism in the South at mid-century and its impact on same-sex desire. This novel can be usefully compared with James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1963), which similarly shows how race and class complicate same-sex relationships in a turbulent time for the South. These texts show that one must also directly consider the complex and troubling interplay between same-sex desire, race, and class in representations of the small-town South at mid-century.

Feeling Unjoined

Carson McCullers's major works are notable for their common preoccupation with small-town southern life in the mid-twentieth century. These texts are also noteworthy for their representation of gender nonconformity and sexual variance. In texts like *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, she brings these two concerns together, vividly capturing the queerest aspects of small-town life. In *The Member of the Wedding*, the tomboy Frankie Addams has mixed reactions to her town. She envisions herself as imprisoned within it, dreaming up elaborate and odd fantasies of escape, but in reality, the town is quite accommodating for queerness. Just as she must navigate this difficult summer, she must reconcile herself with her small town. The queerest aspects of McCullers's rural South, however, are most salient in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. In this novella, queer characters are central to their town, particularly the protagonist Amelia Evans, and McCullers shows the interesting ways that rural areas or

small towns deal with their “eccentrics,” including those whose eccentricity includes gender or sexual difference. McCullers’s small towns are often decidedly freakish and queer, undermining common metronormative assumptions about such areas, whereby places outside of the city are monolithically seen as either devoid of queerness or inherently hostile toward any such difference. Instead, McCullers’s small-town South is both an accommodating and, indeed, productive site for nonnormative gender and sexuality.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, the protagonist Frankie Addams views her town ambivalently. At times, her frustration with her life in this small town is quite emphatic, as when she tells Berenice, the Addams’ maid, “I just wish I could tear this whole town down” (25). At other times, her suffering is more poignant, as when the narrator says, “The town began to hurt Frankie” as she copes with the strange happenings around and within her (24). Later, however, when she feels that she may finally escape, she finds the sense of belonging that has been her greatest desire, as evident in McCullers’s description of how “the town called” to Frankie (50) and “opened before her and in a new way she belonged” (49). These varied reactions reflect Frankie’s restlessness and her desperate sense of being an “unjoined person” (3). Just as she hovers in thresholds, Frankie exists on the margins of her town, disconnected from others and prone to endless wanderings. As she reaches adolescence, Frankie is frightened by the impending changes she senses, leading to an inexplicable dread. As a tomboy, Frankie specifically feels the pressure to conform to normative gender expectations, which intensifies her dilemma and the precarious position she is in. She relies on fantasy and odd schemes to find her place in the world and to escape what she feels is her claustrophobic life, represented through the

novel's settings. While Frankie sees her small town as oppressive, and at times she seems correct, this setting actually accommodates difference, including gender and sexual variance, as is evident with Frankie's tomboyishness, her effeminate cousin John Henry, and other marginal characters. Thus, McCullers's small-town setting is not as repressive as one might assume, a principle that is developed further in her other texts.

For Frankie, the long summer of her twelfth year is troubling. It raises questions about identity and belonging. Frankie seems incapable of finding her place, evincing a sense of estrangement from others that is evident in her feelings of being an "unjoined person" and someone who was "a member of nothing in the world" (3). Mostly, the novel centers around Frankie's seemingly endless meanderings around town and her time with Berenice Sadie Brown and her cousin John Henry in the Addams' kitchen. McCullers establishes the context for Frankie's troubles in her opening descriptions of this summer and Frankie's town. This "green and crazy summer" quickly becomes "a green sick dream" and "like a silent crazy jungle under glass"; the town "turn[s] black and shrunken under the glare of the sun" (3). These images intensify the claustrophobic atmosphere of the novel, as described by Sarah Gleeson-White (18), with the town feeling enclosed in glass and the summer's intensity stifling Frankie. Frankie walks around town doing this and that, but often, she is isolated in the Addams kitchen with John Henry and Berenice, a space that seems suspended in time, where "[t]he world seemed to die each afternoon" (3). Suddenly, however, things seem to change for Frankie, a change that is inaugurated by the visit of her brother and his fiancé, which signals the beginning of Frankie's fantasy regarding the wedding. Frankie first senses that something important will happen to her, and she begins to focus on the wedding as her opportunity to leave her small town, which

she feels represents her stifled life more generally. Yet, what Frankie seems to feel is an unspecified, amorphous fear and a new sense of dread she cannot make sense of, which persists despite her fantasy of becoming a member of Jarvis's wedding. As McCullers writes, "Frankie was afraid. She did not know what caused this fear, but she was afraid" (8). This fear reflects her crisis of identity. She feels isolated, displaced, and rejected—feelings that are exacerbated by the changes of adolescence. In this "long queer season," things begin to change, but "Frankie did not understand this change" (22). These emotions and changes are represented, for example, by the "clubhouse" of local girls who reject Frankie. Rejected by the local girls, Frankie is first left with two other outsiders, the black maid Berenice and her effeminate cousin John Henry, whom she simultaneously resents and clings to as her only companions.

In response to these feelings of rejection and isolation, Frankie increasingly relies on fantasies whereby she can escape her life, culminating in her queerest one—becoming a "member" of her brother's wedding. At first, though, it seems that Frankie feels the simple need to escape her life in this small-town, as when she tells Berenice that she has "been ready to leave this town for so long" (7). Later, the narrator explains, "She did not know why she was sad, but because of this peculiar sadness, she began to realize she ought to leave town" (22). This fear and sadness are almost unbearable, and Frankie seems to envision the town itself as the actor in her feelings of persecution. This feeling is evident in a poignant passage where McCullers describes the town as "hurting" Frankie. She writes, "So she knew that she ought to leave the town and go to some place far away. [. . .] The town began to hurt Frankie. Sad and terrible happenings had never made Frankie cry, but this season many things made Frankie suddenly wish to cry" (24).

As she wanders around town, Frankie feels more isolated than connected, feeling that what she sees or hears in town is “left somehow unfinished,” and returning home after walking through town, she feels a “jazz sadness” that almost stops her heart (25). At several points, Frankie relies on fantasies of masculine pursuits, whereby she can imagine a life that is freer and more empowering than her current one. McCullers writes, “She wanted to be a boy and go to the war as a Marine. She thought about flying aeroplanes and winning gold medals for bravery” (23). Further, she is not afraid of the war, even the possibility of death, but instead is afraid because they would not include her in the war (presumably because she is female), which makes the world feel “separate from herself” (24). Her seemingly compromised fantasy, however, is still aspirational and masculine. She decides, instead, that she will donate blood, which would inspire respect for her. Thus, the army doctors would say that “the blood of Frankie Addams was the reddest and strongest blood that they had ever known”; using a masculine form of address, the soldiers who benefitted from her donation “would call her Addams” (23). Frankie’s aspirations are always quite fantastic. Further, as this example shows, Frankie envisions a more independent and empowered life, which is increasingly closed off to her.

While feeling the general impending changes of maturation, Frankie must also contend with the pressure to abandon her tomboyishness. Like Amelia Evans in McCullers’s *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, with whom Frankie is often linked, Frankie does not conform to the expectations of normative femininity. She is different in physical description, demeanor, and at first, her rejection of the expectations of femininity. Her appearance is markedly tomboyish. She is described, for example, as having hair that has “been cut like a boy’s” (4). Further, she is physically different than an idealized young

girl, as she recognizes, describing herself in terms of freakishness. During this crazy summer, she has grown so tall that “she was almost a big freak,” and “her shoulders were too narrow, her legs too long” (4). Frankie also seems to understand that no “lady” is as tall as she thinks she will become, being afraid of becoming nine feet tall by the time she is done growing. As she asks, “[W]hat would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a Freak” (19). Maturation entails new pressures to conform, which J. Jack Halberstam refers to as the “coercion of the masculine girl” in *The Member of the Wedding*, whereby formerly acceptable tomboyishness, when relegated to pre-adolescence, is countered by new demands once it seems to extend beyond that point (“Female Masculinity” 194, 193). As Gleeson-White explains, tomboyishness is only accepted as a phase, which is abandoned for proper southern womanhood; the female adolescent, like Frankie, is stuck in this liminal space between childhood and adulthood, masculinity and femininity (12, 13). McCullers represents this complex position in the way that Frankie often lingers on thresholds, for example, and the more general sense of suspension that terms like feeling “unjoined” evoke. Yet, these figurative senses of liminality are also very real for Frankie. This position is only further complicated by her tomboyishness and the demands that she “grow up” to be properly feminine (and by extension, properly heterosexual). Frankie does try to conform to these expectations at times, yet she most often fails. Her failures though are not really her mistakes. Instead, McCullers critiques these expectations overall, showing their tangible consequences for Frankie.

Queer characters often pop up on the margins of McCullers’s small towns, which is true for *The Member of the Wedding*, with two notable examples. While Frankie may at

times perceive her town as restrictive, it actually accommodates gender and sexual difference. First, Frankie herself witnesses two males having an unspecified sexual encounter. As she wanders about, she sees a “dark double shape” in an alley. Seeing the “two colored boys,” Frankie is reminded of the wedding: “something about the angle or the way they stood, or the pose of their shapes, had reflected the sudden picture of her brother and the bride” (75). That this image of same-sex desire evokes the same feelings as her brother’s wedding is important, although this equation may indicate Frankie’s inability to make sense of what she sees, using a heterosexual couple as a template. While these are marginal figures, such moments in McCullers’s fiction are significant as “passing glimpses” to remind readers of “alternatives to heterosexual desire” (Richards 170). That such “passing glimpses” occur in McCullers’s small-town South is important, as is underscored by the example of Lily Mae Jenkins, who Berenice mentions in her discussion of the “many a queer thing” she has witnessed (80). Lily Mae is the “man” who changed “his” sex and “turned into a girl”; “he” must be a well-known and visible figure in the town since “he” “prisses around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo” (81). Further, Lily Mae does not seem exceptional, at least to Berenice, who describes Lily Mae as just one of the “boys” she knew “to take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys” (81). This statement suggests Berenice knows of other “boys” like Lily Mae. Whether to describe Lily Mae as an effeminate gay man or a trans woman is unclear, but for Berenice, the fact that Lily Mae falls in love with a man is indicative of a transition in gender identity. Thus, when Lily Mae falls in love with Juney Jones (“a man, mind you”), Lily Mae “changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (81). Yet, Berenice does not seem malicious here, as when she tells John Henry offhandedly that it

“was just one of them things,” not necessarily needing any reasoning or explanation (82). Together, these two examples show how McCullers places queer characters both at the center of her narratives (as with Frankie and, later, Amelia Evans or Cousin Lymon) as well as at the periphery.

Like Frankie, her six-year-old cousin John Henry is a gender nonconforming character who is central to *The Member of the Wedding*. Along with Berenice, John Henry is Frankie’s constant companion. Noted for his effeminacy, John Henry acts as a counterpart to the tomboyish Frankie. For example, while Frankie is disappointed with the doll that her brother brings her, seemingly because it is both infantilizing and stereotypically feminine, John Henry is fascinated by it and seems grateful when Frankie gives it to him (18). He also dresses femininely at times, as when later in the novel, he “put[s] on Berenice’s hat and was trying to walk around in Berenice’s high-heeled shoes” (112). The result is quite freakish, with John Henry appearing like a “little old woman dwarf” in the hat and heels (113). John Henry’s curiosity about Lily Mae is suggestive as well. Frankie seems to move on quickly after Berenice finishes her description of Lily Mae, yet John Henry continues to question Berenice, fascinated by the possibility of changing one’s sex (82). John Henry seems to find sheer delight in his inner world that McCullers describes as “a mixture of delicious and freak” (96). He is a whimsical character, enjoying dressing in Berenice’s clothes, playing with Frankie’s doll, speaking in a voice that is “happy and high and strange” (96), and covering the walls of the kitchen with his “queer, child drawings” (6). Further, he and Frankie both express alternative visions to the restrictions of normative sex and gender, but as Rachel Adams shows, John Henry’s is the “queerest of all” in the novel, most potently expressing the potentiality of

queerness (574). John Henry is not afraid, as Frankie is, of being deemed a “freak” for his belief that everyone should be “half boy and half girl” (*Member of the Wedding* 97-8).

While before Frankie had been afraid of the “freaks” at the freakshow, including the Half-Man and Half-Woman (20), John Henry seems pleased that he could be one of them, “clos[ing] his eyes and smiling” when Frankie threatens to sell him to the Freak Pavilion (98). Further, while John Henry may be most easily identifiable with the sissy character, his feminine behavior does not limit him to this category. As his vision of the “half boy and half girl” indicates, he (like Frankie) can also represent more broadly the suspension of gender categories generally, to expand on Gleeson-White’s conclusion about McCullers’s tomboys. One must consider, however, the difference in age when it comes to Frankie and John Henry. While John Henry is currently exempt from the criticism that Frankie faces, readers wonder whether he would have soon felt similar pressures. (For example, while Berenice tries to guide and admonish Frankie, she dotes on John Henry.) Because he is not subject to the same exigencies that Frankie experiences, John Henry can most directly express and embrace such queer possibilities.

Most of the pressure Frankie faces comes from Berenice’s admonishments and advice. Because Frankie’s father is absent, Berenice is her primary adult caregiver. Berenice represents the voice of “normal” development, although she also seems sympathetic with Frankie’s troubles. Instead, she tries to get Frankie to conform to normative expectations, which Berenice seems to believe is her best chance at happiness. In part, Berenice seems to sympathize with Frankie because of her own feelings of “being caught,” although for her, race is the most central oppressive factor (119). When Frankie becomes unreasonably obsessed with the wedding, Berenice sees this fantasy as both

ludicrous and potentially dangerous for Frankie emotionally. Berenice instead believes that Frankie should become more feminine, which of course also means becoming suitably heterosexual. First, she tells Frankie that she “ought to begin thinking about a beau” (82). Secondly, Berenice says that it is time to change from being “so rough and greedy and big” and instead she should “fix [her]self up nice in [her] dresses” and “speak sweetly and act sly” (83). These changes would indicate that Frankie was developing normally and appropriately rather than giving into her queer fantasy of becoming a member of the wedding, which signals delay rather than the steady progress toward properly gendered, heteronormative adolescence. Frankie, however, cannot conform to these expectations, although she tries, as when she buys a dress for her brother’s wedding. When Frankie does try to act and dress more femininely, Berenice points out the contradictions in Frankie’s gender performance, showing how Frankie is unable to be convincingly feminine, even when she attempts to do so. The orange satin dress that Frankie buys for the wedding is inappropriate and gaudy, and it clashes with Frankie’s masculine appearance and behavior. As Berenice tells her, Frankie’s “hair shaved off like a convict” is incongruous with the ribbon she wears; likewise, the “grown woman’s evening dress” cannot distract from her brown crusty elbows (90). Berenice’s comments, while seemingly harsh, seem well-intentioned underneath. As the adult most involved in Frankie’s daily life, Berenice tries to guide Frankie as she navigates this transition into adolescence, echoing the expectations that process entails.

As Frankie becomes more deeply invested in her fantasy of leaving with Jarvis and Janice, she has a conflicted view of her town. In an often-discussed passage, Frankie has a realization: everyone who belongs has a “*we of me*,” and she believes that she is no

longer an “I person who had to walk around and do things by herself”; instead, her brother and his bride, in Frankie’s mind, become her “*we of me*” (42). This queer grouping is, of course, only real in Frankie’s mind. She feels their separation desperately, projecting her sense of loneliness on her current life in this small town. Jarvis and Janice are alone together elsewhere, and so she feels that “the hull of the old Frankie was left there in the town alone” (42). Frankie’s inexplicable belief that Jarvis and Janice are her “*we of me*” provides a feeling of belonging that she had previously lacked, which is then reflected in how she views her town and neighbors. The day before the wedding, Frankie spends much of her time wandering about town. Now “F. Jasmine,” a name chosen to match Jarvis and Janice, she feels connected with her town, and with the goal of sharing her plans with as many of the townspeople as possible, she feels suddenly that “the town opened before her and in a new way she belonged. Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw, and it was as a sudden member that [. . .] she went around the town” (49). Frankie also feels that “the town now called to her” (50), and so she wanders and compulsively tells people of her plans to join the wedding. In this sharing, she finds connection with strangers. Further, Frankie no longer feels that she needs the acceptance of the pretty, mature “club members”; her old jealousy fades away, and she only wishes to share with them about the wedding, although she does not (96). Before, being excluded from the club had exacerbated her feeling of being a “member of nothing in the world” (3). Now, she no longer feels that she needs them, although certainly, being a club member would be more appropriate. Yet, this sense of finding her “real self” is illusory, as Frankie herself intuits. Wandering around town, she again senses the “ghost of the old Frankie” trudging silently nearby (61, 62-3). Her wanderings reveal not just

this compulsion to share her plans. Her restlessness and aimless wandering reveal the tenuousness of such “connection” and the uncertainty of her plans. These conflicted feelings reveal the unsustainability of Frankie’s dream and the tenuousness sense of self that it provides her.

When Frankie’s plan to become a member of the wedding ends disastrously, she again feels caught in the life that she had found so stifling. She tries one last time to escape by running away, returning to her plan to “dress like a boy” and “join the Marines”; alternatively, she considers becoming a movie starlet, a more “feminine” role (150). Yet as expected, she fails to get away and instead wanders about town aimlessly until she is found by the police. Frankie again feels alienated in her small-town life, believing that she is displaced and cut off from any alternative, which she renders spatially. She thinks, “Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross. The plans for the movies or the Marines were only child plans” (157). Subsequently, she envisions her old life as an invisible prison, feeling a sense of pervasive oppression that encloses her. As she thinks when she sees the town jail, “It was better to be in a jail where you could bang the walls than in the jail that you could not see” (157). While one may expect that the failure of her various schemes would temper her attitude, Frankie finds yet another obsession at the end of the novel, her friendship with Mary Littlejohn. Yet again, the thirteen-year-old Frankie—now “Frances”—reinvents herself. She sees herself as more cultured and mature, affecting an appreciation for the arts because of Mary. Interestingly, however, she still seems to hold onto some of her prior masculine fantasies, deciding that she would become “a great poet—or else the foremost authority on radar” (159), indicating

that although this new friendship is more appropriate for an adolescent girl, Frankie may not have completely abandoned her tomboyishness. Berenice seems to recognize how this fascination with Mary Littlejohn is just as problematic as Frankie's obsession with the wedding. With John Henry dead, Berenice getting married, and Jarvis out of the country, Frankie seems now most invested in this friendship for her sense of belonging. McCullers ends with Frankie feeling an "instant shock of happiness" upon hearing Mary at the door (163), expressing the same intensity of feeling that has characterized all of her fantasies of finding her "*we of me*." Significantly, in this final scene, Frankie and Berenice are preparing for the Addams' move to the suburbs, which may provide Frankie another opportunity to reinvent herself away from the town where she has felt marginalized and following this long, oppressive summer.

Even more so than in *The Member of the Wedding*, space is essential to McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, as she establishes from the beginning: "The town itself is dreary" and "lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world" (3). The narrator thus evokes common images of small towns, yet this description belies both the uniqueness of this community and the tale that follows. While Frankie hovers on the margins of her town, feeling both excluded and oppressed by her life there, Amelia Evans is the most important person in her even smaller town. Her significance is literalized through the placement of her home and the site of her now closed café, which is described as being at "the very center of the town" (3). While Amelia has now secluded herself in this dreary, boarded-up home, this ballad really concerns the town's past, particularly its height as it corresponds to the café. The narrator explains that "here in this very town there once was a café" and that "this old

boarded-up house was unlike any other place for miles” (4). This description of Amelia’s home, along with the opening description of the “dreary” and “sad” town, contrasts with the memory of the café and Amelia’s former prominence. The memory of the café, which was so important to the town, still lingers. As the narrator states, “The café has long since been closed, but it is still remembered” (4). With its closure, the town has become derelict, sad, and “lonesome.”

Through this story of Amelia and her café, McCullers captures the machinations of small towns, the position of nonconforming characters in them, and the way such communities deal with or relate to their queerest residents. These dynamics are most important in the relationship between Amelia and her community, but the arrival of the similarly queer Cousin Lymon and the ensuing changes to the town bring these issues to the forefront. Neither castigated nor marginalized, Amelia in fact becomes so central to this small town that her rise and tragic downfall becomes inseparable from that of her community. This novel then, even more so than McCullers’s other major works, challenges common perceptions of small towns and queer folks there.

From the beginning, Amelia is marked by her gender and sexual ambiguity. Again, the narrator contrasts the present with the past. Now locked away, Amelia appears “sexless” as she peers out from her window (3), but at her height, she was commanding and powerful, taking on masculine mannerisms (although later her gender performance is more complicated) and spurning heteronormative expectations. In the past, Amelia was “a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man”; she kept her hair cut short and wore overalls (4-5). While her appearance and demeanor are important, her position in

the town enhances her masculine, or at least ambiguous, gender identity. She is perhaps the most powerful figure in the town, known for her business acumen (since she is described as the “richest woman for miles around”) and litigiousness as well as her doctoring abilities and the strength of her illegal liquor (4-5). This sort of authority comes, at least in part, from her assumption of traditionally masculine roles within the town. It is only after being stripped of power and influence that Amelia appears “sexless.”

Amelia also resists not only heterosexuality but sexuality more broadly, thereby challenging traditional gender and sexual norms. Despite her masculine appearance and abrasive presence, however, “There were those who would have courted her, but Miss Amelia cared nothing for the love of men” (4). Amelia’s sexual ambiguity comes through in two significant ways, namely her strange marriage to Marvin Macy (which lasted ten days and caused a scandal in the town) and, later, her nontraditional relationship with Cousin Lymon. This novella is notable because of Amelia’s hypervisibility and authority and the town’s general acceptance of—even reverence for—Amelia, despite (or perhaps because of) her deviance from gender and sexual norms. Yet, it is difficult to solidify Amelia’s gender and sexuality because she neither presents as homosexual nor is consistently masculine. Gary Richards succinctly captures the remarkable complexity of Amelia’s gender and sexuality, describing her as “a gender-transitive person who is largely divested of an overt sexual identity” (189) and noting that her gender and sexual identity are “most centrally structured by violations of gender norms and rejections of sexuality” (189-190). These descriptions underscore the similarities between Amelia and

Frankie from *The Member of the Wedding*, and as will be discussed later, between Amelia and Verena Talbo in Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*.

Common perceptions of rural areas, including small towns like those portrayed in McCullers's fiction, presume that such settings would be antithetical to such deviance as represented by Amelia and, later, Cousin Lymon. That assumption has become so pervasive as to seem commonsensical, but McCullers challenges this limited perception of small towns. Colin R. Johnson points to the unique relationships between rural communities and their "eccentrics," countering the belief in the "inherent toxicity of rural areas with respect to queer behavior and queer forms of life" (113). He argues that "rural and small-town Americans have a long history of accounting for various forms of difference" and "discernably queer people have actually been relatively familiar figures in the American provinces" (110). He describes these "eccentrics" as those "whose queerness was alluded to and sometimes commented on disapprovingly, but whose deep embeddedness within their communities also kept them surprisingly safe" from mistreatment (21). It is not surprising, then, to see queer characters occupying both the margins of McCullers's small towns, as in *The Member of the Wedding* (and later, *Clock Without Hands*), or commanding space at the center of their communities, as in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Johnson's argument challenges a monolithic view of rural areas. What Johnson highlights instead is the distinct qualities of the relationships between a presumably heterosexual and "properly" gendered population of such areas and their queerer neighbors, such as the role of familiarity, community solidarity, and personal relationships that supersede difference (118). This point elucidates the dynamics between Amelia and her community, as well as other transgressive characters, whether marginal

or central, in McCullers's fiction. Certainly, Amelia's relationship with her town is neither easy nor straightforward, nor does the town readily make sense of gender and sexual difference (as evident not only with Amelia but also Lymon and a very minor character, Morris Feinstein). Overall, though, this small town not only accepts but actually in some ways reveres two of its queerest residents, who take on central positions in their community and are responsible for its greatest moment—the time of the café.

Certainly, the town's relationship to Amelia is complex and sometimes notably ambivalent. Generally, the townsfolk seem to accept, or at least overlook, her nonconformity, but they do at times seem to hope she would change, as is discussed in the context of Amelia's disastrous marriage to Marvin Macy years ago. Their "queer marriage" is described as one that was "strange and dangerous" and "left the whole town wondering and shocked" (5, 4). Before its inexplicable and shocking conclusion ten days later, the town was initially "gratified" by the marriage, and "hoped that it might reform" the bride. Yet, as the narrator succinctly concludes, "They were wrong" (30). McCullers further emphasizes the town's investment in this marriage by literally making the couple subject to the town's oversight. The narrator explains that some of the young boys watched through the windows on Amelia's wedding night, where they witnessed something "unholy": Amelia's emphatic and violent rejection of Marvin's sexual overtures. The town then witnesses the series of events that unfold, leading to Amelia's total rejection of Marvin when she kicks him out for good despite his excessive efforts to win her love. Of course, as the town understands it, her rejection of Marvin represents a failure to adhere to a fundamental expectation of heterosexual marriage (i.e., the consummation of the union). It is important to note, however, that while the town has

some investment in the marriage, they do not take an active role in Amelia's possible reform, nor do they take any punitive actions for her failure to do so. Instead, the people "laughed a long time over this grotesque affair" and remember Marvin only in terms of this pathetic and almost comical failure (33). Certainly, they pity Marvin to an extent at the time because not only had he been spurned but also because "the whole town [knew] it" (31). The failed marriage becomes another of Amelia's idiosyncrasies and part of the lore surrounding her, unimportant until Marvin's return to the town to seek his revenge. As the narrator makes clear, the townspeople never understood why Amelia married Marvin in the first place, and her discomfort with this role is clear from the beginning (29-30). The town's reaction is ambivalent, shifting between hopes for Amelia's reformation and a tacit acceptance of her rejection of marriage—and by extension, her rejection of heteronormative marriage and sexuality in general.

This discussion of Amelia's marriage highlights an important component of the novella that contributes to its small-town setting, namely the narrator (or balladeer) who weaves this tale. The novella in general is framed in a way that evokes collective memory and knowingness. Recounting the town's lore and the tales and gossip surrounding Amelia, the narrator offers a unique, seemingly first-hand insight into events, helping establish the tone and mood of this small, southern town. Dawson F. Gaillard agrees, arguing that the balladeer's tale "suggest[s] a sense of place" acquired after living there for a while (420). It is, as Gaillard notes, a "human voice" that reflects an attempt to come to grips with the events described (427). This attempt to reconcile the present with the past gives this ballad its emotional power and brings in the reader more intimately with these characters and events (422). This insight into the community is evident, for

example, in the narrator's discussion of Morris Feinstein, a very minor character who nonetheless contributes to the history and shared knowledge of the town. Unlike the novella's primary characters, Amelia and Cousin Lymon, Morris is a marginal one, but he comes to signify gender (and by extension sexual) nonconformity in a way akin to Lily Mae Jenkins in *The Member of the Wedding*, who is similarly absent but used as an example by Berenice. The pitiable Morris was a former resident of the town, yet he remained an outsider both because of his effeminacy and his Jewishness. Evoking both of these qualities, he is described as "a quick, skipping Jew" who was prone to crying. Years after Morris's departure, his name still holds "certain special meaning" for the townsfolk. As the narrator explains, "[I]f a man were prissy in any way, or if a man ever wept, he was known as a Morris Feinstein" (9). He thus becomes part of the townsfolk's shorthand for identifying men who deviate from gender expectations, specifically Cousin Lymon in this context. Yet, while the men here nod knowingly, their intention does not seem necessarily derogatory or malicious, further underscoring how gender variance is somewhat accommodated in the town. The narrator's insight into such shared knowledge and vocabulary is essential for establishing the small-town setting and tone of the novella and showing how the townspeople themselves perceive these eccentrics.

Cousin Lymon's arrival in town sets the central action of the novella in motion, and like Amelia, Lymon quickly becomes a hypervisible figure in the town. His sudden appearance in the town becomes a prime impetus for one of the most notable machinations of small towns—rumor and gossip. Gossip had come in, certainly, surrounding Amelia's marriage to Marvin, but the initial gossip surrounding Amelia and Lymon is a more extensive example of how small-town gossip works. This rumor, which

is prompted by Lymon's absence the morning following his arrival, speculates that Amelia must have murdered him overnight. It makes such a sensation that the narrator, and therefore presumably the townsfolk more broadly, remember this as the "day the rumor started." The rumor was "so terrible that the town and all the country about were stunned by it" (13). The way this rumor spreads is almost comical, slowly becoming a grim tale of theft and murder. The narrator explains that "within an hour" of the rumor's first utterance, "the news had swept the town." Subsequently, the town creates a "fierce and sickly tale" that "cause[d] the heart to shiver" (13). This rumor enlivens the town, sparking what the narrator describes as an "unholy holiday" (23). Further, the town is reminded of Amelia's own eccentricity and scandalous past, with some of the townspeople judging Amelia for reasons other than this rumor, notably for her height, which is described as "unnatural in a woman," and her "puzzling marriage, which was the most unreasonable scandal ever to happen in this town" (14). Amelia's deviance is thus brought into this minor and ludicrous scandal.

This rumor also further underscores Amelia's hypervisibility in the town (and even the surrounding areas) and anticipates how the town will view the spectacle of her relationship with Lymon, the changes in her gender performance, and the odd triangle that develops between these two and Marvin later in the novella. Importantly, this brief "unholy holiday" culminates in the opening of the café, which provides a sense of belonging for the townspeople that they did not have before. It also inspires, as the narrator explains, a "certain pride that had hitherto not been known in these parts," countering what the narrator describes as a sense of the "cheapness of life" and expendability with a sense of worth and dignity (54). Further, it seems that because two

such odd people run the café that it represents a space not only for laborers but also other marginalized folks, such as “bachelors” and “consumptives,” among other “unfortunate people” (55). This space, centered on the queer Amelia and Lymon, thereby becomes a space for all, including those who are likewise marginalized.

If Amelia’s story concerns the relation between this community and its most prominent “eccentric,” then Cousin Lymon’s presence further underscores these dynamics. Like Amelia, Lymon is set apart by his physical peculiarity because he is a dwarfish hunchback. While his arrival is met with gossip and bewilderment, he quickly settles into the life of the town. The fascination surrounding him seems intensified, rather than diminished, by his freakishness and eccentricity. He easily connects with the men who gather at Amelia’s soon after his arrival, and as the narrator explains, “It was as though he had lived in the town for years” and was “a well-known character” (20). Like Amelia, he is marked by his gender ambiguity, as is evident first in his crying, when he is described as a “regular Morris Feinstein,” and his reappearance following the rumors of his supposed murder. In a scene when he is described repeatedly as different from “ordinary men,” his attire is ambiguous, neither masculine nor feminine since he wears a men’s shirt belonging to Amelia and a lime-green shawl (18). Furthermore, the relationship that rather quickly develops between Amelia and Lymon is inexplicable. Amelia initially distrusts Lymon, who claims to be her kin, yet they rather quickly and unexpectedly fall into an odd, desexualized relationship, with Lymon becoming her “beloved,” in McCullers’s terminology.

Just as Amelia's relationship with Marvin is carefully scrutinized by the townspeople, Amelia's relationship with Lymon is similarly public. The changes it brings for the lovestruck Amelia are significant, including changes in her gender performance, as when she starts wearing a dress on Sundays, although she continues to dress in boots and overalls the rest of the week (24). Further, she becomes more sensitive and "softened" by love, as the narrator explains, signaling a shift in her demeanor and manners (40, 45). All of these changes are perceived by the town, which is struck by this odd pairing. This desexualized relationship is notably one-sided, however, with Amelia doting on Lymon but getting little affection in return, as is evident when Lymon so quickly transfers his attention to Marvin later. McCullers provides a paradigm, however, to understand this type of dynamic in the often-discussed discourse on love (25-6). Notably, this paradigm is a rather queer one, marked neither by gender nor by sexuality (nor any identifying categorical markers). This paradigm also explains the unevenness of the lover/beloved dynamic. The lover must deal with his or her love in many private, often painful, ways; the beloved must resist the significant impositions of the lover. Significantly, McCullers argues that the lover can be anyone, whether "a man, woman, child, or indeed any human creature on this earth"; similarly, "the beloved can be of any description" (26). The lover/beloved framework can thereby account for the uneven heterosocial relationship between the gender ambiguous Amelia and Lymon, just as it later explains Lymon's unreciprocated homoerotic attraction to Marvin Macy.

If Amelia's relationship with Lymon has been a public spectacle, Marvin's return to town only further complicates this relationship and makes the town deal with an even more complex set of relationships. Just as Lymon had become Amelia's beloved, Marvin

quickly and unexpectedly becomes Lymon's. In fact, upon first seeing him, Lymon becomes infatuated and acts absurdly to get his attention. The narrator says that "since setting eyes on Marvin Macy the hunchback was possessed by an unnatural spirit" and "was full of silly schemes to attract attention to himself." He follows Marvin around town, and when he is consistently ignored, "grieve[s] publicly" (52). This triangle further challenges heteronormative expectations. Following the lover/beloved dynamic established in the discourse on love, Lymon's infatuation with Marvin, which parallels Amelia's for the hunchback, shows that this type of love is not restricted by gender or sexual categories nor requires the differentiation between types of love or love-objects. Richards argues that McCullers shows, with detachment, the "circulations of unreciprocated desire"; first, the novel "interrogates" Amelia's emotional investment in Lymon, and then the focus shifts to Lymon's "inexplicable homoerotic investment in Marvin" and thereby "invites comparison between the two loves" (168). Further, Marvin does not return Lymon's affection; instead, he uses Lymon for his revenge against Amelia. While these relationships are certainly odd, McCullers's theory of the lover and beloved is notably tolerant and nonjudgmental. Gleeson-White argues that in McCullers's fiction, "neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality is ideal or 'normal'—all subject positions and all desires are haunted by intriguing oddities and strangenesses" (67). Thus, although these relationships may appear odd, McCullers—and perhaps the narrator, who is after all the one who proposes the theory of the lover/beloved—does not marginalize or dismiss either of them. Certainly, however, this queer situation makes Amelia and Lymon even more of a public spectacle because it further challenges gender and sexual norms in highly visible ways.

The town's emotions toward Amelia come out most powerfully and poignantly in the climactic moment of the novella: Amelia's wrestling match with her ex-husband and now-rival, Marvin, who has intruded on her happiest moment—and the greatest time for the town itself. Lymon's infatuation with Marvin, although unreciprocated, intensifies the hostility between Amelia, who ineffectually tries to win back Lymon's attention, and Marvin, who is determined on getting revenge. As with everything else, the town anticipates this final confrontation, aware that this situation between Amelia, Marvin, and Lymon is unsustainable. The fight again gets the attention of not only the townspeople but also countless people from the country, becoming a public spectacle, although one that quickly becomes menacing (63-4). While the fight itself is significant, its aftermath is most important here. Amelia, whom the town was backing in the fight, is certainly a worthy opponent. She has abandoned her red dress, stands one inch taller than Marvin, and fights as viciously as he does (65). Amelia only loses because Lymon intervenes at the critical moment and helps Marvin defeat her, again acting on his infatuation with Marvin at Amelia's expense. Her defeat leaves the town aghast. As the narrator explains, the townspeople were unable to process what happened, even though they witnessed the fight firsthand. Instead of reveling in her defeat, the narrator explains, "The crowd was quiet, and one by one people left the café. [. . .] This was not a fight to hash over and talk about afterward; people went home and pulled the covers up over their heads" (67). The townspeople are left powerless, although they wish to assist Amelia, again showing their concern and respect for her. As the narrator says, "The people would have helped her if they had known how, as people in this town will as often as not be kindly if they have a chance" (68). Gleeson-White argues that Amelia, because of her influence and masculine

behavior, is seen as a threat and so must be punished, implying that the community itself had wished for her defeat (72), yet the above passages indicate the opposite. That argument mischaracterizes the important, albeit complicated, relationship between Amelia and her neighbors. Really, Amelia has become so central to the town that her defeat parallels and *even prompts* the town's decline. So, this ballad mourns not only the loss of the café but also the tragic downfall of the remarkable Amelia.

Love Has No Geography

Noon City is located in the hinterlands of “lonesome country” and is “not much to look at”—a place with one main road of ramshackle buildings that appears suddenly after an “abrupt bend in the road” and disappears quickly in the same way (3, 16-7). Thus, Truman Capote introduces the misleadingly named small town of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. This setting is what Joel Harrison Knox, the young protagonist of the novel, encounters as he ventures from his former home in New Orleans to the mysterious Gothic estate, Skully's Landing. These descriptions echo those of the small-town setting of Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, which is similarly described as “lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world” (3). Noon City is nondistinctive, where the only way most people leave is through death, or as Capote writes, “to wend his lonesome way” to “where forsaken tombstones gleam like stone flowers among the weeds” above the Baptist church (18). The town then can seem to be at odds with the more prominent setting of the novel, Skully's Landing, which is shrouded in Gothic mystery and a sordid history. The estate is seemingly

notorious. Capote first intimates the Landing's reputation when Roberta Lacy, the owner of the Princely Palace (a bar in town), refers to it as "the Skulls," although she is cut off from explaining why; she then warns Joel to not "go traipsin over there" (24).

Anticipating a reunion with his father, Joel is ultimately disappointed and perplexed, facing inexplicable mysteries. Joel believes that he has been summoned to Noon City and Skully's Landing by his father following his mother's death, and the novel then traces his coming of age. The Gothic setting of Skully's Landing can overshadow Noon City, yet the small-town setting is central to Capote's fiction, both in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and later *The Grass Harp*, just as it is in McCullers's fiction.

Gender and sexual difference are central in the novel, not only for Joel but also for the flamboyant Cousin Randolph and the tomboy Idabel Thompkins. Joel is marked by his effeminacy from the beginning. Seeking a ride to Noon City, which is hard to come by, Joel finds help from Sam Radcliff, a driver who is described as having a "rough, manly face." Sam is struck, however, by Joel's effeminacy. As Capote writes, Sam "had his notions of what a 'real' boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; each of his features was shaped with a sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes" (4). Such descriptions are consistent throughout the novel. In addition to his own effeminacy, however, Joel's gender and sexuality are made further ambiguous by his proximity to two other characters, Cousin Randolph and Idabel. Joel's relationship with the thirty-year-old Cousin Randolph is particularly formative for Joel. At the Landing, Joel's effeminacy seems generally accepted by those around him, such as the housekeeper Zoo and his father's wife Miss Amy. Living with the highly flamboyant Randolph, Joel may be tacitly

encouraged to express his effeminacy, just as Randolph's behavior and whims are always accommodated. Joel's friendship with Idabel, however, is particularly important in the first parts of the novel. Idabel, whom Joel encounters when he first arrives in Noon City, is described as appearing and acting in masculine ways. She is thus contrasted with Joel, the "sissy"; together, they evoke the common representations of the gender nonconforming adolescent that also found in McCullers's fiction. Joel and Idabel must contend with the demands of others while also negotiating their own coming of age, reminding one of Frankie's struggle in *The Member of the Wedding*.

Cousin Randolph's reputation precedes him as Joel makes his way to Skully's Landing. When asked about the people living at the Landing, Sam Radcliff mentions "the cousin... yes, by God, the cousin!" He also suggestively responds to Joel's question about Randolph by "merely smil[ing] a curious smile, as if amused by a private joke too secret for sharing" (15), expressing a knowingness that is often indicative of the ultimate secret, homosexuality. Randolph is marked as feminine from the beginning, yet again in connection to Sam. Before Sam takes Joel to Noon City, Joel shows him a letter that he believes was written by his father but was actually written by Randolph. Seeing the letter, Sam is bothered by the handwriting, which is described as a "maze of curlicues and dainty i's and even daintier o's." Sam responds indignantly, asking himself, "What the hell kind of man would write like that?" (8), a reaction that echoes his reaction to Joel's "violation" of his expectations for a "real boy." Further, Cousin Randolph is explicitly connected to homosexuality, first through his effeminacy and then through his openness in discussing his attraction to men and his infatuation with a boxer he used to know, Pepe Alvarez. Capote only suggests that the other gender variant characters—Joel and

Idabel—feel same-sex attraction, but with Cousin Randolph, he is explicit. Randolph's dilettantish demands seem to determine everything at the Landing, including its the old-fashioned, overwrought décor, and his Wildean quips dominate the dinner conversation. At first, Joel finds Randolph off-putting, although Randolph tries to develop an intimacy with Joel early on. Randolph is remarkably feminine in his mannerisms, "patt[ing] his lips daintily" at his first dinner with Joel and "gigg[ing] in the manner of an old maid" (76, 77). At the beginning, Joel seems reluctant to get close to Randolph, but eventually, it is Randolph that he becomes closest to and with whom he most identifies.

While Joel's relationship with Randolph is certainly formative, particularly at the end of the novel, his friendship with Idabel Thompkins is also important. Idabel is Noon City's tomboy, often raising hell and drawing the ire of the town's older inhabitants. Joel first encounters the wild Idabel when he arrives in Noon City, seeing her torment the one-armed barber (20). Idabel's consistent and excessive gender deviance is remarkable, with her tomboyishness far surpassing Joel's effeminacy, although she frequently taunts him for being a "sissy-britches" (108, 109). Idabel is also like the tomboyish Frankie Addams in because of her physical appearance and demeanor. When Joel first sees her, Idabel is described as having "fiery, chopped-off red hair" and a "boy-husky voice"; she also swaggers and is impertinent, thus lacking the proper manners for a young girl (26). Further, just as Frankie is admonished by Berenice for not being and behaving femininely enough, Idabel is frequently reproached by others for her tomboyishness, as when the owner of the Princely Palace chastises her for not having "ladylike manners" and asserts, as Berenice does, that Idabel needs to wear "some decent female clothes" (26-7). Idabel is unrelenting in her masculine performance and takes on the mannerisms of an adult

man, as when she calls Joel “son” or “boy” (104), or later, when she spits her gum “like tobacco, and hook[s] her thumbs in the belt rungs of her khaki shorts” (177). Her sustained and excessive masculine performance makes her stand out, yet she is, remarkably, unmoved by the townspeople’s criticism.

Like Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, Idabel seems to feel the same conflict between her tomboyishness and the new demands she faces while resisting feminine roles and their constraints. Their similarities are evident in two almost identical passages. In *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers describes how Frankie “wanted to be a boy and go to the war as a Marine” and dreamed of “flying airplanes and winning gold medals for bravery” (23). In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Idabel expresses the same sentiment, saying, “I never think like I’m a girl [. . .] I want so much to be a boy: I would be a sailor, I would...” (132), and later, when she and Joel run away, she wants to “join the navy” rather than do anything “sissy” as Joel wants to do (174). Idabel, however, senses the futility of these aspirations and her desire to “be a boy” and hesitates to even finish her thought about becoming a sailor. This sense of impossibility evokes a feeling akin to Frankie’s description of being in a jail without bars (*Member of the Wedding* 157). Idabel tells Joel about the time the townsmen were tracking down an escaped convict, describing how she thought “I was him and he was me and it was both of us they were out to catch” (*Other Voices, Other Rooms* 177). It often seems that Idabel acts tough as a way to resist the imposition of normative gender roles, but the ineffectuality of such resistance leads to her sense of being “caught.” Idabel is also associated with freakishness, as when the barber’s wife describes her as a “freak” at the beginning of the novel (21). Capote suggests that Idabel also sees herself as freakish, just

as Frankie does, which comes up when Joel and Idabel visit the freak-tent at the town's fair. There, they meet the "midget" Miss Wisteria, one of the "freaks" who attracts both Joel and Idabel. Miss Wisteria perceives the conflicting emotions that Idabel must feel, which she sees as expressed in Idabel's infatuation with her. Miss Wisteria asks Joel, "Poor child, is it that she believes she is a freak too?" (195), making the connection between the "freak" and the freakish tomboy explicit. This sense of possible recognition echoes what Frankie feels when she visits the freakshow, believing that she could "be a freak" too (*Member of the Wedding* 19). She remembers years later how "they had looked at her in a secret way" as if to say "we know you" (20). Miss Wisteria pities Idabel because she may be drawn to Miss Wisteria for the same reasons, acting in odd ways to impress her, as when Idabel uses her lipstick to paint "an awkward clownish line across her mouth" (*Other Voices, Other Rooms* 192), a "feminine" action that only emphasizes her freakishness.

Idabel and Joel display a complicated dynamic that often seems like a competition between the tomboy and the sissy. Because of their gender nonconformity, however, they are connected. At first, Idabel seems to reject the effeminate Joel just as she rejects anything feminine. Joel is likewise openly hostile toward Idabel initially because of her tomboyishness, feeling that she will bully him just as he had been bullied by another tomboy in New Orleans (33). Later, she he taunts him for his effeminacy, telling him, "Go on home and cut out paper dolls, sissy-britches." In response, he thinks, "Like every other tomboy, Idabel was mean, just gut-mean" (109). Yet, their dynamic shifts as the novel progresses. This change, for example, is evident when Idabel drops her taunts and refers to Joel endearingly as "my fine dandy" (123). Further, while Idabel seems to be

consistent in her masculinity, she cannot prevent the changes of adolescence, as evident when she and Joel go swimming. In conflicting descriptions, Idabel appears “more boyish” and gangly without her clothes, but Joel sees that her breasts had “commenced to swell” and that “there was about her hips a mild suggestion of approaching width” (133). These descriptions highlight the tension between Idabel’s tomboyishness and burgeoning femininity, a tension that Frankie must deal with in *The Member of the Wedding*. Idabel continues to react to Joel’s body with detachment, saying that “what you’ve got in your britches is no news to me, and no concern of mine”; further, she tells him that “I never think like I’m a girl” when he worries about them swimming nude together (132). While Joel (and the readers) see how Idabel is undergoing change, Idabel holds onto her masculine identification, rejecting normative gender and sexual expectations. While Joel is consistent in his effeminacy, he does at one point try to affect masculine behaviors, although this switch is ineffective. Idabel’s masculinity seems at one point to have gotten to Joel, and in response, he tries to act more tough. Almost comically, however, Joel’s masculine posturing is quickly put to the test: coming across a snake, Joel is stunned and cannot defend himself or Idabel. Instead, Idabel must kill the snake (180-1). These gender dynamics, then, become mobile and more complicated as the novel progresses.

Idabel seems to completely reject heterosexual desire and identification. Idabel is okay, for example, when she and Joel become friends and coconspirators, yet she cannot cope with the possibility of heterosexual relationships, as is evident when Joel unexpectedly tries to become affectionate with her. When he kisses her cheek, she becomes violent with him (134). Later, in a scene that is a counterpart to the snake scene, Capote highlights Idabel’s rejection of adult heterosexuality, with hers and Joel’s roles

being reversed. Seeing two people having sex in the woods, Idabel reacts with fear while Joel seems to embrace his burgeoning sexual desires. He does not understand why Idabel is afraid. Capote writes that “she’d been the hero under the mill, but now he had no weapon with which to defend her, and even if this were not true he wouldn’t have known what it was she wanted killed” (188). This fear seems to highlight the unique pressures that Idabel faces, just as Frankie does, expectations that Joel may be exempt from, either because he is male or because queerness is accommodated—or even encouraged—at the Landing. Capote suggests that Idabel feels nascent same-sex attraction, as comes about at the town fair. There, Idabel tries to woo Miss Wisteria. As Joel realizes by Idabel’s almost inexplicable and baffling behavior, Idabel falls in love with Miss Wisteria. In contrast to her aggressive behavior with Joel and others, Idabel “humble[s] herself” in front of Miss Wisteria, giving her a “dumb adoring smile”; in response, Joel concludes that “Idabel was in love” (192, 193). While Richards only looks at the male characters from *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, his arguments apply to Idabel. Capote conflates, Richards argues, gender nonconformity and homosexual identity, concluding that Joel’s effeminacy is consistent enough “to anticipate Joel’s ultimate gayness within the matrix of sex, sexuality, and gender that Capote presents” (37). This conclusion applies to Idabel as well. It seems then that Capote, as he does with Joel, scripts Idabel as a protogay character, one whose gender performance and nascent same-sex attractions anticipate her future identity.

At the end of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, a significant shift in dynamics occurs. After Joel and Idabel fail to run away and instead are driven home by a storm, Joel changes, and Idabel is almost forgotten. Instead, Joel shifts his allegiance to Randolph,

signaling changes within Joel in terms of age, and as Richards effectively demonstrates, in Joel's sexual identity. When he loses Idabel at the fair, Joel seems to realize the depth of his affection for Idabel, yet following his illness, he abandons her, and her fate is never clear. Joel feels as if he is beyond Idabel now, describing her as part of the "old Joel." His relationship with Idabel is left behind. Yet he realizes that her memory still lingers, like a ghost. He is reminded of her as the "hoodlum" who threw stones at the barber, killed the snake, and had a "rough voice" (210). The "new" Joel is allied with Randolph.

Previously, Randolph had mystified and even frustrated Joel. As Randolph cares for him as he is sick though, the two become close, and Joel realizes he "loves" Randolph, although he cannot fully express that love (211). This new relationship signals Joel's maturation and his increasing acceptance of and identification with Randolph. His acceptance of Randolph, however, is predicated on his abandonment of his childish sissiness and his tomboy compatriot.

Unlike *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* more centrally deals with queer occurrences in the small-town South as public affairs. This novel is told from the perspective of Collin Fenwick, who was sent to live with his unmarried aunts, Verena and Dolly Talbo, following his mother's death. Now an adult, Collin describes the time he, Dolly, their friend Catherine Creek, along with two other outsiders, took up residence in a China tree, causing a minor scandal in their hometown. *The Grass Harp* centralizes setting and place in ways akin to McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Both McCullers's novella and Capote's *The Grass Harp* seem more public in their emphasis on the small-town communities rather than the more private and personal stories of *The Member of the Wedding* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Thomas

Fahy notes the nostalgia evident in the novel and its setting, describing the story as “an idealization of the past and of rural life” (9). Not only does Capote provide a nostalgic snapshot of a small-town, he also represents the operations of a small town surrounding rather queer occurrences. Further, queer characters are neither rejected nor consigned to the margins; instead, two of its queerest residents occupy central positions in the town, although Collin deals with his burgeoning sexuality privately. The decision to reside in the China tree is not the only queer thing about this novel; this event merely highlights the already queer elements of this small town.

Just as *Other Voices, Other Rooms* traces Joel’s coming of age, *The Grass Harp* charts Collin’s, centering around his time with his fellow outsiders in the China tree. His early life, as with Joel, was marked by loss, first by his mother’s death and then his subsequent abandonment by his father, when his aunt Verena intervened to take custody of Collin. Since then, Collin has grown accustomed to his life with his peculiar aunts, particularly his close bond with the eccentric Dolly, along with Dolly’s close friend, Catherine Creek, a black woman who tries to pass as Native American. These three unlikely companions have a dynamic akin to that of Joel and Zoo in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry in *The Member of the Wedding*. Dolly is childlike, innocent, and much kinder than the abrasive and domineering Verena. Further, the masculine Verena is excluded from this domestic setting that centers on Dolly, Catherine, and—importantly—Collin. As he explains, Verena was like “a lone man in a house full of women and children” (15), a description that speaks to Verena’s masculine demeanor and position. No longer feeling that she has a place in the Talbo home, Dolly settles on the tree house as the place where she may belong. Initially, Dolly decides to run

away from Verena because her sister plans to manufacture Dolly's secret dropsy cure, a plan that Verena takes on without her sister's permission. Collin and Catherine follow Dolly, of course, and they are unexpectedly joined by Judge Charlie Cool and Riley Henderson. Led by the eccentric Dolly, this group disrupts the mundane workings of the town, earning the disapproval of their community while, importantly, also finding a place for themselves in an unexpected way.

The ordeal with the treehouse constitutes a major event for this small community and sets off a scandal. At first, Verena is able to mobilize the town authorities to assist her in bringing back her sister, and gradually it seems that the entire town becomes involved—from the town's busybody, Amos, to the baker's wife. This scandalous occurrence disrupts the town's expectations, bringing forth its idiosyncrasies and challenging how the townspeople perceive Dolly, the Judge, and the others. The townspeople feel that they can meddle in Dolly's relationship with her sister, although Dolly is rightfully angry with her sister, and Judge Cool is shamed for joining the rogue group in the treehouse. The baker's wife, Mrs. County, an otherwise understanding and kind character, tells Collin that "it sets a poor example for the town, two sisters quarreling, one of them sitting in a tree"; about the Judge, she concludes, "Leading citizens have to behave themselves; otherwise the entire place goes to pieces" (61). The treehouse group shows a different way of life, one that offers belonging to outcasts and places each member on the same level, contrary to the community's norms when it comes to some forms of difference. As Fahy shows, however, the group ultimately capitulates to the demand for conformity imposed by their community. Once they have finally been

dispersed, each must assimilate into their former lives, although none is untouched by the moment shared with one another.

Gender and sexual variance are central to *The Grass Harp*, specifically with Collin, Amos LeGrand, and Collin's aunt Verena. Among these, Verena is the most visible, being perhaps the most powerful person in their hometown. Like Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Verena's masculine behavior and demeanor make her a commanding figure. The parallels between Amelia and Verena are notable. Both women occupy positions of power in their community, primarily through their business abilities and accomplishments, but that success translates into power and influence more broadly. Collin tells us that Verena is the "richest person in town" due to her various businesses, including the "drugstore, the drygoods store, a filling station, a grocery, an office building" (10), a list that echoes Amelia's diverse ventures (the general store, the café, her stills, and her ad hoc doctoring). Yet, like Amelia, Verena seems isolated from others, in large part because of her success and the determination it takes to manage her business empire. The "earning" of her fortune, as Collin explains, "had not made her as easy woman" (10), and "[t]hough on diplomatic, political terms with many people, Verena had no close friends at all" (12). This description of her as not an "easy woman" suggests a central and unstated issue. Her success in business has placed her in an authoritative position that is out of line with gender expectations, and her accomplishments subvert traditional roles. Collin explains that men are "afraid of Verena" (12), or as he later says, among the group who come to retrieve them from the tree house, only Verena "behaved like a real man" (79). Her business abilities and stature in the community are evident in the way she can use the most powerful people to her own ends. For example, she

mobilizes the town's central authorities—the preacher, the sheriff, and a former judge—to help her get Collin, Dolly, and the others to leave the tree house. Her masculine appearance and her authority mark her as different and even freakish, as with Amelia. Collin notes that his father had started a rumor that Verena is a “morphodyte,” a rumor, as he explains, that “has never stopped going around” (12), thereby making her gender more ambiguous. This rumor is central to the role of gossip in this novel, just as small-town gossip is central to McCullers's novella. The fact that this rumor does not have significant repercussions for Verena, however, is important. Like Amelia, Verena becomes the subject of extensive, albeit seemingly harmless gossip.

A central difference between Amelia and Verena, however, is that the latter is associated with same-sex desire. Collin notes that while men are afraid of Verena, Verena herself seemed scared of women, like a shy young man, with the exception of Maudie Laura Murphy, with whom Verena was “greatly attached” before Maudie married a liquor salesman. Verena subsequently became “very bitter” over the marriage, as if betrayed, and publicly denounced the husband (12). Spying from the attic, Collin witnesses his aunt privately pining away for Maudie as if mourning a lost lover. Once in a while, Maudie would send snapshots of her and her husband, and as Collin explains, Verena would periodically take them out and study them, after which Collin would hear a “rusty crying sound” coming from her room (12). Verena's attitude toward the loss of Maudie is contrasted with her relationship with Morris Ritz, with whom Verena hopes to go into business by selling Dolly's dropsy cure. Before she is swindled by Ritz (which raises questions of anti-Semitism in this representation of the Jewish Morris), Verena finds a kinship with another successful businessperson, and their prospective joint

business venture offers a seemingly equitable companionship that Verena desires. Of course, rumors spread about a possible love affair between them, with people finding “the way Verena was carrying on with that little Jew” scandalous (18). Yet, Verena makes clear at the end of *The Grass Harp* that her feelings for Morris were never romantic or sexual. She explains, “I loved him, I did. Not in a womanly way; it was, oh I admit it, that we were kindred spirits” (84). This clarification underscores Verena’s ambiguous sexuality, especially when coupled with her pining away for Maudie.

Verena can be interestingly paired with Amos Legrand, another gender nonconforming character who takes up a central place in this small town. Amos, with his appropriately campy surname, is the town’s barber and busybody. His effeminacy parallels, inversely, Verena’s mannishness and the authority that she derives from it. Described as a “little monkey,” for example, Amos appears physically different, almost freakish, and he is so short that later Verena uses him “as though he were a walking stick” because his head “came not quite to her hip” (63, 79), an image that draws a comparison between the Amazonian Amelia and the dwarfish, feminine Cousin Lymon. It is clear that Amos is neither rejected nor even treated with the tolerant condescension of Morris Feinstein, the effeminate Jew in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, although he is spoken of in a similar manner. As Collin explains, everyone calls Amos “that old sis. But they didn’t mean any harm; most people enjoyed Amos and really wished him well” (63). Amos is also noted for calling all of his customers “honey” whether they are men and women, but again, this quirk seems to make him more liked, thus his ability to talk easily with anyone, from “businessmen to girls of ten” (63). What marks him as different, then, is what seems to endear him to the townspeople. His interactions with the town

emphasize Johnson's point that nonurban communities have ways of accommodating queerness and that other factors, such as familiarity and personal relationships, can supersede (110). Amos is also known for being the best source of town gossip, taking on a stereotypically feminine role. Yet, this role only underscores his importance in the town just as Verena takes on a central role.

Collin privately grapples with his unexpressed same-sex desire, primarily his infatuation with Riley Henderson. Collin expresses his romantic interest in Riley as a desire for friendship and the elevated social status that this friendship would lead to. Collin seeks Riley's attention perhaps as he might for anyone who was so popular, but he also expresses a long-time longing for Riley's attention in general. For example, he has a "happy shock" when, upon finding Collin and the others in the tree house, Riley calls his name. As Collin explains, "I hadn't thought Riley Henderson knew me from dust. But I knew him all right" (26), and he exclaims, "How I longed for him to be my friend!" (27). Collin anticipates that Riley's decision to join them in the China tree shows that they can be friends, and the two do become somewhat intimate as Collin has longed for. Significantly, Collin continues to envision a bond with Riley in social terms, as is evident when he finally rides in Riley's well-known sportscar. As they drive into town, Collin hopes for a "witness," saying that "there were certain persons it would have done [his] heart good to have seen [him] sailing by in Riley Henderson's car" (58). Couched in terms of social validation, Collin can more easily process his attachment to Riley, but this response seems more of a deflection. Significantly, Collin consistently brings attention to the various girls that Riley would drive around town, so now he is finally in that same

position. Yet, their intimacy seems mostly limited to the confines of the tree house, and following their departure, their relationship becomes gradually limited.

It is useful here to compare Collin's situation with Joel's in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. As Fahy correctly notes, although does not expand upon, Cousin Randolph represents a model for expressing same-sex desire that Collin lacks, thus making it more difficult for Collin to identify his desires for Riley (21). Perhaps Verena could have been such a model for Collin, but her longing for Maudie is private, with Collin only witnessing it by spying on her. She never acknowledges her possible same-sex desires. In contrast, Randolph is very direct with Joel in describing his doomed relationship with Pepe Alvarez; further, he opines on the naturalness and acceptability of same-sex desire. Regarding the latter, Randolph articulates an attitude reminiscent of McCullers's theory of the lover and beloved. He argues that love cannot be fully demarcated, suggesting (as McCullers does) that love is not limited by object-choice or by categorical markers, as Randolph makes clear when he states that "love, having no geography, knows no boundaries" (147). He also points to the erroneous belief that some types of love or some relationships are "unnatural," instead claiming that any love is acceptable as long as it is fitting for the individual. He concludes that "any love is natural and beautiful that lies within a person's nature; only hypocrites would hold a man responsible for what he loves" (147). By articulating these ideas, Randolph perhaps validates Joel's nascent same-sex desires, in line with the framework that Capote sets up in that novel. The novel's conclusion, however, makes the connection between Joel and Randolph more meaningful. Joel discovers that Randolph, in drag, was the "queer lady" he had seen earlier in one of the upstairs windows (67, 231). When the "lady" beckons to Joel, he

realizes “he must go: unafraid, not hesitating”; in response, he pauses only briefly, to look back “at the boy he left behind” (231). As Richards rightly contends, this closing passage represents Joel’s “metaphoric acceptance of the gay identity he shares” with Randolph (38). In *The Grass Harp*, Capote does not reveal if Collin has such a moment of recognizing and accepting his same-sex desires, but considering that this narrative is retrospective, it is important that the adult Collin still does not directly identify his attraction to and affection for Riley in these terms.

Verena’s transformation at the end is notably tragic. After being swindled by Morris Ritz, Verena seems diminished, almost powerless. An important reversal also happens in terms of gender. Exploited by a man and stripped of her former authority, at least partially, Verena appears more feminine and much more of a somewhat pathetic victim. Her demise echoes that of Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. A comparison of key descriptions of each character is instructive here. The narrator of McCullers’s novella, describing Amelia soon after her fight with Marvin, describes her as shrinking away “until she was thin as old maids are thin” and “those gray eyes – slowly day by day there were more crossed, and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition” (69), with this last detail echoing the opening description of the sexless figure overlooking the town while her crossed eyes exchange “one long and secret gaze of grief” (3-4). These descriptions are almost exactly like those of Verena, who appears similarly diminished when she appears at the China tree, begging for Dolly to return home. Collin notices the change in Verena automatically. He explains, “Verena [. . .] was not anyone I knew; but some woman woebegone, wasted—with eyes once more drawn toward each other, their stare settled on an inner territory, a withered

country” (84). Further, rather than the commanding figure she once was, Verena is reduced to a frightened old maid, with Collin wondering “that [he] could have been so afraid of her, for she’d grown feminine, fearful” (96). One interpretation of these parallels is that a loss of power means a loss of supposedly masculine authority. As with Amelia, her influence in the town had come at least in part due to her assumption of “masculine” qualities, behaviors, and vocations. Verena only appears feminine after the loss of her former prestige, although her defeat is less extreme and vicious than Amelia’s.

The conclusion of *The Grass Harp* is a mournful one. After the group in the China tree is forced to leave the tree house, each outsider seems lost. First, Capote shows the immediate effects of the disbandment on the group who have occupied the tree house. While Dolly and Judge Cool fall in love, they never marry as they had intended, with Dolly rather shortly after becoming sick and dying. Subsequently, Catherine is lost without her closest friend and also impacted by her abuse by a gang of white men and her unjust imprisonment. Collin also tries to reacclimate to normal life and tries to date while maintaining his friendship with Riley, who he feels betrays and abandons him. Collin’s relationship with Maude Riordan is central here. After the tree house escapade, Collin believes he is in love with Maude. Still close friends with Riley, he confesses his supposed love for Maude, and he is crushed when he discovers Riley and Maude together, indicating that neither of them took Collin’s confession of love seriously (89-90). In reality, it seems that Collin is more upset because his intimacy with Riley has ended, as when they used to sit in Riley’s shed, a place that Riley had until only recently forbidden “females” to enter (89). Capote suggests that Collin had transferred his affection for Riley onto Maude, a more “proper” object for his love. Just as he had

struggled to articulate his feelings for Riley before, he cannot see that this feeling of betrayal is not so much about Maude but rather that Riley has chosen her over him. Collin's reaction, then, is not unexpected. Just as Riley is described as somewhat wild and fast with women, Collin begins to act the same way following Dolly's death. As he explains, he "slicked back [his] hair [. . .] and chased off to dances in other towns, shined flashlights and threw pebbles at girls' windows late at night" (94), mimicking Riley's former "skidding around with every floozy in town" in his fancy car (27). Thus, his womanizing seems like a performance, another way to mask his loneliness and again to be like Riley. He and Riley had become close when they stayed in the tree house, with Collin finally getting the validation he had desired from Riley. Afterward, their intimacy gradually dwindles, culminating with Riley becoming a "man of affairs" in the town and getting engaged to Maude (95-6). Subsequently, Collin leaves town, only returning years later. Thus, this queer escapade ends in disappointment and acquiescence to outside forces for these characters. The group must recognize that their fantasy of escape was never sustainable, Verena must cope with her loss of power and authority, and Collin and the others must capitulate to the expectations of their community or else leave altogether.

The South Was Not Big Enough for Him

James Baldwin's *Another Country* and McCullers's *Clock Without Hands* deal with the intersection of race, class, and queerness in the mid-century South. Same-sex desire prompts serious personal conflicts for the young white boys in these two novels. From the vantage point of adulthood and a more realized homosexual identity, Eric in

Another Country reconsiders his burgeoning sexual identity as an adolescent in small-town Alabama. In *Clock Without Hands*, McCullers engages with a more contemporary view of same-sex desire and the definition of homosexuality; it is also, significantly, her most pointed critique of southern racism. Her last novel addresses racist violence, the Lost Cause mentality, and the Civil Rights Movement more powerfully than her other texts do. These issues come together in an interracial same-sex relationship that is at the center of the novel. The sexual identities of these young white characters in these novels are not isolated; instead, Eric and Jester contend with these desires while being protected in part by their whiteness, class standing, and social prestige. Jester has the social standing and racial privilege that may protect him from mistreatment, and Eric is in a similar situation. For both Jester and Eric, their infatuation with two young black men—Sherman and LeRoy, respectively—brings these issues to the forefront, leaving them unable to resolve the conflict between their desires and the racism that surrounds them.

Eric in *Another Country* and Jester in *Clock Without Hands* feel the smallness of the South for two specific reasons: their same-sex desires and their opposition to southern racism. The other queer characters in McCullers's fiction and in Capote's novels were not as aware of racism or perhaps only in a more general sense. The queer boys in *Another Country* and *Clock Without Hands*, however, are seemingly as alienated by their progressive views on race as by their same-sex desires. Eric realizes, specifically, that he was deemed different because of his sexuality and because of his progressive views of race. As an adolescent, he felt that his hometown was "not very big; as far as Eric was concerned, the South was not very big, certainly, as it turned out, not big enough for him" (Baldwin 200). His feelings of alienation were exacerbated by town gossip and the quiet

disdain of his community. Jester's struggle is more personal. He grapples with both his "abnormal" sexual desires and the racism he witnesses, particularly his grandfather's paternalism and Lost Cause mentality and the racist violence he sees in his hometown. Like Eric, he feels the smallness of the town. McCullers writes, "Some people were content to live and die in Milan [. . .] Some people were content to live their mortal lives and die and be buried in Milan. Jester Clane was not one of those" (*Clock Without Hands* 101). Significantly, these thoughts are in part brought about by the sight of the segregated water fountains he sees in the town square and intensified when he sees a white police officer kill a young black man shortly after (100). Certainly, as becomes evident, Eric's and Jester's views on race are in some ways naïve, perhaps because of their age as well as their mostly privileged backgrounds. They cannot fully understand the magnitude of racism and its literally life-threatening effects, especially when it comes to the young black men they desire. Yet, they are genuine in their criticism of the racism they see. Small-town dissatisfaction, the feeling that the South is not "big enough" thus converges at the intersection of racial progressiveness and same-sex desire.

Baldwin's *Another Country* underscores the interplay between race, class, and same-sex desire. Eric is an aspiring actor living as an expatriate in France along with his lover Yves, but he is still preoccupied with his past, particularly his childhood in small-town Alabama. Eric's queerness was evident early on, yet it was tacitly allowed or uncommented on because of his race as well as his class and family's social standing. As an adult, Eric reconsiders the emergence of his sexual identity, along with his relationship with LeRoy, a young black male. Their close bond was considered "improper" because it was rumored to be more than friendship but, more importantly, because it was an

interracial, cross-class relationship, thus challenging fundamental taboos. Eric's relationship with Rufus (a black man whose suicide sets the novel going) connects with his own past in Alabama. His sexual attraction to black men emerged early on, with Eric seeming to fetishize the black male body. Wondering if he was really attracted to Rufus as an individual, Eric questions whether it was Rufus he "clung" to, or whether he was clinging to "the bodies of dark men, seen briefly, somewhere, in a garden or a clearing, long ago, sweat running down their chocolate chests and shoulders" (194). These desires represent, more broadly, part of the nascent sexual attractions that Eric dealt with early on and is part of an ongoing struggle with his sexual identity in adulthood. Yet, while he had a certain prestige in his hometown, Eric was marginalized, in part because of his apparent homosexuality, and thus he connected with the black community in his town because of a sense of shared marginalization, perhaps influencing his early views on race.

Baldwin explores Eric's burgeoning homosexuality through secrecy, gender transitivity, and same-sex desire. His sexuality is first described through the framework of the open secret, as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. With the open secret, a key facet of the contemporary definition of homosexuality, others are in a position of knowledgeable authority over the closeted gay person (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 80). Baldwin demonstrates how others in Eric's community "knew" his "secret" before he was even fully aware of it. Baldwin writes, "The trouble with a secret life is that it is very frequently a secret from the person who lives it and not at all a secret for the people he encounters. He encounters [. . .] those people who see his secrecy before they see anything else" (199). The authority granted to others by the open secret is a powerful one, a position that can be used for both good and ill. Whatever the intent, however, this

power is always threatening in its uncertainty. Baldwin also uses gender transitivity to signal Eric's protogay identity. Eric was effeminate, with his "fantasies" inscribed in his mannerisms, the inflection of his voice, and his gestures (199). Further, as an adolescent, Eric remembers that he fantasized about being like the women he knew and at times dressed in his mother's clothes. While others knew of Eric's queerness, Baldwin makes clear that he was protected by his standing derived from, first, his whiteness, and second, his socioeconomic class. Yet, Eric remembers how he felt consistently stifled by his community and the "smallness" of the South. When he realized that his relationship with LeRoy was coming to an end, he knew he must get away (205). He began to feel a sense of exile that he never loses and that is connected with his marginalization as a queer man. This critical moment in his maturation and the development of his sexual identity, Eric realizes later, was when "his shame and his battle and his exile had begun" (201). The end of his relationship with LeRoy both fulfilled his greatest desires and made him realize the unacceptability of those same desires, a conflict that Eric grapples with fifteen years later.

In an extended recollection, Eric reconsiders his childhood relationship with LeRoy and his general feelings of difference. While Eric was marginalized because of his queerness as an adolescent, he was protected by his whiteness, class, and social standing. His mother was a "civic leader," and his father was a banker (197). Thus, although the townspeople would speak his name "venomously" and shake their heads with disgust, Eric remembers how he was treated with "the hideous obsequiousness of people who despised him but who did not dare to say so" (200). Eric's friendship with LeRoy was seen as improper in part because of the suspect nature of the bond and then because it

was unbecoming for a white boy of Eric's social standing to form such a close relationship with a black boy at all. Baldwin points to the scandalous nature of this relationship in part because Eric tried to put LeRoy (whether successfully or not) on a more equitable level with himself. In the opinion of whites, an unequal one that upheld the racial status quo would have been more acceptable—even if the nature of the relationship did not really change, Baldwin implies. If LeRoy had worked for Eric's family, for example, then their relationship would have appeared properly paternalistic, if only in appearance, a relationship that would be justified by the "assumption" that Eric was only being responsible in caring for "his colored boy." Without that nominal justification, however, the relationship was "suspect" and "indecent" for "a white boy, especially of Eric's class and difficult reputation" (202). Significantly, however, black people in the town were similarly wary of this relationship. They knew that such a relationship could never be equitable, a justified assumption that LeRoy himself tried to explain to Eric. While LeRoy seemed privately to value Eric's companionship, he understood that this relationship was unacceptable for both the white and black communities and thus could never be sustained. More importantly, Eric was completely unaware of the literal danger their relationship put LeRoy in. LeRoy told him, "Your Daddy owns half the folks in this town, ain't but so much they can do to you. But what they can do to *me*—!" (206). While Eric questioned "what *harm* are we doing to anybody," LeRoy was more aware of the wishful, naïve thinking of such an idea (205). Before they parted, LeRoy became Eric's first lover, setting off a chain of events that are transformative for Eric while also leading (in Eric's mind) to the conflicts he faces now as an adult. Baldwin thus emphasizes the

complex interplay between race, same-sex desire, and class—a complicated matrix that McCullers also draws on in *Clock Without Hands*.

McCullers's last novel is another tale of an alienated youth. Jester Clane lives with his grandfather, Judge Fox Clane, in the small town of Milan, Georgia, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Just as Jester must deal with the puzzling changes of adolescence, he must also deal with his own same-sex desires. The novel begins, echoing *The Member of the Wedding*, during a long, confusing summer for Jester, where he feels most poignantly his isolation and loneliness, as well as a growing dissatisfaction with the provincialism and backwardness of his hometown. His confusion is only heightened by his emerging sexuality. Jester's confusion is exacerbated when he falls in love with the biracial Sherman Pew, who rejects his affection although he himself is sexually ambiguous and does not fully conform to masculine norms. This relationship connects with another of Jester's unique qualities: his relative (albeit naïve) progressiveness when it comes to race, which conflicts with his grandfather's Lost Cause mentality and the violent racism he witnesses in Milan. The novel mostly focuses on Jester's conflicted relationship with his grandfather and his infatuation with Sherman Pew. These relationships occur against the backdrop of the small-town South at midcentury. For these reasons, Jester, like Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding* and Eric in Baldwin's *Another Country*, feels stifled and out of place in his hometown.

Others in town, such as J. T. Malone, also sense something different about Jester. The druggist thinks that Jester "had never been a Milan boy. [. . .] There was something hidden about the boy and his softness, his brightness seemed somehow dangerous — it

was as though he resembled a silk-sheathed knife” (23). These descriptions of something hidden, along with this ambiguous image that combines masculine hardness and feminine softness, is clearly indicative, even if Malone is unaware of it, of homosexuality. Thus, Jester is not really a “Milan boy” (i.e., a straight boy who acts appropriately masculine). Instead, he is a “stranger,” although Malone has known Jester his entire life. This image echoes Jester’s initial appearance, when he is described as a “slight limber boy of seventeen” with a “fair” complexion and “delicate elbows” (21). Malone’s distaste for Jester also comes through later when he describes him as “fancy and overpolite” (101). Yet, like Eric in *Another Country*, Jester seems to be protected because of his social standing. While Malone may feel this way, and one may presume others do as well, he does not act on his dislike and suspicion of Jester.

Jester’s sense of difference also comes through in his rejection of his grandfather’s outdated and racist views. While the Judge dotes on his grandson, Jester has come to realize how problematic his grandfather’s views are. As he explains to his grandfather, he has taken on more progressive views on race and civil rights: “All my life I’ve seen things like you and the family wanted me to see them. And now this summer I don’t see things as I used to – and I have different feelings, different thoughts” (30). Jester’s changing views are related to his own sense of displacement, confusion, and marginalization because of his sexuality (as with Eric in *Another Country*), which becomes clear in this same scene. For the Judge, Jester’s rejection of white supremacist ideology is “abnormal,” a word that Jester fixates on as directed toward his “abnormal” sexuality. When his grandfather describes Jester’s views on race as abnormal, Jester significantly feels the word “like a blow in the groin” (31). Jester then adopts the

normal/abnormal dichotomy to make sense of his own feelings of being different. The *Kinsey Report*, because it shows the pervasiveness of same-sex sexual behavior, makes Jester contemplate his own nascent desires when he reads it. Yet, it seems to offer no solace for Jester, instead giving him an identity to resist and fear. He read the report and was “terribly afraid” that “he was not normal” (92-3). This thought makes him almost visit a local brothel, but he feels instead that “he had never felt the normal sexual urge” and so “his heart quaked with fear for himself, as anything more he yearned to be exactly like everyone else” (93). These passages show how same-sex desire comes together with racial progressiveness as a challenge to white heteronormativity, as happens with Eric in Baldwin’s *Another Country*. Jester is at odds then with his small-town community and with his grandfather as a representative of a regressive, racist ideology and mindset.

McCullers does not shy away from discussions of same-sex desire in her texts, whether it is the “boys who take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys” like Lily Mae Jenkins in *The Member of the Wedding* or the more general philosophy of the acceptability of all love and desire proposed in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Yet, *Clock Without Hands* is significant in using exact language to identify same-sex desire with the term “homosexual.” Through Jester, McCullers most directly engages with a more contemporary, defined homosexual identity. Jester must not only deal with his emerging same-sex desires; he must grapple with the labels applied to those desires. His sexuality aligns with this category and thus sets him apart from other queer characters in McCullers’s fiction. Further, he engages with the meanings and value judgements that are associated with such a category. While Berenice can refer to Lily Mae’s gender transitivity and sexual ambiguity as “just one of them things” (*Member of the Wedding*

82), Jester tries to make sense of his own sexuality through rigid sexual labels and the concepts of abnormality and inversion, often seeing these as coming together within a more tragic, disreputable sexuality. McCullers writes, “If it turned out he was a homosexual like men in the *Kinsey Study*, Jester had vowed that he would kill himself” (94). As Rachel Adams points out, Jester is disturbed by this label because it is “laden with connotations of medicalized deviance” (565). Rather than naming his desires, it pathologizes them, as he intuitively feels. One important passage shows Jester questioning his own desires, incorrectly using the term “introvert” for “invert,” while also differentiating himself from those who are “normal” and not “queer.” Further, he questions whether Sherman may be queer like him. He thinks, “Not being introverted, his grandfather had never wondered if he himself was normal or not. It had never entered his singing and dancing mind if he was normal or queer. [. . .] No, his grandfather was utterly not an introvert [. . .] Extrovert, that was the opposite word... while he was an introvert. And Sherman?” (94-5). Jester must grapple with his emerging desires in light of new understandings of sexuality that, rather than enlightening and reassuring Jester, merely exacerbate his struggle with his sexual identity.

Jester cannot readily make sense of his emerging sexual desires. For example, he fixates on the word “passion” to process his sexuality. This fixation begins when Jester’s grandfather admonishes him for not being passionate, by which he means passionate for the southern cause and southern tradition (41). Jester, extremely self-conscious and confused, takes this criticism as directed at his sexual desires. He thinks later, “It was true he had no passion. The shame of his grandfather’s words pulsed in his body and he felt that the old man knew that he was a virgin” (42). He realizes that he has not had the same

sexual experiences of other boys, such as visiting the town brothel, which Jester tries to do but cannot actually go through with. Instead, readers learn about Jester's history of crushes on his male schoolmates. These crushes were not "passion," however, and instead were loves that lasted "for a day, a week, a month, once for a whole year" (42). Significantly, in the scene where Jester is lying in bed working through his confusion regarding his lack of "passion" and touching his genitals "for solace," he overhears Sherman, who he does not know at this point, playing the piano (42). Drawn to Sherman's house, his response is visceral. The music "throb[s] in his body"; seeing Sherman, he feels a sudden and intense shame. He questions his reaction: "Was it fear? Was it love? Or was it – at last, was it – passion?" (44). Jester's attraction to Sherman goes beyond what he has experienced before in his schoolboy crushes. Those seemed more short-lived and more superficial, at least as Jester explains them, whereas his affection for Sherman is intense, interconnected with deeper questions about his sexuality, and sustained despite significant resistance from Sherman.

Jester quickly becomes infatuated with the young, biracial Sherman. Theirs is a complicated, very intense relationship. Sherman's insecurity is derived in large part from his acute resentment regarding racism and classism. Sherman was a foundling, named because he was abandoned in a church pew. He stands out in Milan for this reason, as well as for his unusual blue eyes. He eventually becomes Judge Clane's private secretary, which Sherman feels elevates his social standing, as he has always desired. While Jester is the character most directly identified as gay, Sherman seems also coded as queer. Sherman's acute desire for sophistication and preoccupation with aesthetics effeminizes him. Sherman is consistently posturing, particularly in front of Jester, as well as

embellishing and lying about his own life and experiences. Sherman's fantasies and the reality contradict one another. For example, as he gives Jester a tour of the apartment where he lives with his friend Zippo, he points out the "fancy" antique furniture while passing over the other broken and "sad-looking furniture" (71). As Richards and Adams demonstrate, Sherman's posturing and preoccupation with material goods and aesthetics derive in part from his own disempowerment and insecurity. As Richards so astutely points out, this connection between sophistication and potential homosexuality is crucial: it could signal a conflation, by McCullers, between "specifically male homosexuality and either elevated class status or the anxious performance of it" (192). The acquisition of material goods, as Adams demonstrates, is perceived as compensation for Sherman's troubled life, whether as an orphan or because of the racism he experiences (571), yet his conspicuous consumption is queerly excessive and frivolous (553). At other times, Sherman acts more obviously feminine, as when he describes his concern with having "beautiful manners" (143) or when he speaks with a "sassy, languid voice" (139). It is important to note, however, that Sherman never really speaks or thinks of his sexuality in the same way that Jester does, especially not in terms of homosexuality. While he does brag and lie about sexual experiences, his sexuality is more uncertain, although McCullers seems to encode potential queerness through these more feminine qualities and in his resistance to Jester's affection.

Jester's and Sherman's relationship is tempestuous, impacted by competing emotions, from desire and affection to outright resentment. Sherman must perhaps deflect from his own potential same-sex desires as well as his desire for Jester's approval and admiration. From their first meeting, Sherman berates Jester, as when he calls him a

“tenderhearted sissy” (81, 83). In response, Jester wants to prove Sherman wrong and redirect his “passion” and desire toward the right (i.e., heterosexual) object-choice, visiting the brothel that he previously had been too scared to enter. This attempt, however, fails: Jester envisions Sherman’s face as he is having sex with one of the women. As McCullers writes, “He closed his eyes, and having in mind a dark face and blue flickering eyes, he was able to become a man” (84). (“Becoming a man” seems somewhat ironic here because of Jester’s abnormal, not properly masculine sexual desires.) This moment merely intensifies Jester’s attraction to Sherman. They are drawn closer after Sherman becomes Judge Clane’s private secretary. Their proximity to one another, following their initial, more perplexing introduction, is significant for Jester. For Jester, their closeness is homoerotic or romantic, as Jester’s fantasy at the brothel indicates, as well as later when Jester is so moved by Sherman’s story that he kisses Sherman on the cheek. This scene reveals a central problem for Sherman. He had a traumatic experience when he was eleven as a foster child, having been “boogered,” as he describes it, by Mr. Stevens (143). While Sherman is prone to lying, McCullers makes clear that this incident happened since Sherman starts stammering when he is telling the story, which he only does at this moment in the novel. Any desire Sherman may have, including toward Jester, seems impacted by that trauma, as when he slaps Sherman for kissing him on the cheek, saying, “I thought you were a friend and you turn out like Mr. Stevens” (145). This exchange shows that even if Sherman felt as Jester does, he may be unable to articulate or express that affection or reciprocate Jester’s desires.

Jester seems well-intentioned but somewhat idealistic or naïve when it comes to race. He may not realize fully how doubly taboo any relationship with Sherman may be,

just as Eric in Baldwin's *Another Country* may not. Sherman feels acutely the effects of racism, not just as it directly impacts him, but the racial violence he hears about throughout the South. He also seems to be invested in the Civil Rights Movement, following it closely and, later, even trying to challenge the town's segregation laws himself, albeit unsuccessfully. He fully understands the power structures that prop up racist ideology and policies, which he sees embodied in Judge Clane, another of the "politicians, from governors to congressman, down to sheriffs and wardens, [who] were alike in their bigotry and violence" (163). Further, McCullers effectively and emotionally shows the toll of racism on Sherman, who responds viscerally: "Sherman brooded over every lynching, bombing, or indignity that his race had suffered. [. . .] [H]e felt every abuse in his own body, and therefore lived in his stasis of tension and fear" (163-4). Jester, although seemingly genuine in his beliefs about civil rights and racial equality, does not and cannot share that understanding with Sherman. He is unable to cope with Sherman's rightful anger, instead relying on platitudes, speaking of his "admiration" for the way black people have withstood racism (167) and envisioning himself as a "Southerner of good will" (168). While he is "morally" convinced about the injustice of racism, Jester's words often seem glib, and Sherman is unable to get past his general distrust of and rightful disdain for white people. Jester does not fully comprehend what it means to challenge racist ideology and practices, although his feelings are genuine and promising. Protected by not only his whiteness but also by his class and social position, he can more easily rail against the prevailing ideology. While Jester, like Eric in *Another Country*, may feel the impact of his own marginalization, that does not necessarily lead to effective insight into racist oppression.

A central question of the novel, then, is whether difference can be bridged to form a meaningful bond. Facing the double taboos against same-sex desire and against interracial relationships, it does not seem possible. Just as Eric's relationship with LeRoy in *Another Country* is never sustainable, Jester and Sherman can never bridge the divides forged by race, class, and sexuality. *Clock Without Hands* demonstrates the very real social, cultural, and political conditions that may preclude any such relationship. This reality comes through most emotionally in the novel's tragic conclusion. After leaving Judge Clane, Sherman decides the most decisive way to rebel against racism in Milan is to buy a house in the white section of town. Feeling scorned by Sherman, the Judge organizes a vigilante posse to bomb Sherman's house. When Jester tries to warn Sherman, he is obstinate and feels that he has finally attained the social position he has always sought, insisting on showing Jester the house, his new furniture, and sophisticated clothing. In response to Jester's plea that he leave, Sherman responds, "Leave my furniture? [. . .] And you haven't seen the bedroom suit, with the pink sheets and boudoir pillows. Or my clothes" (227). He also brags about his "elegant" home, and it becomes evident that "[t]he house was suddenly all of Sherman's world" (228). Again, Jester must consider why he cares so much about Sherman, merely explaining to Sherman that "I want for you to be living always" (229). Of course, Sherman is killed shortly after, but Jester is powerless to prevent the killing since Sherman would not leave on his own or "go North" as Jester suggests.

In the end, Sherman cannot transcend the limitations of his race and class, although he fantasizes—briefly—that he has done so. Jester cannot avenge Sherman nor is his affection ever satisfied or reciprocated. As Adams explains, Jester's affections

“cannot counteract the pervasive discrimination that thwarts Sherman’s attempts to improve his social and economic situation” (563). While Jester intends to shoot the man who killed Sherman, he cannot do so. For him, this signals the end of his connection with Sherman. As he concludes, “His odyssey of passion, friendship, love, and revenge was now finished” (234). Of course, this swift reconciliation is questionable. It either shows the superficiality of Jester’s affection for Sherman, or it is as false consolation. Either way, such an inconclusive end indicates that complexities of the ideologies and norms that Jester’s love for Sherman challenged but would never overcome.

McCullers’s and Capote’s small-town South is a very queer place indeed. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and *The Grass Harp*, queer occurrences are a public affair, shaping these communities and often challenging their norms and expectations. *The Member of the Wedding* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* bring these issues to a more individual level. These adolescents make sense of their feelings of difference or being “unjoined” and their unease with gender and sexual norms. Simultaneously, they must determine their places in these communities. In their focus on the intersection of race, class, and same-sex desire, Baldwin’s *Another Country* and McCullers’s *Clock Without Hands* underscore the other important forces that shaped queer experiences in the rapidly changing South at midcentury, particularly the intransigence of racial boundaries and hierarchies in light of same-sex relationships.

CHAPTER III: GOOD BEDFELLERS: SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN THOMAS HAL PHILLIPS'S NOVELS

Thomas Hal Phillips was once a very prolific writer, publishing five novels in the same number of years: *The Bitterweed Path* (1950), *The Golden Lie* (1951), *Search for a Hero* (1952), *Kangaroo Hollow* (1954), and *The Loved and the Unloved* (1955). After 1955, however, Phillips stepped away from novel-writing, gaining some fame as a screenplay writer over the next few decades. His final novel, *Red Midnight*, was published in 2002. Maybe because of this somewhat puzzling career trajectory, Phillips's fiction has not received any sustained critical attention. This perhaps understandable lack of scholarship is unfortunate for a specific reason, beyond the general absence of a significant voice of midcentury Southern writing: his novels are groundbreaking in their representation of same-sex desire and relationships between men. Writing in the pre-Stonewall era and in the midst of the paranoid turn of the early 1950s, Phillips's novels like *The Bitterweed Path*, with its unabashed depiction of an otherwise unspeakable topic, are landmarks in queer literature and representation. Another reason though that Phillips's fiction may have been overlooked in queer literary studies is that, like Carson McCullers and Truman Capote, he focuses on an overlooked region, the rural South, exploring how queer men navigate and negotiate their place there. Following the rural turn in queer studies, it is time to reconsider how this writer shaped representations of gender and sexuality in twentieth century American fiction.

“It Makes a Difference—Being in the Country”

Phillips’s fiction depicts same-sex love and desire in what may seem like an unlikely setting: rural Mississippi in the first half of the twentieth century. His first novel, *The Bitterweed Path*, is a landmark representation of romantic and sexual relationships between men, particularly because it is an *affirmative* novel about same-sex desire. The novel focuses on the deep, affectionate bonds between the protagonist, Darrell Barclay, and Roger and Malcolm Pitt. John Howard notes in his introduction to the novel that *The Bitterweed Path* is Phillips’s most explicit representation of homosexuality and is “an important precursor to contemporary gay fiction” (xvi-xvii). Even Phillips, according to Howard, was struck in retrospect by his boldness and audacity in writing about this otherwise “unspeakable” topic (xiii). This novel is also a very important rural queer text, challenging many of the assumptions regarding same-sex desire and the men who love other men in these spaces. As Howard notes, *The Bitterweed Path* shows that same-sex desire and relationships are not necessarily bound by the “remarkably fixed, readily definable, decidedly urban” definition of the “modern homosexual.” It channels, rather, the “loves, liaisons, meetings, unions, and emotional ties of various sorts” which have been notably absent in the history of sexuality in the postbellum South (xviii). This challenge to the definition of the “modern homosexual” is, by extension, a challenge to its metronormative biases.

Howard’s *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (1999) is instructive here. Using real-life stories, he shows that same-sex desire between men always existed in rural Mississippi (with a focus on the first half of the twentieth century), but more

importantly, he rethinks how that desire should be understood. The near-compulsory identity and community models have skewed contemporary views of same-sex desire and men who love other men. Same-sex desire is not bound by identity or by the need for a narrowly delineated (urban) gay community. Men who desire men—or “men like that” in Howard’s phrasing—but do not ascribe to certain identities are not solely a rural phenomenon, but he shows its uniquely rural formations. Phillips’s fiction, perhaps especially *The Bitterweed Path*, illustrates how men who desired or loved other men do not require strict labels or categories to make sense of those affections and desires. Howard also shows how the identity and community models are limited and often contribute to a metronormative bias, depicting rural areas as backward because identity and community may not be as important in these settings as they are in urban ones. In the Mississippi that Howard studies (and Phillips depicts in his fiction), queer desires were not necessarily “identity bound or identity forging.” Howard warns though that one should not assume that such desires “lagged behind” by not being bound to identity; instead, it acknowledges certain localized and lived experiences of same-sex desire (29). Moving beyond the identity and community models is a significant step toward recognizing the varied experiences of same-sex desire and affection. The effect is to “upset and denaturalize” these often-universalized definitions of homosexuality (29). Following Howard, then, the most effective way to read Phillips’s representations of same-sex relationships and same-sex desiring men is to focus on “the interactions between men who experienced and acted on queer desire within a small, localized realm, men who never took on a gay identity or became part of a gay community.” This framework, Howard argues, returns agency to non-urban dwellers in attaching meaning

to “nonconforming attractions and behaviors” (14). This model is based more so on the individuals, the “men like that.” One must be attuned to the nuances and subtleties of their loves, desires, and relationships and their individual experiences, not sweeping narratives of the progress of queer identity and community. This lens is essential to understand how Phillips represents same-sex love and relationships, beginning with *The Bitterweed Path*.

Set at the turn of the century in the postbellum rural South, *The Bitterweed Path* tells the story of Darrell Barclay, the son of a sharecropper, who is taken on by the Pitt family, particularly the father Malcolm and his son Roger. The novel’s primary focus is Darrell’s relationships with these two, relationships that are deeply affectionate, physical, and even erotic. It begins with Darrell’s first encounter with Roger at a race in Vicksburg as an adolescent. *The Bitterweed Path* is a palpably physical and homoerotic text from the outset. Darrell first sees Roger in the changing room where they must get ready for the race that they are supposed to be competing in. He is drawn to Roger’s body: “he was very still and naked and the light seemed to bounce away from the fullness of his loins.” Darrell seems unable to turn away, and so his “gaze measured the body slowly, cautiously” (4). Seeing Roger again soon after, “A little shiver ran along the inside edge of [Darrell’s] suit and seemed to touch him like a drawn finger” as he “trembled” (6). Such physical, almost visceral, reactions are common for Darrell throughout the novel, revealing his attraction to either Roger or Malcolm. After the race, Darrell meets Malcolm, who is charismatic and openly affectionate. He assumes a paternal role early on because Darrell is already neglected by his father. Malcolm takes care of Darrell this first day, but it is evident that this relationship may go beyond—eventually—this father-son

dynamic. When Malcolm tousles Roger's hair, for example, Darrell feels "chills [...] along [his] body" and wishes that "the hand would touch him too" (12). Thus, a father's loving gesture becomes a potentially homoerotic one for Darrell. These opening scenes, then, anticipate the physical, emotional, and affectional bonds that Darrell develops with Roger and Malcolm over the course of the novel.

A complicating factor here is socioeconomic class, particularly within the somewhat rigidly hierarchical sharecropping system. The Barclays' move to the Pitt plantation highlights the economic disparities that shape the relationships between Darrell and the wealthy Pitts. Phillips's novels frequently foreground the impact of socioeconomic class differences on relationships between men. *The Bitterweed Path* is optimistic and affirmative, showing that men *can* form meaningful bonds—homosocial and homoerotic—across class boundaries. Furthermore, Darrell can transcend his lowly upbringing to become a prosperous landowner and businessman, in large part because of his bonds with Malcolm and Roger. Darrell's father Thad accepts Malcolm's offer for employment, but firmly within the sharecropping system, Darrell and his family are dependent on the Pitts, which Thad especially resents. Thad is, like many fathers in Phillips's fiction, unnecessarily vindictive and cruel. His racism and bitterness about the South's loss in the Civil War (in which he fought) is what really motivates him. While Darrell trusts and respects Roger and Malcolm from the beginning, his father begrudges their prosperity, often taking it out on his son very cruelly. Because of his father's abuse and disregard, Darrell seeks the comfort that Malcolm and Roger offer.

For Darrell, as for Max in *The Loved and the Unloved* later on, the wealthy landowning Pitts represent a life that he does not have, one of stability and affection. The Pitt home becomes a symbol of this life that Darrell longs for. While he is not “ashamed of his own small house” or family, he does long for “exact pattern of living” that the Pitts and their home represent (45). This life, however, is even more off-limits when Darrell is held back and away from the Pitts by his father. Thad’s death early in the novel opens up new possibilities. Darrell realizes the significance of his father’s death. Despite any hurt or guilt he may feel, Darrell quite easily replaces Thad with Malcolm. While Thad is his father “in the flesh” only, Malcolm is his “real” father, one who is “tall enough to stand against God” (56). The loss of his father is a pivotal moment for Darrell, portending the end of his adolescence, as when he feels the “first rush of man-blood” because he must now take charge of his life (56). More importantly, he now can pursue relationships with Roger and Malcolm, which also open up new opportunities for Darrell. Of course, while he is free from his father’s abuse and control, Darrell still faces serious impediments due to class, although eventually, he rises above them.

Darrell’s relationship with Roger takes precedence in the first part of the novel. Beginning with their first, erotically charged encounter in the changing room, their relationship is beyond the merely friendly or even fraternal, as they often frame their bond. In *Men Like That*, Howard argues that Phillips “relies” on the fraternal relationship as a “metaphor for the primary homoerotic bond in *The Bitterweed Path*” (190). Fraternal bonds become a template or outlet for other intimacies between men. Early on, Roger tries to take care of Darrell, being sympathetic to his lesser circumstances. While Darrell’s father tries to stand in the way of Darrell’s relationship with Roger (and with

the Pitts more broadly), Malcolm actually encourages it, and generally, Darrell is accepted in the Pitt home. His and Roger's intimacy is evident one night that Darrell stays with him. Darrell feels compelled to share with Roger the story of his hard life before they came to Leighton, knowing that "Roger would understand" (46). In the morning, when Darrell wakes up, he finds that they are lying very close together and that Roger has put his arm around him. While Darrell thinks they should not be found like that, Roger does not move; significantly, Malcolm is not fazed when he sees them (47). Later, Darrell and Roger go to the nearby swimming hole. This scene underscores the rather idyllic relationship between the two, which is almost pure in its innocent and sincere affection. Sometimes, their moments together channel what Frank O'Hara derides in "Meditations in an Emergency" as the "praises of the pastoral life" and a "nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures" (197). Darrell's relationship with Roger does not necessarily come to "perverted acts in pastures," but set fifty years prior to when Phillips was writing, the novel portrays an idyllic vision of the "pastoral life" and a "nostalgia for an innocent past" of childhood love in the country, best exemplified in the scene at the swimming hole. After swimming nude, the two get into a friendly wrestling match, which is described in very sensual terms. Phillips writes, "Their hands touched, gripped, parted; arms and palms slipped with quick uncertain seizing. Then locked suddenly, stomach against side, thighs entangled, they rolled in the sand, and lay bound together" with "their thighs [. . .] interlocked." Even when they realize how their position must look, "their bodies did not move away from one another" (53), indicating that they feel no shame in their affection. The swimming hole is an important site here. As Colin R. Johnson observes, the swimming hole was a crucial rural space for male adolescents in

the early twentieth century. According to Johnson, the swimming hole was—and perhaps still is—important to rural men especially because it is a homoerotic space (while it is also a homosocial one). In a description that is fitting for this scene in Phillips’s novel, Johnson notes how rural boys could explore “their bodies and their desires together [. . .] on the banks of country swimming holes during the lazy days of summer” (60). This scene also vividly shows the physicality of this novel, which is inundated with touching and the desires to touch, the movement of bodies toward and away from one another.

While Darrell’s relationship with Roger is important throughout the text, it changes as they age and when their lives take different paths. As Roger becomes a more absent figure, especially once he leaves for school in New Orleans, Malcolm becomes a central one in Darrell’s life. As a younger adolescent, Darrell’s attraction to Malcolm is more ambiguous and undefined, but as he matures, so do his desires. For example, he feels an unspecified “peculiar thrill” when Malcolm calls his name at one point (31), and he is attracted to Malcolm’s rugged strength (43). By the time Roger leaves for school, Darrell and Malcolm seem to understand that Roger’s absence will bring them together. Thus, when Darrell asks for employment, Malcolm “pull[s] Darrell against him” while noting that Roger is leaving, thus implying that Darrell maybe would not like to stay; when Darrell says he would like to stay regardless, Malcolm tells him, “I wasn’t going to let you leave anyway” (61-2). While Malcolm’s interest in Darrell may seem at first more altruistic and paternal, it gradually goes beyond that to being quite blatantly romantic and physical. (Certainly, this relationship does raise some ethical questions considering the that it turns physical, although perhaps not sexual, when Darrell is still quite young.) This relationship is also one of two significant intergenerational same-sex bonds in Phillips’s

fiction, with the other appearing in his final novel, *Red Midnight*. As in this last novel, males are able to transcend class and age differences to form meaningful relationships. The gradually intensifying relationship between Darrell and the older Malcolm is complicated when it comes to the slippage between pseudo-familial bonds and other relationships between males. From their first meeting, Malcolm claims Darrell as a second son, but this relationship is more than paternal. Malcolm seems to shift his attention completely to Darrell after Roger leaves for school. For the rest of the novel until Malcolm's untimely death, this relationship between Darrell and Malcolm is the most important one, seeming to surpass Darrell's affection for Roger.

The turning point in Darrell's and Malcolm's relationship is their visit to Memphis. Malcolm has already told Darrell of his plan for the cotton gin, namely that Darrell and Malcolm (and eventually Roger) will run it together and split the profits. So, the trip to Memphis is ostensibly to buy supplies for it, but it quickly becomes much more than that, which may have been Malcolm's unexpressed intention all along. Malcolm treats Darrell almost like a sweetheart, as when he asks Darrell to "be his boy" or when he "tilted [Darrell's] face upward with one hand and with the other he pushed back the soft blond hair" while asking Darrell whether he "loved [him] a little" (80). Their intimacy intensifies during the night they spend together on the boat leaving Memphis. On Malcolm's request, Darrell sleeps with him, literally, which sparks a strong physical reaction: "He turned once and his face was against Malcolm's shoulder and Malcolm pulled him close so that Darrell could feel the great maleness of him, soft and warm and weighty. He shivered a little" (83). Malcolm represents the epitome of a "great maleness" which attracts Darrell. This emphasis on masculinity shows how, for Phillips,

same-sex affection is not only acceptable for normatively masculine men, it can be a positive and productive means of expressing deep affection. Darrell recognizes that this moment is a crucial turning point for him and Malcolm. Physical intimacy signals a change in their relationship:

Their hands touched for a long time, as if it were part of some old ritual binding them together. [. . .] Their hands rested lightly together. Then, as if to complete the ritual, Malcolm put his arm around Darrell. Darrell did not move. He knew that, somehow, there was nothing fleeting about this moment, that he was bound forever to the great strength against him. (83-4)

Darrell's understanding of this moment is accurate. Hereafter, the two become almost inseparable, whether in their personal lives or because of the gin. Further, this moment is not forgotten. Malcolm jokes about it later, causing Darrell to blush (114), and Darrell reacts strongly when he remembers it later, feeling "a quick division, so that blood seemed to rise toward his face and fall below his stomach" (168). The importance of this trip, however, is not only because Darrell and Malcolm share this intimate moment together. It represents a shift in the dynamics between Darrell, Roger, and Malcolm. It also suggests Darrell's development as an adult and initiates the new opportunities that his relationship with Malcolm opens up within the sharecropping system.

As Darrell becomes an adult, the differences between him and Roger become more pronounced, centering on the opposition between city and country. Malcolm and Darrell connect based on a shared form of masculinity, what becomes the Phillips ideal: the rugged but emotionally complex country man, often from a lower socioeconomic

background. (Other examples in Phillips's fiction include Max Harper from *The Loved and the Unloved*, Rufus Frost in *Kangaroo Hollow*, and Howard Mims in *Red Midnight*.)

The rural/urban division informs the contrasts between Darrell and Roger. It relates to some basic binaries: the mind versus the body, *man*-ual labor versus intellect, country ruggedness and urban "softness" or delicacy. In contrast to Darrell, Roger's daintiness becomes more pronounced as he lives in New Orleans. Much earlier, Darrell had noted Roger's delicate and "soft" hands (57, 59). Later, however, Malcolm is more direct and vocal in contrasting the "soft" Roger with the "hard" Darrell. Malcolm derisively dismisses Roger as "too soft" and not suited for the rugged country life that Darrell and Malcolm lead. Roger is just a delicate "schoolboy"; he could not "work like we do, Roger—us men" (93), implying Roger is not a "real" man although he may have a big city education. (Phillips does suggest that Malcolm, because he lacks a real education, may berate Roger from some feeling of inferiority.) In response, Roger tries to fight Darrell, who senses Roger's comparative weakness, with flesh that was "softer than his own" (93). Darrell, however, does not judge Roger as Malcolm does. They realize that this fight is contrary to their true emotions for one another, and so they kiss. Again, softness is a key descriptor: "Darrell kissed Roger's lips. They were soft and warm and the very touch seemed to pain him with tenderness" (94). Malcolm aligns himself and Darrell with a way of life and form of masculinity that Malcolm suggests is inaccessible to men from the city. Darrell, however, does not view Roger in this way, and Darrell distances himself from the rivalry that Malcolm instigates between them.

The urban/rural division becomes increasingly pronounced, and in this novel, the country is idealized through a nostalgic pastoralism and elevated above the city. Darrell

resists urban life. Darrell's preference for the country creates some tension between him and Roger, especially when Darrell visits Roger in New Orleans. Leighton—and the country more broadly—becomes associated with purity and goodness, in contrast to grimy New Orleans. At first, Darrell feels the “thrill” of being in the city for the first time (114), but when he and Roger sneak out for the night, with Roger determined to show him the “real” New Orleans, Darrell's emotions quickly change. Roger inexplicably decides to take Darrell to a brothel. This locale is out of character for Roger. He makes Darrell believe he is sexually experienced (particularly with women), and so he appears knowingly urbane. Seeing Roger in this new setting is troubling for Darrell, who suddenly feels as if “he did not know Roger at all.” Thus, Darrell wants to touch him to ensure that “it was the same body which he had slept warmly against in another and younger day, the body that had whispered to him beside a creek bank in the nights of another and younger time” (120). Further, although Roger reveals he is still a virgin, Darrell believes Roger is no longer “clean and good” (123), suggesting an opposition between the dirty, illicitly sexual city with the pure country.

Unlike Roger, Malcolm and Darrell prefer the country life in Leighton and reject the city. For example, at one point, Darrell envisions Malcolm as a “figure” that embodied “the strength and warmth of the land” (224). Like Malcolm, Darrell also becomes more connected to the land, especially when he becomes a married landowner like Malcolm. Darrell's feelings are most pronounced when he and his wife, Emily, go to New Orleans for their honeymoon. While there, Darrell increasingly feels the smell of the city “crowd[ing] heavy against him and heavy inside him”; it becomes “stronger and stronger and his whole insides seemed weak under the weight of it.” The air of Leighton, though,

would “heal whatever gall he felt” (218). Later, when Darrell and Emily return to Leighton, Darrell feels that “New Orleans was behind him, and the smell of Leighton was clean and swelling with freshness, was Leighton’s own” (226). Malcolm shares Darrell’s feelings. As he tells Emily, “He doesn’t like the city. He’s like me—wants the smell of the country” (230). Unlike these two, however, Roger seems content in the city, or so Darrell and Malcolm assume, with Roger not returning to stay (albeit briefly) until Malcolm’s unexpected death. Phillips thereby puts the country over the city. Darrell sums up his feelings and the general tone of the novel: “It makes a difference—being in the country” (231).

In a novel that privileges male intimacy and bonds, one might not expect marriage to be important, but that is not the case. As Howard notes in *Men Like That*, one of the most potentially perplexing aspects of Phillips’s fiction is that the men who love men often choose marriage, “thereby complicating today’s readerly notions of gay identity and community”; importantly, Howard found that many such men in the real rural Mississippi often did the same (192). Marriage does not prevent intimacy between men in this novel (or later, in *Red Midnight*, a novel in which marriage even more easily coexists with and even complements same-sex intimacy). One reason that marriage is so important in *The Bitterweed Path* is that it opens up the homosocial realm and fosters new connections between men. Darrell is the one most caught up in the promise of marriage for these reasons. At first, with Malcolm and Roger both married, he feels somewhat excluded but also in awe of the two. The father and son are uniquely bound as married men. He studies Malcolm and Roger together, noting their “muscle arms, their knowledgeable bodies” (194). After he marries, Darrell believes he will “stand tall at the gin in the midst of hard

man-talk and man-laughter” because he could understand “the secret” between men (184). The homosocial realm and homosocial bonds become physical for Darrell, as his description of Roger’s and Malcolm’s “knowledge bodies” first suggests. The change in Darrell and in his relationship with Malcolm is palpable when he and Emily return home. Feeling Malcolm’s hand on his side, he senses that “the touch was a sign that some deep secret lay between the two, some particular man-knowledge” (225). Darrell feels a similar physical sensation later, which has a palpably homoerotic undertone. Darrell wants to be part of that “realm of vigorous, hard-tanned men about the gin, the store, the barn” (243), and soon he was “among them, touching them, brushing against clothes far more faded than his own” and “the desire to be more among them, to be one, mounted in him slowly” (244). This passage directly shows the slippage between the homosocial and the homoerotic, a possibility that is always present in the central male bonds in this novel and elsewhere in Phillips’s fiction.

At the end of the novel, Darrell’s position is drastically different from where he began. Because of the cotton gin, he has financial independence, is a landowner, and can take care of his sons following Emily’s death in childbirth. After Malcolm’s unexpected death because of an accident at the gin, Roger returns home, having become a successful doctor. An emergency, however, brings about a significant change in their relationship: Roger must rely on Darrell to bail him out after a significant financial loss. The fact that Roger needs him is empowering for Darrell, feeling that he “did not want the need in Roger’s eyes to end” (303). Yet, Darrell is not vindictive. Instead, he values his ability to help Roger because he feels that it makes him more like Malcolm and because such support from Roger and Malcolm before had signified their affection for Darrell. These

points come together when he and Darrell return to Vicksburg, the site of their first meeting, so that Darrell can pay the debt. Their relationship seems naturally to have led to this moment, when they share a renewed, but changed, tenderness. Darrell possesses a new and empowered sense of self in regard to Roger, feeling “an upsurge of tenderness for Roger, who until now [. . .] had never needed him” (306). Further, Darrell has become like Malcolm, which he has always hoped for. He laughs like Malcolm, and Roger “follow[s] him now as he, himself, had once followed Malcolm” to the Showboat (306). It thus mirrors Darrell’s earlier trip to Memphis, although Darrell’s position has changed.

The Bitterweed Path ends with the most homoerotic scene in the novel; notably, it is also the most explicit suggestion of actual sex between men in Phillips’s fiction. In this final scene, Darrell and Roger address an issue that has been implicit following Malcolm’s death: whether Darrell’s love for Malcolm was greater than his for Roger. Further, they openly acknowledge that this love was romantic and even homoerotic. Roger asks him, “Did you love Father? I mean *really* love him?” Darrell responds, “Would you make something ugly out of that, Roger?” (310), which Roger says he would never do. Darrell is straightforward with Roger about his devotion to Malcolm. He says, “I never saw him in my life but that something moved inside me. [. . .] I love you Roger. I always have. But not that much” (310). His bond with Roger, however, is powerful, both because of the memories of their adolescent intimacy and because of Roger’s all-encompassing dedication to Darrell. While they are ready to give into their desire for one another, Darrell and Roger must consider whether it is appropriate, the first suggestion that their love may be unacceptable, especially because of their age. Roger is reassured, however, because Malcolm, as an adult, had shared such feelings, as Darrell tells him.

Suddenly, Darrell realizes that they will give into their desires: “It is only a dream, he thought; but he knew the wild tenderness was upon them” (311). This moment of “wild tenderness” signals a turning point for the two. They have “reached the just-beyond” in their relationship, a point to which the novel has been leading (312). Afterward, Roger goes away, not staying in Leighton as he had planned. This moment is what he and Darrell had been waiting for; having experienced it, they can move on. Further, they share this moment as equals. *The Bitterweed Path* is significant then as an affirmative tale of same-sex love between men and Phillips’s most explicit depiction of such intimacy.

Queer Legacies

Phillips’s fourth novel, *Kangaroo Hollow*, was published initially in England in 1954 and in the United States in 2000. The novel focuses on a single family across two generations, and the narrative is set in the period between 1916 and 1941, with World War I and II bookending this family’s story. *Kangaroo Hollow* has a uniquely epic feeling among Phillips’s novels, charting the growth and struggles of this family, while also dealing with the significant social and political changes of the interwar period. The novel begins with Rufus Frost’s arrival in Kangaroo Hollow, a small community in northern Mississippi, where he works for the Shannon siblings, Jesse and Anna, first in their sawmill and then on their farm. His position changes, however, when he marries Anna. Subsequently, they have five sons, while Rufus also has an illegitimate child by a former lover. The first part of the novel focuses on Rufus’s attempt to build his own dynasty. The second half of the novel focuses primarily on the two eldest Frost boys, Rex

and Bayard. Their rivalry becomes a competition between the popular and athletic “king” Rex, a state football star, and the bookish, artistic, and sensitive Bayard, who is at a disadvantage because he cannot live up to a masculine—and presumably heterosexual—ideal represented by Rufus and Rex. Phillips does not suggest that effeminacy and same-sex desire are linked in *The Bitterweed Path*, but he does posit a relation between the two in *Kangaroo Hollow*. Further, potential queerness evokes secrecy and anxiety, self-doubt and rejection, unlike in Phillips’s more affirmative first novel. Phillips pairs the two potentially queer characters in the novel—Jesse Shannon and Bayard Frost—to highlight and develop these issues. For Jesse, the problem is a disconnect between his dilettantish personality, secret fantasies, and the demands of being a landowner. For Bayard, it is a struggle for his position within the Frost family and for his father’s approval, along with a struggle with his more “feminine” qualities. Rather than providing a nostalgic vision of same-sex desire, *Kangaroo Hollow* looks more in-depth at the struggles that queer men face, a bitter legacy that Bayard inherits from his uncle Jesse.

Jesse Shannon stands out in the Hollow. Following his father’s death, Jesse must take over the sawmill and farm, although he knows nothing of the business and displays no interest in it. Instead, he relies on his sister, who leaves the university so that she can help out on the Shannon estate. Gender roles are somewhat inverted in their relationship, with Anna assuming a more authoritative position, as when she completely takes over the farm. As Anna realizes, while Jesse may be older and the “accepted head of the household,” he “hardly knew the difference between a mare mule and a horse mule” (7). Anna is understanding of her brother, recognizing that Jesse’s problem is that he is unsuited to this new role and uninterested in these new responsibilities. She concludes,

“Was Jesse lazy? No. Did he waste money? No. He simply had no love for the land, the stock, the crops” (8). Instead of being a landowner, Jesse wishes—as he told his father—to be a “dilettante” (11), a more feminine role that better aligns with his fashionableness and delicacy. Jesse is described in feminine terms throughout. He moves with “absolute grace” and takes a seat “like a prince”; he is physically feminine, with “long, thin hands”; he dresses carefully and elegantly, wearing a white shirt “monogrammed in blue” and bright red suspenders “because his gangling pale body did not have flesh enough to properly support his trousers” (11). Because of his appearance, “No one could possibly suspect that he was the owner—or half-owner with his sister—of two sawmills” (10). While Jesse later recognizes the differences between himself and the rugged, alluring Rufus, he does not feel any anxiety about being different and accepts that Rufus is superior according to certain standards. Thus, he neither likes nor dislikes his “smooth white body, unbroken by muscles, devoid of power and the strength to hurt” and sees that he is “superbly graceful” (41), thus putting himself in direct contrast with the commanding Rufus. Phillips relies on these physical cues to mark Jesse as different and as effeminate, in contrast to Rufus and the masculinity he represents.

Of course, life is not easy for Jesse in the Hollow. He is separated from others in part because of some unidentified secrets and his introspective, dreamy nature. Jesse is troubled and discontent, and so he often retreats into his private world and his “cave of golden dreams” (41). His anxiety comes, in part, from his feeling of being constantly scrutinized (which he is), with others trying to get to his secrets. He knows that the “billion-eyed world” cares nothing for him, except for “the few beaks that pecked at his secrets, scratched at the corner of his heart” (11). These secrets of the heart connect with

a recurring fantasy of escape to an imagined city, where he will find love. As he thinks, “‘Love is waiting for me in the heart of some city.’ And he imagined the city, dead, empty” and “saw himself walk through daybreak along newly washed streets to find his love, by chance, at a fountain in the heart of the city” (11). This “secret city” contrasts with the Hollow. Jesse relies on his imagination to escape from the mundane world that he feels trapped in, a juxtaposition between the life he desires and the one he inherited. Jesse surprises everyone by seeming to court Todda Hurly, a servant in the Shannon home, carrying her home from work every day, which causes people to speculate about the relationship, although they seem to know that there is no basis for the rumors. As usual, Anna alone seems to recognize the underlying issue, suggesting that Jesse is helping Todda from a selfish motive. This “courtship” would mitigate his queer reputation. She confronts him about being “unfair” to Todda, declaring that he does not have “the slightest urge to marry her” (11). After Jesse is killed by Todda’s brother after she gets pregnant, Anna finds Jesse’s diary, which troubles her. In a letter to Rufus, she describes Jesse as “strange” and “unhappy and brooding and off by himself somewhere” and says that she read Jesse’s diary, explaining that the “strangest, queerest things went through his mind” (69). She perceives what readers witness when Jesse is alone, namely his dissatisfaction and queer longings, which she conceals, only to destroy the diary at the end of the novel.

Bayard is first introduced as one among the brood of five Frost boys, but the novel primarily focuses on the rivalry between Bayard and Rex. The differences between the two, particularly as they mature, are considerable. Rex is popular and has a reputation as an athlete, from his high school days to the glory he achieves as a college football star.

In contrast, the sensitive and introspective Bayard is an artist figure, first pursuing music and then writing. Rex is the more domineering and respected among the Frost boys, and Bayard is an oddity among the brothers and has a vexed relationship with his father. Even as a child, Bayard is already marked as feminine, as when Rex calls him “pretty” (137), in comparison to Rex and the other brothers. As the narrator explains, Rex “knew he was the most handsome of a handsome lot. [. . .] Bayard was not handsome; he was pretty. He was pretty as a girl” (138). Thus, Bayard is marked as feminine, but to be effeminate in this novel is to possibly be queer in other ways. The effeminate Bayard, like his uncle, stands out in this masculine, and presumably properly heterosexual, milieu in the Hollow and the House of Frost. Bayard’s prettiness comes up again a little later, the first scene that indicates that Rufus may reject his son. In an inexplicably callous moment, Rufus—now sheriff—decides to use Bayard during a standoff with a runaway murderer, assuming that the man and his family will not shoot him with Bayard there. He rightfully questions whether he had chosen Bayard because he was his “least favorite” son (166). More importantly, Rufus intuitively feels that Bayard’s effeminacy is a decisive factor here. Phillips writes, “Though [Rufus] did not put the thought into words, he knew there was a certain lack of boyishness, a certain beauty in the face behind him that made it different from the others. A tenderness, it might be called” (165). While Rufus questions whether this “tenderness” might have come from Anna, the suggestion is that it really came from another Shannon—Jesse. Rufus seems unable ever to move past what he sees as lacking in Bayard. For Bayard, this episode may silence his brothers’ teasing because he is “different.” Bayard thinks, “When they laughed at him about his music lessons and stole his poems and teased about his pretty face, he would not have to do anything. He would

merely keep silent and they would remember this day” (170). This moment of triumph is illusory, however, and Bayard’s sense of difference is only heightened as the novel progresses.

In a novel preoccupied with family and legacy, it is not surprising that Jesse’s presence—through Bayard—lingers after his death. Phillips pairs these two characters to underscore Bayard’s potential queerness. Bayard recognizes the import of the connection between him and his uncle, a connection that he increasingly resists. As he matures, Bayard becomes more troubled about his difference. His feelings of isolation from his brothers and Rufus become very painful for him. After Bayard uncharacteristically gets in a fight at school, he implores his mother to explain to him why he is different, which she is unable to do. He pleads, “I wish I was like Papa, but I’m not. I know why you said you didn’t expect me to get in a fight. It’s because I’m different. Mother, why am I different? [. . .] People say it all the time, even when they don’t say anything” (188). Bayard for the first time recognizes the unspoken thought that he is like Jesse, one who similarly had a reputation for being “different,” a comparison that Anna recognizes but suppresses. Phillips writes, “‘All the others are like Papa, and I’m not. I never will be. I’m like....’ But he would not dare say it. Both of them were relieved that he had broken off” (188). Just as Anna had previously hidden away Jesse’s strange diary, she and Bayard must tuck away any specific acknowledgement of what makes Bayard strange. Later, Bayard more emphatically disavows any similarities with his uncle and tells Anna, “I’m not what you think I am” (256). Not only is he not like his uncle, Bayard insists. He is not “what” Jesse presumably was either. The anxiety and doubt that Bayard evinces here, coupled with his rejection of his uncle, represents a shift from *The Bitterweed Path*.

In *Kangaroo Hollow*, effeminacy must be disavowed, an issue that comes up again in *The Loved and the Unloved* but with even more bitter and dramatic consequences.

Later, Bayard's decision to leave the university and move to Memphis is an attempt to escape the pressures he feels to conform to a particular standard. At the university, where Rex also goes and is the renowned football star, Bayard pursues music first, and after Rex breaks his fingers in a fight, Bayard retreats to Memphis and becomes a somewhat famous and controversial writer. Being this artist figure seems to only set Bayard further apart, particularly in comparison to Rex. Just as Jesse had yearned for his "secret city" where he would find love and acceptance, Bayard believes that Memphis will bring him solace, feeling that he can "become a man" in the "city of strange faces" (247). Among these strangers, however, Bayard is struck by a particular one, Dean Temple, who he happens upon one night in a café. Unbeknownst to Bayard, Dean is Rufus's illegitimate child, who has been living in Memphis with Todda. Despite their differences, both in temperament and background, Bayard and Dean develop an ambiguous but deep intimacy. Sometimes the two seem conflicted about why they like one another, but as Bayard concludes, they cannot "break the bond." He also fears that Dean will reject him and explains to Dean that he does not care if Dean likes him, saying, "As long as you allow me to like you, I don't really care if you like me or not" (276). One reason Dean pursues any relationship with Bayard is because he, unlike Bayard, knows that they are brothers; getting close to Bayard is a way to get close to his father, who Todda has kept away from Dean. Their relationship is not romantic or sexual per se. Dean's sort-of girlfriend Jenny does make a connection between this relationship and that between another male couple, Bill and Cleve, a relationship that *is* romantic. Jenny does

not know that the two are brothers when she says this, but Dean feels the need to assert that he and Bayard are not “like” the gay Cleve, just as earlier, Bayard had told Anna he was not “what” Jesse was. Their familial bond allows Dean to make sense of his love for Bayard. No matter the role of kinship, Phillips wants to highlight another important relationship between men, although the possibility of queerness—especially because of Bayard’s ambiguous sexuality—does make the situation more complicated.

In the end, Bayard is drawn back into complicated family dynamics; he is again the outsider among the Frosts. After Dean dies in a car accident, Memphis no longer appeals to Bayard. This loss reveals the depth of his affection for Dean and leaves him adrift, and so Bayard inevitably returns to the Hollow. Running into Rufus at Dean’s funeral, Bayard finally learns that Dean was his brother. He and Rufus at first seem to find a new connection, but they cannot overcome their differences, with Rufus increasingly unable to understand his “strangest son,” as he thinks of him (219). Rufus seems unable to accept Bayard as he is, while Bayard also feels that he must still perform for his father. On their way home from the funeral, for example, Bayard brags about supposedly having “had” nine women, to which Rufus merely laughs “neither with belief or disbelief” (296). Yet, with mild cruelty, Rufus does bring it back up again later, “grinning” at Bayard because he knows he is lying. Bayard reacts, understandably, to his father’s mockery defensively: “Bayard was furious. So his father knew! He knew it had been a lie!” (300). Bayard reacts in a way that encompasses all of the hurt caused by his brothers and father, just as Jesse had reacted to Anna’s and his father’s criticism earlier. These issues between Rufus and Bayard come up again when Bayard must help his father with the farm. Bayard, unlike his other brothers, is not suited to this demanding manual

labor, but he tries to keep up and not show any weakness, which only brings on more mockery. Even Rufus's employee Wren taunts Bayard, "maliciously" "enjoying the sweat that dripped from his pale, girl-like face" (298), feeling a sense of superiority that Rufus—cruelly—also feels in comparison to Bayard, grinning at his son with the same "superior twist of the lips that Wren had used all morning" (299). In the end, Rufus can only condescendingly pity Bayard, the "son who had boasted of women and knew no women" (314). Back home, Bayard must again contend with his rivalry with Rex as well. Again, Bayard recognizes his deficiencies in comparison to Rex in what counts among the Frost men. As Bayard tells Rex, he resents not inheriting Rufus's "rugged hands" and masculine physique as Rex did, in contrast to what Bayard calls his "pink cheeks and broom-handle arms," a weakness underscored by his failure to keep up with the farm work (302). Instead, Bayard is bound to another relative—Jesse Shannon—who likewise could not conform to this masculine ideal. Significantly, Phillips brings Jesse up again in the closing scene of the novel. Now, so long after Jesse's death, Anna decides to destroy his diary with its "strange" and "queer" ideas, bringing it out of its hiding place in the literal closet to destroy it (316). Her motives are complicated. It may be a final disavowal, but it is also a protective action because Anna is very sick. Paired with Bayard's mostly unresolved position in the Frost family, the destruction of Jesse's diary indicates that queerness cannot be easily accommodated in *Kangaroo Hollow*, foreshadowing problems that only intensify in *The Loved and the Unloved*.

The Limits of Same-Sex Bonds

Phillips's *The Loved and the Unloved*, published in 1955, is the fifth and final book written during his major period, which began in 1950 with *The Bitterweed Path* (although *Kangaroo Hollow*, which immediately preceded *The Loved and Unloved*, was only published in England at the time). *The Loved and the Unloved* contains two components: first, the third-person framing narrative that focuses on events surrounding Max Harper's impending execution for murder, and second, Max's "manuscript" that is his first-person account, from when he first moved to Cross City as a teenager until his trial for murder. Again, Phillips focuses on a sharecropping family in rural Mississippi and a young man whose harsh life contrasts with his emotional depth and sensitivity. His story is thus akin to Darrell Barclay's in *The Bitterweed Path* and raises the same issues when it comes to socioeconomic class and mobility within sharecropping system. The Pitts from Phillips's first novel are akin to the Acrofts, with the paternalistic, rich landowner (Sid Acroft) and his two children (Vance and Margo). Like Darrell, Max tries to make sense of his position in relation to this powerful family, also trying to improve himself and rise above his troubled family life and his lowly social and economic position. What is importantly missing, however, is the tenderness and understanding one finds between Roger and Darrell, for example, which is a stark contrast with the intense hostility and rivalry between Max and Vance, a rivalry that ends with tragedy. As readers learn toward the end of the novel, Max is to be executed for murdering Vance. At the center of this murder is a secret, a particularly threatening one, but Max only shares this secret in his manuscript. Others have tried unsuccessfully to learn the secret, with many (including the executioner) sensing that it would vindicate Max. Thus, instead of

executing Max, the executioner kills himself, setting off the chain of events that eventually, as readers learn in the epilogue, lead to Max's release.

This novel draws on many of the same elements as in *The Bitterweed Path*, acting almost as a counterpoint to Phillips's first novel. These similarities include the peculiar power dynamics of the sharecropping system (a vestige of the even more rigid plantation system) and the possible tensions between seemingly opposing figures with that system. Specifically, the focus becomes relationships between men within this system, particularly those on different sides of the divide. It considers mobility and whether men can establish rewarding bonds despite socioeconomic difference. *The Loved and the Unloved* leads, however, to a very different conclusion than *The Bitterweed Path*, demonstrating the relative impossibility of such bonds. In this novel, Phillips depicts the relation between class and the possibility (or impossibility) of relationships between men (whether homosocial or otherwise), the potential for suppressed same-sex desire, and the construction of masculinity. Max's rivalry with Vance Acroft is the locus for these interrelated issues. The Harpers are the typical sharecropping family, frequently moving about and relying on wealthy, landowning families for work and supplies. Max's narrative begins with a description of their move to the Acroft place, outside of Cross City, where his father becomes a sharecropper and works at Sid Acroft's sawmill. Max has a troubled childhood because of their frequent moves, his brother Rudy's health issues (and subsequent death), his own "crippled" foot, and his father's erratic and abusive behavior. On their very first night, Max is confronted by Vance, who describes himself as the "heir apparent" to the Acroft estate and acts superior to Max (24). Retrospectively, Max realizes that from the beginning, his rivalry with Vance was leading

to its tragic conclusion (28). What is also important, however, is that even in this first encounter, Phillips shows the ambivalence in Vance's reaction to Max. At one point, Max sees Vance's "goodness," particularly his sympathy for Max because of his "crippled foot" (24), but it does not last. Vance's feelings of superiority over the Harpers and sharecroppers like them, is fundamental in the difference between his rivalry with Max and the more equitable relationship between Darrell and Roger in *The Bitterweed Path*. Vance defiantly holds onto what he sees as his rightful position. This novel, then, counters the types of intimacy and relationships found in *The Bitterweed Path*, which affirms same-sex bonds and the ability to transcend class within the stratified sharecropping system. Of course, such male same-sex bonds in Phillips's novels are never uncomplicatedly mutual, but this novel is notable for its almost complete foreclosure of such possibility.

In this conflict between Vance and Max, it becomes evident that Vance's feelings of superiority are meant to deflect from his own feelings of inferiority, which are in part connected to his past troubles. Max learns about this history from Mr. ten Hoor, the unofficial leader of the residents at the Poor House where Max's mother works. Mr. ten Hoor is known for being cultured, righteous, philosophical, and witty. He quickly takes on Max as a protégé and helper, sensing in Max (as others do) that he is more sensitive than one might expect from someone with his background. Mr. ten Hoor has a complicated past, one that is never fully explained. Phillips suggests a scandal involving the Acrofts when Mr. ten Hoor worked at the local grammar school. The old man explains, obliquely, that Vance was "once" his "favorite"; he warns Max that Vance is a "very dark angel with a very bright mind" and a "fallen angel who wishes others to fall"

(38). Over the course of the novel, Phillips is increasingly suggestive when it comes to Vance's masculinity and suppressed same-sex desires. Mr. ten Hoor's description of Vance when he first knew him is highly suggestive. He remembers Vance as "[b]right, certain, delicate" and "different." For these reasons, Vance becomes a target for bullying, subsequently "revolting" by becoming aggressive: "The others began to pick at him, accusing and teasing until at last he was labelled [. . .] a sissy. Great was the fall and great was the revolt. [. . .] After that, he would be a Caesar. Only, well, he knew... he knew so well he was a bit too delicate" (64). Mr. ten Hoor understands the import of what he has told Max, blushing because he had said more than he had intended (65). The descriptor "delicate" along with Mr. ten Hoor's more direct use of the term "sissy" is crucial: it marks Vance, beneath his superior attitude, as different because of his failed masculinity. Further, it can help explain the sort of masculine competition between Max and Vance, with Vance using his class position to assert his superiority. Phillips implies that Vance's "fall" once he becomes a "sissy" is connected to Mr. ten Hoor's "unfortunate experience" with the Acrofts, which led to his dismissal from the school. It seems that Mr. ten Hoor coddles his "favorites," with Max replacing the "fallen" Vance. While this doting does not appear sexual, it is confusing in terms of gender roles, as when Mr. ten Hoor calls Max "beautiful," to which Max reacts viscerally, sensing that that descriptor may be improper (37). This background foreshadows Vance's murder, particularly the subversive secret that lies at its center.

Overall, Max feels ambivalently about the Acrofts. Mostly, Max feels that the Acrofts are kind to him, but Mr. ten Hoor warns him early on that "the rich devour the poor" and that they will destroy whoever gets in their way (64). While Vance consistently

belittles Max, as when he calls him “white trash” (75), the other Acrofts—particularly Sid Acroft and Vance’s sister Margo—do not act in the same way. Thus, Max is conflicted. Also, like Darrell, who trusts and admires the Pitts, Max remains hopeful when it comes to the Acrofts. Max’s father, however, resents his class position and his subservience to Sid Acroft. Max realizes that they are lesser than because they “were sharecroppers, hungry and ignorant, grasshopping from farm to farm,” but his father “licked their boots” and was “hateful to [his family] because he had a sorry taste in his mouth” (105). Eventually, the paternalistic figure of the sharecropping system becomes a father figure for Max, particularly after Max’s father abandons his family. Max also often seems like a replacement for Vance, particularly when he begins to work with Mr. Acroft. Vance does not work for his father; he does not really work at all, unlike the rugged, masculine Max. In part, Mr. Acroft tries to protect Vance, while also being concerned (as Margo tells Max later) that Vance is too coddled and too feminine.

Margo Acroft is central to this matrix of relationships, conflicts, and rivalries. As with Darrell in *The Bitterweed Path*, Max falls in love with the boss’s daughter, although class barriers create tension within and surrounding their potential relationship. Margo becomes close with Max, although their relationship does not go anywhere, and they lose touch when he goes to war. Max’s affection for Margo comes about gradually. Vance is eager to thwart any romance between Max and Margo. This intervention is mostly premised on a perceived class discrepancy (Margo is too good, too rich for Max), but really, there seems to be a more fundamental issue here. A certain jealousy underlies much of the tension between Max and Vance, as with his seeming resentment of the closeness between his father and Max. Other factors, however, seem to underlie this

tension, specifically what seems like a thwarted or repressed desire that Vance feels for Max, although Phillips is never explicit about this possibility per se. Cumulatively, in this novel and alongside Phillips's other depictions of same-sex relationships, it is implicit, particularly in light of Vance's past (as a "sissy"), his ambiguous relationship with Mr. ten Hoor (just as Max's relationship with the old man is ambiguous), and his seeming compulsion to hate and abuse Max despite sensing that they could have been close had factors been different.

The possibility of repressed desire is more explicit later on, and it is also tied to complicated gender dynamics. Unlike Max and Mr. Acroft, Margo is the most sensitive toward Vance, as Anna is with Jesse and Bayard in *Kangaroo Hollow*. She acknowledges the conflicting demands placed on Vance. Asking Max to not be "too hard" on Vance, she explains that her father "always treated me like a boy and Vance like a girl. But he couldn't stand it if Vance acted the least bit weak in anything" (209). Mr. Acroft gives Margo greater freedom; in contrast, he treats Vance "like a girl" while also demanding he act manly. These competing expectations are evident when Mr. Acroft sends Vance to military school but gets him out of the draft for World War II, unlike Max, who enlists on his own. As Margo says, "I reckon he wanted [Vance] to be the best millhand without working and the best soldier without ever going to war" and concludes that "it seems to me that Vance has his side of the story somehow... somewhere..." (209). Readers never really get Vance's side of the story, however, thus relying on these tidbits of information to better understand his struggles and insecurities. Margo knows that these nearly impossible and competing expectations are fundamental to Vance's personal struggles. They also help explain the fallout from Vance becoming too much of a "sissy" when he

was young. The implications of these negotiations of gender expectations are exacerbated by what Max intuits as a compulsive desire and jealousy underlying Vance's hostility. He says that Vance "would never stop, that something about me unnerved him, wore him raw" (171, 232). Max intuits, however, that the two may have "loved" one another had things been different, and he seems able to sympathize with Vance. He explains,

I know, deep in my heart, it was I who drove him to such indecencies; I who hounded him up and down the corridors of his mind; I who would not let him rest in peace. [. . .] No word can be recalled, no thought that be recast; no breath can be redrawn. And so we move on, creeping to the earth again, wishing tomorrow that yesterday had been a time of love. (185)

The sentimental language here is important, with Max's yearning for the "time of love" that could have been. He repeatedly considers the mysterious reasons behind their rivalry, never coming up with an answer. Like Max, Vance feels that they could have been close had the situation been different. In his final words before dying, most notably, he tells Max, "I really liked you" (232). Phillips thus shows the complicated and contradictory feelings the two must make sense of.

All of these issues related to gender and sexuality come to the fore with Vance's murder, particularly in the reason that Max shoots him. Max has kept his motive a secret, even at his trial. The "secret," as Max and others repeatedly refer to it, first pops up in the prologue, in relation to the executioner. William Morgan, who has years of experience with the job, senses some reason Max should not be executed. For the first time, he feels guilt about his grim profession, and troubled by his encounter with Max, Morgan

commits suicide. He explains in his suicide note, “He does not deserve to die. [. . .] I know this clearly: there is always something the courts cannot find out. I will never be blamed for it. Whatever his secret is, I know it would save him” (17). Importantly, only readers learn what Max’s secret is through his first-person account. The final confrontation between Max and Vance is predicated on many related elements and events. First, Mr. ten Hoor’s past association with Vance is significant. Next, Vance’s intervention in Max’s relationship with Mr. Acroft is also an important factor. Lastly, Vance becomes even more aggressively vindictive when Max refuses to sell the Acroft land that Max has bought back to Vance. Max had always believed that Vance had confronted his father about the insurance fraud, thus breaking the secrecy around Mr. Acroft’s actions when he got Max’s foot fixed. What Max learns at the end of the novel, however, is that Vance had told his father that Max had become Mr. ten Hoor’s “sissy,” a highly explosive charge that would be unacceptable to Mr. Acroft, as Max knows from Vance’s past (233-4). Max had essentially become Mr. ten Hoor’s new “favorite,” a term that takes on more meaning than before (38). Partly, Vance seems motivated by jealousy, saying that Max had become the new “heir apparent.” Yet, one can also see how Vance may still be resentful that he was deemed a “sissy” as an adolescent, turning it back on Max. Max does not hesitate in killing Vance, shooting him immediately after Vance reveals the truth. Max does realize that he and Mr. ten Hoor had a special relationship, although it is never improper. He does not see their intimacy as necessarily problematic, although Vance’s lie tries to make it so. This accusation alone, however, is what motivates Max’s compulsive, visceral reaction, but he keeps it a secret, feeling that it has potential consequences for his reputation.

The Loved and the Unloved is Phillips's most anxiety-ridden novel when it comes to gender and sexual variance, much more so than *Kangaroo Hollow*. Unfortunately, and perhaps inadvertently, it in part condones what might be considered a variation of the homosexual panic defense or a justifiable response to an attack on Max's "honor." The insinuation of an improper relationship between Max and Mr. ten Hoor, with implications regarding Max's masculinity, can be interpreted as causing a sort of homosexual panic, a reaction that has been used to justify violence (including legally) in the name of protecting one's heterosexuality and masculinity. Others come to believe, because of the executioner's suicide in the prologue and Mrs. Acroft's intervention in the epilogue, that Max must have had a good reason for killing Vance. It seems that the main reason for hiding the secret, however, is that it could undermine his masculinity and heterosexuality. Max knows its importance, saying, "It was better to tell nothing, absolutely nothing, for if I told one thing I might have to tell another; and at last they would find out the final thing that raised my gun" (236). Exactly what Max would have to explain is ambiguous, yet the suggestion that others may learn *too much* is important.

Certainly, Max is a very sympathetic character, one who rightfully earns the understanding and compassion of readers. He survives a rough childhood, while remaining a sensitive and emotional character. Yet, readers must ask, does Phillips also want them to sympathize with his reason for killing Vance, despite its possibly homophobic implications? So many things—including Max's first-hand account, the executioner's suicide, and Mrs. Acroft's sympathy for Max—seems to lead to such an understanding. Logically, readers may understand why, after so many years of abuse, Max may have impulsively killed Vance, but it is crucial that *this* allegation specifically

sets him off, making the situation more complicated contextually. Because of the executioner's cryptic suicide, people believe that Max must have revealed his secret to Morgan (245-6), so public opinion shifts in Max's favor. Max's remorse, however, perhaps indicates that Phillips does *not* see this defense as actually justifiable, although the insinuation, from the public's perspective, might have warranted Max's reaction. It is significant, however, that Max is sympathetic to Vance in the end, and he concludes his manuscript, "Vance, if we should meet in some yet unnumbered age, let me be forgiven" (240). Further, at the very end of the third-person epilogue, Max begins to cry when he thinks of Vance (248). His response echoes Mrs. Acroft's response, which is both sympathetic toward Max and mournful for both her son and the relationship that he and Max could have had. About the murder, she tells Max, "You were wrong... you were wrong, but I can't believe you were *all* wrong. Years ago I hoped you would like each other. I hoped you would be friends" (240). This mournful conclusion underscores one of the central tragedies of this novel: two individuals were unable to transcend basic differences, were unable to get beyond personal resentment to become friends, although Max and Vance (like Mrs. Acroft) seemed to have yearned at times for that relationship and understanding with one another.

"Ain't I a Good Bedfeller?"

Phillips's final novel, *Red Midnight*, was published in 2002, decades after the release of *The Loved and the Unloved*. Phillips returns to his familiar place and era, northern rural Mississippi in the early twentieth century, specifically the period between

World War I and II. This novel is different from Phillips's earlier novels in that it was written and published at a time far removed from this era, evoking instead a version of the rural South that is mostly gone. The protagonist, Marcus Oday, is another of Phillips's emotional and sensitive young men, although he has more in common with Bayard from *Kangaroo Hollow* than Max from *The Loved and the Unloved* or Darrell from *The Bitterweed Path*. Marcus does not face the hardships that confront Darrell and Max. His trust fund and inheritance make him independently wealthy, and his time abroad and passion for literature exemplify a cultured sensibility more akin to Bayard's than to that of the rugged country boys. Marcus's story begins with his account of his return home from France, where he had lived with his mother and grandfather prior to his mother's unexpected death. Back in Hammerhead, Marcus lives with his father. His father's death, however, changes his life unexpectedly. As in Phillips's other novels, same-sex bonds are important in *Red Midnight*, and class differences shape such relationships. *The Loved and the Unloved* countered Phillips's first novel in highlighting the impossibility for men to transcend class barriers and form meaningful bonds. In his final novel, however, Phillips returns to that earlier optimism. Through the novel's poignant central relationship, that between Marcus and a fellow prisoner, Phillips shows that two men can overcome differences in age, background, and socioeconomic class.

Relationships of various forms between men are central to this novel, but the most important relationship is Marcus's intimate bond with Mims. Marcus meets Mims in Olanberg Prison while he is serving time for killing Sanford Galloway, who had tried to drive over Marcus's father's grave; Marcus feels he must prevent such disrespect and so shoots Sanford. On his second night at Olanberg, Marcus is sent to the Lumber Yard,

where he is paired with Mims. Social and class difference again factors in this central relationship. Mims is from a lower-class background, while Marcus has access to greater resources and is more cultured. Yet, despite the disparities between Marcus and Mims, they are not hampered by them, instead becoming intimately devoted to one another both in prison and after their release. Mims's story is a remarkable one. He was sent to prison because he took the fall for his ailing father, who was to be charged for bootlegging, and so he is respected in the prison. In some ways, Mims becomes a replacement for Marcus's father, sharing many of Marcus's father's mannerisms and behaviors, caring for Marcus in similar ways, and possessing the same sensitivity that one might not initially expect. This relationship, however, extends beyond paternalism. More importantly, it goes beyond a purely homosocial relationship as well. Marcus and Mims develop a romantic, physical, and possibly sexual bond that is not limited to their time in prison. This bond leads to a happy conclusion uncommon for men in Phillips's novels, one that posits a new—and queerer—opportunity for male bonds.

In his novels, Phillips takes a typically simplistic and one-dimensional character type—the (white) working class men from the rural South—and develops it, making such characters more sympathetic and dynamic. Mims is much more than the simple country man he initially seems to be to Marcus. He speaks in dialect (saying, for example, “dreckly” for “directly” and “tomarr” for “tomorrow”) and comes from a humble background. Early on, Marcus has shifting perceptions of Mims, particularly based on his physical appearance. At first, Mims's face seems “coarse and unpleasant”; after speaking with Mims, however, Marcus sees that his “face did not appear so coarse now” and has a balance of “strength and a certain attractiveness” (126). In no time, Marcus sees “more

clearly than ever” that Mims’s face “was not the least bit coarse or unpleasant” (129). The repetition of the descriptor “coarse” at first seems to mark Mims as one might expect: an uncouth, rough country bumpkin. Mims is also rather physically imposing. He is tall with a “heavily built body, a large head, large hands” (126); he has a “powerful neck” and eyes that are “firm and steady” (127). This description is a little deceiving though. Mims is actually quite sensitive and caring. He is also deft at delicate and beautiful craftwork and keeps a cozy home. As Marcus explains, “Here was an unusual man. A body that would be at home in overalls. Hands that could shape the scrollwork on a cabinet with the ease of Sarah [the family’s servant] moulding butter” (131). Further, while others may dismiss Mims because he seems uneducated or less sophisticated, Marcus sees that Mims is actually superior or “more precious” than such people (131, 148). Phillips offers an alternative, more complicated view of this type of man, challenging class prejudices, especially as those prejudices intersect with assumptions about the (rural) South. Marcus, despite his education and better social position, recognizes that Mims is in many ways better than people like him. They come to complement one another, bridging what may at first seem like significant differences.

The basis for Marcus’s relationship with Mims—including its physical dimension—is established on their first night together. Mims’s apartment becomes a secluded, intimate space for him and Marcus. Immediately, the two develop a bond that is physical (in a non-sexual sense). They also establish a domestic routine that they adhere to for the rest of their years together in Olanberg. Marcus’s first night with Mims is one of the first freezes, and Mims becomes concerned because Marcus is not prepared for the intense cold. After they lie down, Mims tells Marcus, “If you wanta bring your quilt over

here and us double up, I don't mind" (134). The two do not really shy away from being physically close, even as relative strangers. When Mims tells him that he can get closer, Marcus "moved closer, and wrapped [his] arm around the big warm body" (135). It is interesting here and afterward how Mims invites this physical closeness, with him describing the two as "bedfellers." Frankly, it is not really unexpected that Marcus seeks this type of physical intimacy. Mims, however, seems like the "typical" masculine country man, having had a wife and family before. Interestingly, however, Mims is the one who admits that there was more to their first night together than just necessity, not Marcus. As he tells Marcus, "You're a right good bedfeller" (137). Further, Mims feels somewhat slighted when Marcus asks for blankets the next day, which means they would sleep separately. As he asks Marcus, "Why, ain't I a good bedfeller?" (138). Marcus seems taken aback at first, indicating that Mims's reaction is likely unexpected. This scene is repeated the next night when they again sleep in the bed together, which Mims already assumes will happen. When they are in bed, Marcus explains, "I turned and put my arm around him. 'Can I hug you tight?'" Mims responds simply, "Tight as you want to" (169). They maintain this domestic space and routine, and their physical closeness and intimacy here anticipates their long-lasting dedication to one another. For Marcus, his seemingly immediate intimacy with Mims is transformative. Thus, the day after their first night together, he recounts, "I looked back and felt how much happier I would be if I could only stay close to Mims. [. . .] I was distinctly aware of two worlds now, one with Mims and one without him" (139). To be in this new "world" with Mims guides Marcus for the rest of the novel and gives him new purpose.

One seemingly minor detail recounted about their first night together actually comes to signify much about Marcus's relationship with Mims, their promises to one another, and the potential for sexual intimacy. This symbolism is contained in what Marcus later refers to as the "ritual of the silver box" (197), meaning the silver box in which Mims keeps his snuff. It is odd that Marcus is "thrilled" by Mims's "maneuver" of taking the silver snuffbox and taking a pinch of the snuff (131). Later, this "ritual" takes on more symbolic—and sexually suggestive—importance. The two strike a deal: Marcus can have a "chew" when he turns eighteen, which suggests not only maturity, but specifically, the age of consent. After Mims refuses to give him snuff, Marcus tells him, "Sometime? Will you give me a pinch? I sure would like one. With you" (167), with this offset and thus emphasized "with you" suggesting something more. At the same time that they bargain that Marcus can have a pinch of snuff after he turns eighteen, they allude to another arrangement that seems blatantly sexual. Believing that he will be able to leave Olanberg to attend Aunt Bella's funeral, Marcus recounts the following:

After a bit I said, "You know what you promised me when I'm eighteen.

What you'd let me do?"

"Yeah."

"What if I asked right now?"

"Well..." He paused for a long time. "I'd come across, I guess. But you don't mind waitin', do you?"

"No," I said. "I'll wait." (177)

The language here—“coming across”—and Mims’s desire, as the older man, that they wait until Marcus turns eighteen, suggests a sexual arrangement or promise. Yet, Phillips renders it ambiguous: on Marcus’s eighteenth birthday, Mims actually *does* give Marcus a chew of snuff. Seeing Mims get his snuff that night, Marcus has a visceral, bodily reaction, one evocative of sexual arousal: his face “flushed with excitement”; the “blood rose” in his face; and his heart “pounded” in anticipation (191). This physical reaction and the more significant import of the occasion, for Marcus, is reinforced soon after: “All the blood in my body mounted to my face. I was trembling with fear and pleasure. In a strange and mystic way I felt the sharing of the silver box with Mims provided some eternal commitment, a final seal, a perfect union with something” (193). This scene is tangibly erotically charged, whether it should be read as a literal, although obscured, sexual consummation or a replacement for a sexual act. These scenes are the closest Phillips comes to portraying a sexual encounter in this novel.

Their time together in Olanberg is emotionally transformative for Mims and Marcus. Despite their circumstances, they form a deep bond. Mims even accepts his unnecessary imprisonment because of his relationship with Marcus. “It ain’t so bad,” Mims reflects, “If I wasn’t here I wouldn’ta met you. And I wouldn’t take nothing for that” (182). By the time that Marcus is set to leave Olanberg, the two have settled into their life together. Marcus accurately describes their dynamic as a “curious harmony, like a very old couple who have long since forgotten that separateness could exist” (190). On this same night, Marcus asks Mims to make a promise: “I love you more than anybody. When you get out of here, will you promise to live where I do. [. . .] I’ll take care of you.” Mims promises yet believes he will not get out for a long time (196). Shortly after,

Marcus is set to be released. The two men share their only blatantly romantic moment that is described in the narrative. As Marcus recounts, “I put my arm on Mims’s shoulder, my fingers caressed the face, the neck. [. . .] I leaned over and kissed him. He stirred as if to rise, but only lifted his hand and I felt the pressure of the big fingers on my shoulder and then the warm hollow of his hand like a gentle collar about my neck. I kissed him again and turned away quickly” (200). This kiss represents the logical expression of their emotional and romantic devotion both in and out of Olanberg. It also serves as a promise that their bond will outlast their time in prison. Marcus returns to the world “without” Mims. He cannot recapture his past, particularly with his father and great-aunt gone, but he also lacks his new partner, his replacement family—Mims.

The ending of *Red Midnight* is the most positive one in Phillips’s fiction for the men who love other men. As promised, Mims joins Marcus in Hammerhead, where he lives and works on the farm, restoring it to its prior condition as when Marcus’s father was alive. They again settle into a domestic routine. Marcus’s contentment, however, is complicated by one factor: Mims’s relationship with the neighbor Shelley Raye. Marcus feels ambivalently about this relationship, both accepting and at times resenting it, but the novel ends optimistically. While one might assume that Mims’s marriage to Shelley would end his relationship with Marcus, Phillips delivers an alternative, one that reconciles these different affections into a positive—and queer—arrangement or understanding. Shelley moves in with Mims on Marcus’s property, and so they become a trio. Mims has maintained his devotion to Marcus and asks Marcus for his blessing in marrying Shelley. Interestingly, Mims explains explicitly that his love of Marcus is greater than his love for anyone else, including Shelley. As he tells Marcus, “I wouldn’t

do you any harm for nobody. And I'll never love nobody more'n I do you." Now reassured, Marcus consents (291). Marcus's approval is inconsistent at first, particularly right after the wedding. Realizing later that "Shelley was not going to hide Mims" from him, however, Marcus describes their odd fate optimistically. He says, "The mind and the heart and whatever else it is that shaped our tomorrows can play some funny tricks. Now I was certain that there would be no hiding, no walls, no closed doors" (302). Their position seems to be the result of the "funny tricks" of fate, but they accept it. Phillips implies, although without much overt development, that Shelley recognizes the importance of Mims's relationship with Marcus. This relationship is not hidden, although it will likely not be physical or explicitly romantic again. Instead, their intimacy will be visible and acknowledged, while Marcus retains an equal place in their homelife, establishing a queer dynamic that balances same-sex intimacy and heterosexual marriage. Neither seems incompatible with the other. Marriage is not a hindrance to love between men, whatever form it takes. This reconciliation is unique in Phillips's fiction. Paired with Marcus's and Mims's ability to transcend multiple barriers (particularly age difference and class status), it represents the most positive conclusion for Phillips's same-sex loving men.

Phillips's fiction is remarkable for its consistency and candor in representing same-sex desire and relationships, whether its positive forms or attendant problems (such as class differences) for "men like that." Phillips writes with an emotional astuteness and insight related to these issues, which is particularly important in the context of his early

career. Further, Phillips probes some of the basic assumptions about modern understandings of sexuality, from nonnormative gender and sexuality in rural areas to a broader questioning of identity and community as standards in defining sexuality. His representations of queer men and longings range from the affirmative to the anxiety-ridden—and back again. Phillips neither gives into naïve pastoral nostalgia nor despondency because of homophobic pressures. One must recognize, however, the affirmative aspect of his portrayals of same-sex desire and relationships. If *The Loved and the Unloved* had been Phillips's final word on "men like that," this assessment might be different. His affirmative vision of same-sex desire and bonds between men in *Red Midnight* reaffirms the acceptance found in Phillips's first novel. The multidimensional quality of Phillips's treatment of queerness and the varied experiences of same-sex desire for men in the country enriches any study of rural queer literature.

CHAPTER IV: WILLIAM GOYEN'S PECULIAR REGION

William Goyen's first novel, *The House of Breath*, was published in 1950, the same year Thomas Hal Phillips published *The Bitterweed Path*. In a contemporaneous review of the novels, "The House of the Bitterweeds," Margaret L. Hartley outlines some commonalities and slight differences between the two novels. Hartley argues that the two novels share a "comprehension of love" or "the sense of deep inner relationship with other human beings" (xxiii), although each writer differs stylistically. Phillips draws on a "simplicity and directness of feeling" (xxii); Goyen, in contrast, relies on an "intricacy of language and more explicitness of analysis" (xxiii). Phillips and Goyen also share common source material. Like Phillips, Goyen draws on certain experiences and settings, that of "people of no extraordinary dimensions living in a drab little town," to use Hartley's description (xxiii). Yet, he invests so much in these characters, elevating their experiences to "the fulness of tragic human dignity" (289). Hartley glosses over, however, an important commonality between *The House of Breath* and *The Bitterweed Path*. Both writers centralize same-sex desire and relationships in these two novels. To her credit, Hartley hints at the significance of same-sex bonds in *The Bitterweed Path*, although she does not do so with *The House of Breath* (xxii). Significantly, Hartley's review outlines the divergence between Goyen's and Phillips's fiction that becomes even more pronounced after these two novels. While Phillips's fiction is marked by its directness and a consistent focus on male same-sex bonds in rural Mississippi, Goyen establishes a mythic and poetic vision of East Texas and its outsiders, from *The House of Breath* to his final novel, *Arcadio* (1983), with an increasingly queer cast of characters and disruption of gender and sexual categories and norms.

Goyen's fiction, from *The House of Breath* onward, is grounded in the particular setting and landscape of East Texas. This question of region and regionalism is important in placing Goyen's work—or resisting such placement. Goyen has sometimes been identified as a southern writer, a descriptor he rejected, as Clark Davis repeatedly notes. Goyen considered himself southwestern, feeling that his fiction was “grounded in the emotional terrain of East Texas” but without the “colorist aesthetics of regionalism” (Davis 5). Instead, he embraces the “technical sophistication” of modernism (182), while developing a distinct point of view in representing the region and its towns, people, and culture. Goyen's vision of East Texas is a grand, mythic one. It is also characterized by a sense of dislocation and change, which was personal for the author. As Goyen describes it in the preface to his collected stories, his landscape is “pastoral, river-haunted, tree-shaded, mysterious and bewitched”; for him, he always felt the pull of “this faraway haunting landscape, this ringing speech, this tender and yearning, rollicking people, [. . .] this vision of ‘home,’ this ache of ‘homesickness’” (xi). Goyen's personal emotions regarding the region inflect his representation of its significant changes throughout the twentieth century. Goyen's East Texas is a personally retrospective and “homesick” vision of the area since he left Texas early on in his life, and so the mood of his fiction is often forlorn and wistful. His personal longing for this lost culture and people is connected to the environmental change in the region he witnessed. Goyen was troubled by industrialization, urban sprawl, mass migration to cities, and ecological change. As Davis explains, “Goyen imagined the region of his early childhood to be under a sort of malediction, particularly when the delicate pastoral of dirt road and river began to yield to oil wells and dams.” His fiction shows a “deeper understanding that what had been

(geographically, ecologically, culturally) no longer existed” (36). Loss and immense change in rural East Texas are thus foundational to Goyen’s fiction and interconnect with his interest in memory, individual’s stories, and relationships between people.

The Country of Childhood

Goyen’s first novel includes many of the elements that would be central to his fiction throughout his career, including its small-town setting, an appreciation for language, and a nascent ecological critique. It also specifically addresses sexual development and nonnormative gender and sexuality. Like most of Goyen’s novels, *The House of Breath* is an experimental work. Goyen forgoes straightforward narrative, instead featuring a series of episodes and “portraits” remembered or imagined by the narrative consciousness of Boy Ganchion (Gibbons, Afterword 185). Boy brings together the stories and voices of the disparate members of the Ganchion family through fragile memory and imagination. As Hartley describes it, *The House of Breath* is a “lonely meditation, of the one member [of the Ganchion family] who has dedicated himself to the task of finding the meaning the others have sensed dimly in the whole tangled web of their interrelated lives” (xxiii). Readers are thus “led by stages through the lives and places of this small, half-remembered, half-imagined local world” centering around the town of Charity and the Ganchion family (Gibbons, Afterword 185). This fragile “half-remembered, half-imagined” world contrasts with Boy’s current situation. The now-grown Boy describes his isolation in a nameless city. He yearns to recover his childhood and to better understand his family’s story and the often-tragic fates of its different

members. The novel begins midsentence, as if it is an ongoing monologue in Boy's mind. The city appears menacing to Boy, as when he describes the city park as "the very pasture of Hell" where unidentifiable couples mock him in their intimacy (3). He alludes to furtive or illicit sexuality with the couples "whispering in shadows" and explicit graffiti on the lavatory walls, suggesting that the park is a cruising ground. All of this sexual and romantic activity only reminds him of his loneliness, feeling mocked by the shadowy lovers. Yet, this defeat or isolation is not only romantic or sexual. It connects to a more fundamental loss. He describes himself as "alone and lost in the world with no home to go home to" and "robbed of everything I never had but dreamt and hoped to have" (3). An invocation leads him back to his source: "I began to name over and over in my memory every beautiful and loved image I ever had, to name and praise them over and over like a rosary" (4), and so he begins his journey through Charity and to the Ganchion family's home.

The Ganchions' sad stories are bound up in the history of the small town of Charity and of historical and environmental change in the area. Such changes produce a sense of loss that Boy feels acutely. Boy begins his imaginative return to East Texas by addressing the town where the Ganchion family lived. His desperate cry—"O Charity!"—leads him back as he reconstructs the path through Charity to the Ganchion home (5). The town is remembered as it appeared to Boy as a child. (Throughout the novel, one almost forgets that Boy is now an adult since he relies so heavily on childhood memory and perception.) As Boy "tells" Charity, "I would go out [. . .] and stand and look over across the fairy fields at you where you lay like a storybook town" (6) and describes it as "happy" "sitting in your place in Texas" (7). Yet, even in this intimate,

loving invocation of Charity, Boy suggests the town's limitations that the various Ganchions reckon with, flee from, or begrudgingly submit to. Early on, Boy perceived that Charity had become "old and lusterless" (8). For Boy, Charity is most important as the homeplace of the Ganchion family. As Boy says, "In you, Charity, there stands now, as in the globed world of my memory there glimmers the frosted image of it, blown by all these breaths, the fallen splendid house" that "appears, now, to be an old monument in an agony of memory of us" (9). Memory relies on speech, the ability to use language to revive, if only in memory, what was lost. Thus, the house waits "for one of us to give back its language" (9), Boy's task in this novel. He allows the Ganchions to speak, either alone or to one another, in ways that did not actually happen. As Davis notes, they emerge as "fragmented voices, sounds in his head that lead him imaginatively to the house that once held them." Boy can only momentarily restore these disparate family members as "fragile tissues of memory" (Davis 122). The destination of Boy's imagined return to Charity is the now-ruinous Ganchion home, the "house of breath" of the novel's title. In Boy's vision of the house, its imagined current state—one of ruin—coexists with his memory of his childhood there. The house becomes abstracted, almost as if it were never real, only a house "founded on the most fragile web of breath" (perhaps memory, perhaps loss) (*House of Breath* 56). Through this return, Boy is able to breathe life back into the house and allow the various Ganchions to speak again.

In another direct address, Boy speaks to the River, which speaks back to him. He begins his sojourn by wandering through Charity, retracing the path that leads back to the Ganchion home, but then his focus becomes the River that encircles the town. The River is a formative site for Boy, described as "the first river in the country of childhood" (26).

As Gibbons notes, Goyen demonstrates a sensitivity to the natural world beginning with *The House of Breath*; here Goyen's ecological vision is more subtle and personal, whereas later it becomes increasingly urgent and persistent (*William Goyen* 63). This sensitivity comes through in the way Boy and the River speak to one another and recount their experiences together. The River is also erotically charged, as when it describes itself as "swollen huge and throbbing" with its fluid (30). Notably, the River is part of Boy's sexual awakening, as when Boy unexpectedly has his first orgasm while swimming in it (29), and so the River envisions their relationship as sexual. As the River tells him, "I had you rising and falling in me and you left something in me [. . .] O we were lovers" (31). This communion between Boy and the River sets the stage for *Come, the Restorer*, where another young man—Addis Adair—is drawn to the erotic energy of the natural world; for both, sexual awakening is intertwined with nature. *The House of Breath* also gestures toward *Come, the Restorer* (and even *Arcadio*) because the River is described as both male and female since, for example, it has a womb but also fertilizes the land with its "sperm." In *Come, the Restorer*, nature is also self-contained in its ability to reproduce. Echoing the language used to describe the intersexed Arcadio in Goyen's final novel as well as the self-reproducing Thicket in *Come, the Restorer*, the River describes itself as it "folded back again over upon [it]self, a shrunken, lighter lover" (27). Goyen's novels are queerest when he brings together and synthesizes central dualities: flesh and spirit, male and female, human and nature. This description of the River gestures toward the development of this strategy in those later novels.

In *The House of Breath*, Goyen introduces the ecological critique central to his writing about this region. Just as the Ganchion home has not withstood time and change,

the River has been nearly destroyed by human exploitation. Boy ends his address to the River, “But even a river, River, can fall to ruin” (32). The River is now depleted—“so thin and weak and old”—because of the oil boom and industrialization. Oilwells now cover the bottomlands, and the River was unnaturally redirected, “turned out of [its] path” (32). The roiling, full River and its lush surroundings are replaced by “the black towers of riggings” and covered in “the slime of decomposition” from the industrial waste (32-3). Charity has changed, Boy has lost his family, and the Ganchion home has slowly worn down. Now, even the natural world that Boy remembers has depleted, as symbolized by the River. Boy seems bewildered that “even a river”—otherwise seeming so permanent—could be ruined, but as is evident throughout Goyen’s fiction, nature is never immutable and beyond human influence. Malley Ganchion and her daughter Jessy, who died young, offer a more dramatic vision of human greed and ecological destruction. Malley says that because of the oilwells everywhere, “no nature [is] left” (78). Yet, it is not limited to Charity. As Malley explains, “The world has sold away everything that was beautiful and as the Lord put it here to be [. . .] East Taxis [*sic*] is ruined, there’s a terrible change in the world” (79). Jessy presents a more apocalyptic vision, describing “the end of our time [. . .] because the oilwells and evil had come to Charity [. . .] the oil money bred swank and greed and false-facedness” (94-5). One sees the beginning of Goyen’s ecological critique in Boy’s more poignant mourning for the lost country of his childhood, but Malley’s and Jessy’s more emphatic criticism of human greed and exploitation is more central in *Come, the Restorer*.

While Boy returns to and mourns the changes in Charity, his relationship to the town, as with the rest of the Ganchions, is an ambivalent one. Charity has its limits as a

small town, with many impoverished families, including the Ganchions, and minimal opportunities. The different generations of Ganchions react differently. The voices that Boy recovers are primarily in two categories. The younger Ganchions—Folner, Berryben, and Sue Emma (or Swimma)—leave Charity when Boy is young, just as Boy leaves eventually. Christy is unique among them in leaving but eventually returning. The older women—Granny Ganchion, Aunty, and Malley—stay and mourn the loss of their wayward children. Addressing Charity, Boy says, “There was just no future in a little town like you for young people young and ready, they said. But the old ones sat right there with you, Charity, holding your hand, rocking and wailing and listening or counting their secret futile beads of hope” that the younger ones will return (33). The older Ganchions thus remain attached to Charity, despite its limitations, while the younger Ganchions often feel they must change their situation, even if they must also abandon their family.

Boy may genuinely mourn the changes in Charity, but he does not seem fully convinced that it was ever going to be a real home for him. The town is described as cursed and the Ganchion family doomed in some way. Aunty describes it as “this infernal little town of Charity dead and rotting away”; she intuits that “we’ll all die in a pile right here” with “nobody carin, nobody carin” (49). Boy notes, however, that this situation was not limited to the Ganchions: “Oh all the porches in the little town had them rocking on them, sitting, sitting” with “the town rotting away and no place to go” (49-50). An unsettled conflict arises: Charity is not enough, but to leave causes pain for others (and perhaps even the self, as it does for Boy). Also, those who leave often face ruin, as with Folner and Swimma. Christy perhaps best embodies this conflict because he is the only

one of the younger Ganchions to leave Charity (because of his time in the Merchant Marines) and to return. Back in Charity, he hardens and becomes silent, intently studying the map of the world that he hangs on the kitchen wall. Swimma contrasts with Christy. She leaves for the city, becomes a model, and after marrying and divorcing multiple times, comes to be increasingly disreputable. Like Folner, Swimma is a scandal for her family, living a salacious life that troubles the Ganchions and the others in Charity. To leave or to stay becomes a primary conflict. Returning to the opening section, one can see how Boy faces this dilemma now. He cannot go back to Charity, yet the anonymous city is isolating and hostile. Perhaps memory is a compromise. He can “return” to Charity, but it is a Charity inflected by his sense of displacement and homesickness and a return to a place and people now lost.

Ben Berryben stands out among Boy’s aunts and uncles who leave Charity, although his story is more subtle when it comes to sexual difference. As with Christy and Folner (and Boy later), Goyen suggests that Berryben is a queer character, although his approach to describing Berryben’s sexuality is more indirect, mostly framed as difference and secrecy. As Berryben’s mother Malley wonders, “[M]y pore lost and sufferin little Berryben. What was there that made you different from us all?” (96). Like the others, Berryben felt that “the world is big and Charity so small”; he “wanted something that we all didn’t know about” and that was kept a secret even from Malley (97). Berryben never actually returned home, but Boy imagines the reckoning that Berryben and his mother could have had if he did. Berryben channels the feelings the other young Ganchions must have felt when it comes to their small-town life. He describes the urge to leave as a “call away from all the withered quiet and dying old life and ways of this little world of

Charity” (101). Malley was likely unaware of the effect she had on Berryben, turning his “difference” into sin through a self-fulfilling process. He tells her, “I couldn’t tell you the truth about the things that claimed me. Because you always said that these things were sins” and so made him “sinful” (102). Generally, secrecy abounds with the Ganchions, and Christy’s experience demonstrates what could have happened to Berryben had he returned. While Christy had same-sex relationships when he was in the Merchant Marines, he hides his desires when he returns to Charity, which hardens him and makes him act erratically. Sexual difference becomes a common reason to leave Charity among the four male Ganchions, including Boy. As Davis explains, for both Berryben and Boy, sexuality “sets the self apart, creating a sense of burden and the need for fulfillment, if at all possible, *elsewhere*” (126-7). These two remain exiled, seeking love and desire beyond Charity, while Christy begrudgingly comes back home and Folner returns only after death.

Of the ones that get away from Charity, Folner is the most transgressive because of his effeminate queerness. Notably, the flamboyant Folner inspires Berryben to leave Charity. As Berryben tells Malley with flourish, “What did we go after? [. . .] *Something marvelous, something magic, that makes all secrets vanish*” (105). Like Berryben, Folner is viewed as different early on. He is effeminate and seen going to and coming back from what must be illicit sexual encounters elsewhere. As a young person, Folner seems like a “sad and cheap and wasted, a doll left out in the rain” and disappeared for days at a time, returning “spent and wasted and ruined” (111). Even his nickname—Follie—suggests superficiality, frivolousness, and effeminacy. It is unsurprising that Folner leaves with the circus that comes to Charity, eventually becoming a female impersonator. He leaves and

gets “out of East Texas” with the show “because [. . .] it was the only bright and glittering thing in the world he could find” (113). Folner differs from Berryben in his lack of shame or even much secrecy; he is conspicuous and so embraces his queerness. As Boy says, Folner “knew what he was and pursued it all the way” even though it ends tragically (113). Boy seems to admire Folner and understand him, recognizing that Folner needed to leave their small town, which would always constrain him. Boy tells him, “You didn’t want to flicker around East Texas, you wanted to blaze in the world, to sparkle, to shine, to glisten [. . .] You wanted tinsel and tinfoil and spangle and Roman candle glamor, to be gaudy and bright” (114). The circus and its freakshow provide Folner the escape he desired. As he explains, the freakshow seems a suitable place for him; he had already been deemed a “freak” because of his effeminacy. Folner’s authenticity appeals to Boy, although it made Folner the target of Charity’s gossip and judgment. For Folner, his death is worth his brief escape. Folner’s story reveals the unfortunate ostracism that a visibly queer person, particularly one that deviates from gender norms substantively, may face in Charity. The novel more broadly, however, does not necessarily position Charity as inherently inhospitable to *all* queer folks, or at least, as the Ganchion family’s story demonstrates, it can be a productive site for gender and sexual variance.

Because of his own sexual difference, Boy connects with Folner; understanding Folner is a means to understand himself. Even when he was younger, though, he must have felt some connection to his uncle, evident when he secretly dropped a spangle into Folner’s coffin at the funeral (115). For Boy, Folner has become a saint-like figure. As he makes his way through the Ganchion home, Boy visits the attic where Folner’s gaudy possessions are stored, describing them as relics and the attic as a sepulcher. He tells

Folner, “I am here [. . .] rummaging for some answer. It is hard to be in the world and bone of your bone” (124). This last phrase—“bone of your bone”—suggests a deeper kinship beyond familial ties. Such a connection is underscored when Boy looks in the mirror, exclaiming, “For a moment I look like Folner!” (128). Although Boy feels a connection to his uncle, Folner is still an enigma to him, as when he searches for the secret he senses in Folner’s trunks, with its women’s wigs and spangles and make-up, from Folner’s time with the aptly named Gayety Shows and Company (127). Toward the end of Folner’s imagined monologue, he reminds Boy that he imparted to him some sexual knowledge, although at the time this experience was confounding for Boy (134). The exchange of sexual knowledge among the Ganchions comes up a few times, as when Berryben describes how Christy, Folner, and Swimma taught him about “romance” (102). Boy’s experiences with Folner (and later Christy), however, are particularly important in the novel. Folner reminds Boy of the time he “taught [him] a secret”; Boy recalls how alarming it was for him, making him “feel so full of sin” (134). Eventually, however, Boy understands that same-sex intimacy is not sinful, as when he rejects the preacher’s judgment that Follie was condemned to hell because of his queerness (134). As with Christy later, however, Boy’s age in comparison with the older Folner raises ethical questions about any such sexual encounter. Goyen’s point seems to be that Folner serves as a model for sexual (and gender) nonconformity for Boy. Later, Boy will be given another option: his other uncle, Christy. Yet, unlike Christy, Folner represents true authenticity and liberation. Boy must make sense of himself through these different models for same-sex desire and gender presentation.

Uncle Christy's position as the final character that Boy addresses in *The House of Breath* underscores his importance for Boy. Berryben is driven away because of his sinful desires; Swimma becomes a scandal because of her salacious behavior; and Folner can only express himself and his desires elsewhere. For Christy, the situation is more complicated since he is the only one to return to Charity and stay, an unfortunate decision for him. Early in the novel, Boy mentions Christy's time with the Merchant Marines, which offered freedom and experience, and, more importantly, a way to fulfill his same-sex desires. As Christy says of another man who was on his ship, "*Oh he was bright and I was dark and I gave him all my darkness on that ship; but we joined, for all good things in the world and to find somethin together; and loved, I never knew I could do it*" (35). Charity does not offer such opportunities for affection that the ship—an all-male environment away from home—offers for Christy. Significantly, this sexual liaison is not just a circumstantial thing for Christy, as he realizes once his ship returns. While others turn their back on any such experiences at sea, Christy holds onto this intimacy and his relationship with the other sailor. Charity does not offer the freedom that Christy found, albeit temporarily, in his time away. Christy is a rather tragic figure, overcome by isolation and loneliness, along with the oppressive secrecy expected in the Ganchion home. His endless gazing at the map of the world he has put up in the kitchen reveals his constant, albeit silent, yearning for something more. When Christy marries later, although the marriage does not last, he seems to do so because he has no other way to express his desires, but the marriage only leads to more tragedy and frustration. All of these disappointments and constraints lead Christy to express his desires in other, more problematic ways.

Among these older male characters, Christy exerts the most influence over Boy, particularly because Boy is grappling with his own nascent sexual desires. For him, Christy is both a sexual object and a model for a masculine same-sex desire. Boy first suggests Christy's role in his sexual awakening when he describes a camping trip he and Christy took with some other men when Boy was younger. He overhears Christy wondering aloud whether Boy "had any hairs down there yet." Boy lays "trembling and waiting for them to come" see; he senses the import of his reaction, feeling guilty about his secrets (23). Christy also inadvertently brings about Boy's first orgasm while swimming in the river. He knows what happened and tries to get Boy to do it again by swimming to the bottom of the river (29). In the final sections of the novel, however, Boy describes his attraction to Christy and Christy's effect on him in more detail. Spying on Christy while he is sleeping, Boy has a profound realization. Seeing Christy's naked body, "shafted" in its secret place, Boy explains, "I whispered to myself 'Yes!'—as thought I was affirming forever something I had always guessed was true" (154), referring to his own sexual desires. Earlier, Boy had described some recognition of himself in Folner, but his reaction to Christy is more profound. Goyen suggests that Christy's masculinity particularly appeals to Boy. In Boy's mind, Christy is the "eternal shape of man" and "all gentle and in his prime and bloom"; he was created, by some power, as "*man*, defined, real, continuing man in me" (154). He is both what Boy desires and what Boy desires to *become*. As Davis describes it, in this scene, Boy discovers the "bodily and sexual reality of Christy, his archetypal masculinity, and [. . .] a license for his own future as a fully realized, fully sexualized individual" (130). Christy puts himself in opposition to feminine gay men (or "fruits") like Folner (162). While Boy may desire

to become more like Christy, his personality, trepidation, and feelings of secrecy may be more akin to Berryben, the figure that exists between the extremes represented by Folner and Christy; notably, like Boy, Berryben is spared the tragic fates of Folner and Christy. The fact that Boy has such choices, however, is notable when it comes to the range of gender and sexual expressions in Goyen's novels.

Christy is pitiable because of his isolation and repressed, unfulfilled sexual desires, but those factors also make him a somewhat threatening figure. He expresses his desires in oftentimes strange or "improper" ways. He "whisper[s]" things about animals and their sexual behavior (150); he is rumored to be sexually deviant in various ways, from masturbating too much to being a "Peepin Tom" (148). Christy's odd behavior is due, Goyen suggests, to Christy's overpowering but unfulfilled (queer) desires. He cannot express any such desires when he returns home, and even his marriage—the "appropriate" outlet for his desires—ends with disappointment. That earlier scene, when Boy overhears Christy talking about his pubescent body, while exhilarating for Boy, is obviously inappropriate and slightly menacing, as is Christy's attempt to pressure Boy into having another orgasm in the river. The climactic moment of the novel is Boy's secret adventure with Christy, who now seems resolved on doing something sexual with Boy. Christy and Boy go to the Thicket of East Texas for a purported hunting trip. In this section, Boy provides insight into Christy. For example, he describes how Christy looks down on Charity, feeling "his life breaking with loneliness and memory inside him" (157). Christy remembers his past, or so Boy imagines, describing his conflicted feelings about his early sexual desires, mostly unsatisfied or forbidden (164-5). Significantly, Christy, in Boy's mind, shared the same experiences as he describes at the beginning of

the novel. During a brief time in the city, Christy also saw the park that was like the “very patch of Hell” with “couples whisperin, men to men and men to women” and the sexual graffiti in the lavatory (166). All of this is bottled up in Christy, just like the ship in the bottle he constructed. Boy may be the outlet for these desires and emotions. Boy is both titillated and fearful of what Christy has in mind. Again, the transfer of sexual knowledge is a family affair, but Christy, who has been contemplating Boy’s purity and his own corruption, concludes that he should not follow through with his unspecified plans. Instead, he aims his gun at Boy, who flees. Yet, Christy has a great impact on Boy, who seems to have gained some insight and seems to have lost any remaining childhood innocence. Boy becomes a wanderer and is now isolated in a faraway city. This final confrontation with Christy convinces him to leave, yet Boy may never really find fulfillment elsewhere, as the opening chapter suggests.

Erotic Nature

Come, the Restorer (1974) is a more forceful novel than *The House of Breath* in its treatment of eroticism and in its environmental vision. Goyen glances backward to a time before the oil boom in small-town East Texas and the wild Big Thicket. The region remains the focus of Goyen’s environmental critique in this novel, building on *The House of Breath*. This later novel is polemical in its denunciation of industrialization and the oil industry, environmental degradation, and urban sprawl. As Gibbons notes, Goyen’s ecological vision changes from the “Edenic nature of childhood” in *The House of Breath* to the “images of [nature as] an exploited and polluted area of human struggle” in *Come,*

the Restorer (William Goyen 56). From that first novel, however, Goyen draws attention to the “harsh inhumanity of industrial and urban society, which destroys the natural environment and estranges people from one another” (63). Goyen’s views of sexual desire are also more troubled and extreme in *Come, the Restorer*. One character, Addis Adair, however, is able to briefly attain an ideal state, one that unites place and sexuality, humanity and the natural world, and prompts a queer kinship between men. As best exemplified in Addis’s story, *Come, the Restorer* represents Goyen’s most dramatic and explicit representations of eroticism and ecological awareness. It offers insight into Goyen’s view of these two issues and how they interconnect—a combination that makes this novel compellingly queer.

Come, the Restorer centers on three main characters—Mr. de Persia, Addis Adair, and Wylie Prescott—and two important locales—the small town of Rose, Texas, and the Big Thicket of East Texas. The novel begins with an invocation of the “restorer” Mr. de Persia and tells of his disappearance from Rose. Its middle sections focus on the young Addis Adair. It concludes with Wylie Prescott, the “fire devil” who capitalizes on the destruction wrought by industrialization and manufacturing. The opening section, “Lost Rose,” frames the novel as a chronicle of this small town now lost to the oil boom; it also introduces the villain of the novel within Goyen’s worldview, Wylie, the “man of greed and vulgarity” who was responsible for the changes in Rose (ix-x). He is among the “generation that made poison and ate its own poison; that cemented over land and grass; that built shopping centers.” Wylie the destroyer is contrasted with de Persia the restorer, who if he returned, could be the “repairman in an age of breakdown” (x). The first part of the novel, “The Times of Mr. de Persia,” returns to this small town prior to the oil boom.

Yet, de Persia now exists only as a memory, a potential for restoration that likely will never come. A mysterious figure, deemed almost magical, de Persia was the restorer of photographs, thereby bringing back those who have gone, as well as a master craftsman; if he returned, he could again “save what’s lost” (5, 7). De Persia connects to the novel’s ecological vision. The town of Rose needs restoration because of the degradation brought about by the oil boom and industrialization. He could perhaps mend the “broken chain of life” and bring back “the days before the ugliness, to the time before Rose River was ruined by a chemical factory” (10). In Goyen’s fiction, the destruction of the natural world connects to humanity’s degradation. Thus, the narrator concludes, “we have no redemption and the world is ruined” (10). De Persia counterbalances the reviled Wylie, who brings the oil boom and industrialization to Rose. For the narrator, the restoration of the Adair family would be most important, including the pitiable Ace Adair, his domineering wife Jewel, and their adopted son Addis. If restored, Addis would bring about change because of his connection to the Texas wilderness.

De Persia is an interesting character in terms of gender and sexuality in this novel. De Persia exemplifies masculine prowess, yet he has a delicate, tender side, becoming a figuratively intersexed character. The narrator describes his body as divided in half. He is “of two hands, lighthanded and heavyhanded, one hand fleet and light, the other heavy and dark” (12). His feminine “faery hand” by which he repaired and crafted contrasts with his “dark and heavy hand, hairy and sexual” (13). His body is thus a synthesis of seemingly opposing attributes, gesturing toward the intersexed Arcadio in Goyen’s final novel. After he is found in a trance-like state and with a persistent erection, the entire town becomes obsessed with the entranced de Persia. His effect is potently sexual, which

is odd considering de Persia was impotent before this mysterious slumber. De Persia lies there “chamber loaded, cocked, reared back to spurt the issue”—descriptions of virility that are repeated with Addis later (21). With comical exaggeration, the sleeping de Persia has a drastic effect on the town. He appeals to both women, who seek his fertility powers, and men, who are captivated by the sleeping figure; he inspires a “renaissance of lovemaking” with the whole town coming to a standstill (24). Once this outburst of lust subsides, however, the Restorer takes on a more mystical role. The freaks and “deformed” come to visit the sleeping de Persia, including hunchbacks and a “morphodite,” seeking healing or restoration (30). De Persia also becomes a fertility god. He was said to have “power over growth and decay, over a kind of birth and a kind of death” (31). These powers are attributed to de Persia by the residents of this small town and those who come once the story becomes widely known. After he disappears or is taken by unknown bandits, his absence has as profound an effect as his potent presence. The residents of the small town sought de Persia’s body, although unsuccessfully, yet as the opening invocation demonstrates, he remains an important figure for the townspeople.

The descriptions of de Persia as a pagan fertility god set the tone for the section of the novel that focuses on Addis Adair. In Addis’s story, sexuality is intimately intertwined with nature, which has the real power over growth and decay, birth and death. Addis appears two and a half years after de Persia’s disappearance. Although it is unknown at the time, Addis is the son of de Persia and a woman, Selina Rosheen, who is among the bandits that stole his enchanted body. The Big Thicket takes on a central role: it is the place where de Persia’s body disappears, a “sleeping prisoner deep in the thick shady wilderness, a part of wild nature” (53); the two-year-old Addis is discovered,

Moses-like, in the Thicket as well, before being adopted by Ace and Jewel Adair (45, 47). Ace and Jewel's sexless, fruitless marriage is portrayed as a Mary and Joseph relationship. Jewel is not an idealized Madonna, however, and neither is Ace a willingly compliant Joseph. Jewel acts cruelly, berating Ace for his sexual desires. Like de Persia in his virile slumber, Ace's flesh was "untouched, his young man's juices flooding him, his flesh ached"; he "kept himself back [. . .] ripe-to-bursting, vigorous and brimming, tight as a swollen pod" (68). He is depicted as cuckolded, perpetuating a misogynistic view that becomes increasingly problematic in this novel. When he fails even to have sex with a visiting sex worker, Ace longs for his lost manhood, planning to escape his dire situation. Foreshadowing Addis's time in the wild Thicket, Ace plans to "go away and get his man's strength back"; if he got away, "his man's vigor would juice back into him like sap" and "he would lengthen and fatten and stiffen, he would be firm and rooted again in his manhood like a tree" (75). Ace never gets this chance, though, and is killed by a locomotive. Ironically, the roundhouse where Ace dies becomes a fecund, overgrown place: the "romantic ruin" of Ace's tomb becomes a "hothouse of teeming growth and bloom" with the "unused Ace" somewhere below (77). Sexual desire requires balance in Goyen's fiction. One can neither deny it entirely nor give into it completely without some restraint.

Addis is the second important male character in *Come, the Restorer*. He stands out from a young age because of his unknown origins and mysterious allure. As with de Persia, superstitions develop regarding Addis among the townspeople, although they are unaware that he is de Persia's son (59). While rejecting Ace, Jewel clings to Addis as a messiah. Addis feels the burden of Jewel's expectations and demands, and so he

eventually rejects Jewel, setting out on the sojourn that leads him throughout Texas until he ends up in the Big Thicket. Addis identifies not with Jewel but with his now-deceased adoptive father. Like Ace did, Addis feels that Jewel obstructs his desires and needs. Visiting Ace's fecund tomb before he sets out on his sojourn, Addis feels an intimate, sensual, and physical connection with Ace. He gains a "sense of the man"—an "instinctive knowledge, primitive and of the heart and genitals and blood" (82), and he takes an oval portrait of Ace with him as his companion. In Addis's mind, he must leave Jewel to "be with Ace" (85), a sort of queer union that balances a physical and sexual identification with a paternal one. This identification with Ace—even an incorporation of him—corresponds with Addis's sexual awakening as an older teenager. He, like Ace, begins to feel innate, seemingly compulsory sexual desires. Yet his desires have the same potential to be destructive since he cannot find the proper outlet at first, and so he must leave. As he prepares to leave, the tragedy of Ace's death is replaced by "another passion"; Addis feels "an overwhelming vitality, such a surge and rush of male power"; and this vitality is a "passionate redemption of Ace's flesh" that "went into Addis" (121). Male sexuality and kinship are intertwined powerfully here.

These descriptions of nature and sexuality foreshadow Addis's eventual home in the Big Thicket, where he goes after a long, winding journey. In that final visit to Ace's tomb, Addis has a sexual encounter that sets the tone for the eroticism of the Thicket, where he is united sexually with nature. At Ace's tomb, Addis clasps a fruit that opens up and "bursts" with "warm juice"; he touches a blossom that "gave way, warm and sliding" that seemed to "clutch and draw his fingertip." The fruit even seems to climax: it is "human in its heat and softness," and Addis "eased its load—a kind of milk flushed out"

(121). This description combines both yonic and phallic or “masculine” and “feminine” sexual imagery, a union that is common in Goyen’s writings about erotic nature, such as the description of the River in *The House of Breath*, which “folds” into itself. Similarly, as Addis discovers later, the Thicket is harmonious and self-contained. It sustains and reproduces itself, throbbing with erotic energy. Later, Addis senses the “secret sexual movement of the Thicket” that is “self-seeding, self-incubating, self-mothering”; it “throbbed and pulsed like a gonad in the groin of Texas” (126). For the longest time, it has been beyond human intervention, at least prior to the oil boom. It is described as a “fortress” constructed by nature “against civilization of towns and systems made by men’s hands”; it “bloomed and mated, devoured and salvaged itself, without the intercession of mankind” (125). Again, this sort of intersexed synthesis is an ideal, as with de Persia in this novel or Arcadio in Goyen’s final novel. Goyen also challenges the human/nature duality, bringing them together in Addis’s sexual experiences in the Thicket. Together, these syntheses underscore the originality of Goyen’s vision of gender and sexuality in *Come, the Restorer*.

Addis finds a place for his sexual expression in nature. Autoeroticism, another nonnormative sexual practice, represents the most positive erotic behavior in the novel, particularly when paired with the self-sustaining eroticism of the Thicket. Addis is a tightrope walker, and so he strings up his line in a large tree in the Thicket. Addis becomes a pagan Satyr, a magical and “enchanted creature of the Thicket” who masturbates as he walks his tightrope high in the tree (128). Goyen uses rather blunt descriptions of sexuality in this section of the novel. Shooting his semen into the air, for example, Addis seems to be “loving it, fucking the tree” (129). Addis’s sexual awakening

is thus a very unusual one that challenges sexual norms. Addis's experiences in the Thicket, at least early on, best exemplify what Gibbons refers to as the "cosmic eroticism" of Goyen's fiction. Eroticism becomes a "spiritual experience of the vast dimensions of the human soul and its capacity for feeling" (*William Goyen* 55). Goyen further "suggest[s] the power of the erotic to give the individual an ecstatic sense of his or her place [. . .] in nature itself" (55). This sense of oneness, connected erotically and physically with nature, is the most positive expression of sexuality in the novel, although it lasts only briefly. This section of the novel begins as a "solitary male and adolescent fantasy"; autoeroticism becomes a means of "romantic self-expression" for the young Addis, the "child of Nature joining Nature sexually" (Davis 262, 263). Autoeroticism is innocent, ideal. All of these issues are suggested initially in *The House of Breath*, particularly Boy's experiences with his first orgasm as he swims in the River or later when he continues to masturbate on its banks. Addis's story expands on this type of sexual awakening and bond with nature.

Addis's isolated idyll in nature, however, does not last; innocent sexual expression is replaced by destructive, consuming desire. Unfortunately, Goyen traffics in misogynistic views, depicting female sexuality as threatening and destructive. After Ace's death and Addis's disappearance, Jewel becomes inexplicably and uncontrollably sexual. Foreshadowing her time with Addis later, she is compelled to visit the Thicket by night (63). Later, when she comes upon Addis performing his erotic tightrope act, she becomes immediately consumed by lust. Addis appears almost angelic, sacred in his "innocent heat" and "virgin holiness" (129), but Jewel disturbs his solitary ritual and sacred bower. Goyen portrays Jewel's physical reactions quite graphically. She hides,

pants, throbs; she tears at herself while “her sex burned and ached,” overcome by an “itching desire” that drives her to “near-madness” (130). At first, seeing Jewel naked below him, Addis feels that his desire for a woman, which he had confided in the imaginary Ace about, has been answered. From the beginning, however, their sexual relationship is destructive. Jewel becomes masochistic in her desire for the boy, who she does not know is her son, with her desire becoming “almost self-destroying in its voracity” (132). Soon, Addis becomes as animalistic as Jewel, and sexual relief becomes compulsory and torturous. Here, female sexuality becomes threatening and destroys or castrates young Addis. Her vagina is described as “devouring” (134), and Addis becomes “cockless” by having sex with Jewel (134, 135). Later, even after her death when her body is discovered by Mr. de Persia, Jewel is portrayed as malevolent and monstrous in her sexuality. She is described as a “naked beastlike woman” (139) and a “demon of lewdness” or “Eve whored” (141). These are problematic descriptions that put productive, idealized masculine sexuality in opposition to threatening, monstrous female sexuality. The throbbing erection and potent semen (de Persia’s, Addis’s) are powerful and mystical, in contrast to the threatening sexual female body. Female sexuality is positive only when brought together with the male in the intersexed figure or status.

Addis looks to Ace to save him from this destructive relationship. Again, Goyen here suggests a queer union that balances a physical and sexual identification with a paternal one, just as Addis had felt earlier at Ace’s tomb or when he arrives in the Thicket, living with Ace like a new Adam and Eve. At one point, Goyen writes of a queer incorporation and consummation between Addis and Ace. Addis feels that Ace had “hunched with him and come, at last, at long last” and shared his lust (135). Ace is part of

his sexual awakening. Ace, or at least the photo of Ace in the coffee can nearby, accompanied Addis in this “new mystery of his sex”—“the sadness of manhood,” “the sorrows of woman-lust,” and “the frailty of coming manhood” (136). Masculinity and sexual desire unite Addis and Ace. Ace cannot, however, save Addis his destructive relationship with Jewel, and instead, Addis’s fate echoes that of his adoptive father. It is not surprising, because of this spiraling series of events, that seemingly by accident Addis hangs himself in the tree by his tightrope and that coming upon him, Jewel’s final act of degradation is to have sex with his corpse (137). When she discovers, however, that the boy was her adopted son, she hangs herself as well. This tragic, violent conclusion is not surprising in the intense sequence of events from natural idyll to alarming scenes of all-consuming lust. In the end, though, Addis is fittingly returned to the sexual life of the Thicket when Jewel buries Addis at the base of the tree that he had previously walked his tightrope in. The tree absorbs Addis into its “sexual hub” and its “dark sexual life,” which is the source of its power and mystery (138). The tree is the logical resting place for the tortured young man who had found momentary respite in the wilderness, united with its sexual energy.

The Thicket is already threatened by the time Addis ends up there. The biggest threat to the Thicket is the oil boom, which is depicted in dystopic terms in this novel. Addis and the animals see the “hellish fire-shadow and smelled the faint sour odor of burning oil” (126), foreshadowing the rise of “Firedevil” Wiley Prescott. Wylie contrasts with the “restorer” de Persia and is the most destructive character in the novel, exemplifying the worst of humanity’s greed and disregard for nature. Wiley’s true evil comes through first in his exploitation of the Thicket, a highly damnable action in

Goyen's fictional worldview. As Goyen writes, whoever "harmed" the Thicket's continuation, "fouled life" itself (126). His greed and destructiveness also put him into direct opposition to Addis, the one who found complete unity (albeit temporarily) with nature in the Thicket. Goyen describes Wylie and this exploitation in the most extreme terms, presenting him as an almost biblical force of destruction. He is "marked like Cain" in his "ancient instinct for devastation" and is described as a "walking Plague, a pestilence, [. . .] a devourer" (156). In addition to oil, Wylie makes his money through his chemical factory, Rose Works, which he sets up in Rose, Texas, where the novel begins and which is close to the Thicket. Goyen writes, as leader of the "generation that poisoned itself," Wylie "took from Nature its pure self, its forces, and did not put anything back" but chemicals. So, his factories "murdered rivers, spoiled freshness, soured and embittered sweetness, withered green" (156). Wylie and his factory are responsible for Rose's expansion and urbanization, with its new highways and expressways, a city populated by those who were run off from their homes in the countryside or whose small towns had been destroyed during the oil boom (170-1). Wylie's story is unremarkable otherwise, and Goyen does not develop his character as much as that of de Persia or Addis. Wylie functions primarily as a symbol and the target of Goyen's polemic. *Come, the Restorer* intensifies the ecological critique of *The House of Breath* significantly, presenting an increasingly urgent vision of environmental destruction through Wylie, whose story concludes the novel. In the end, the storyteller, who begins the novel with an urgent evocation of the long-gone "restorer," reiterates that this tale is the story of Rose and thus the region is represents (180). The identity-less storyteller, like many such figures in Goyen's fiction, is the one who ensures the story

lives, thus bringing to life the story of this town and its remarkable residents, whether positive (as with de Persia and Addis) or not (as with Wylie).

Peculiar People in a Peculiar Region

In his final novel, *Arcadio* (1984), William Goyen spins his queerest tale, focusing on an intersexed character with a lamentable but ultimately hopeful story. The novel brings together many of the major aspects of Goyen's fiction, such as themes (including displacement) and setting (rural East Texas). It also further complicates Goyen's representation of gender and sexuality, with the synthesis of dualities—male and female, flesh and spirit—and a vision of sexuality beyond rigid categories at its center. In *The House of Breath*, the well tells Boy that “there’ve been a lot of freaks in Charity [. . .] in my estimation” (62). Similarly, at the beginning of *Arcadio*, one character mentions the “peculiarities” to be found in the otherwise unremarkable East Texas. He says, “Peculiar persons living in this part of the world [. . .] East Texas’s a peculiar part of the world. People with peculiarities you wouldn’t guess were here, coming as a surprise to people that live outside—even to us that live inside, sometimes” (5). For him, the unique landscape of the region may accommodate or even produce such peculiar people. He continues, “Must be the river and riverbottoms, parts of it wild and forbidden, and the Thicket” (5). Further, he argues that the stereotypical image of the area, exemplified by the rugged, masculine men of the Southwest, does not represent the variety of people who live in the region. As he says, “Seeing men in ten-gallon hats and cowboy boots in town talking cattle and cotton—that’s only the way it looks; there’s more than that” (5). These

statements prompt another family member, Uncle Ben, to share his encounter with such a “peculiar” person, a mysterious bather, who he came across in the river nearby. These statements align with a central motivation in Goyen’s fiction: to tell the stories of the gender and sexual outcasts that either come from or find their home in his native region. The poignant, loving tale of Arcadio is a proper ending for that project.

Arcadio begins with two very brief framing narratives with parallels to *The House of Breath*. Like that first novel, *Arcadio* begins in a faraway city, where the narrator remembers his adolescence in East Texas; his family there, now gone, are similar to the simple, country Ganchions. This initial narrator appeals to the same sense of memory and longing shared by Boy Ganchion, and he likewise revisits an important moment in his adolescence, which is part of the second framing narrative. In this second one, the narrator describes the time his uncle, Ben, told of discovering a mysterious bather in the Trinity River. The narrator is reminded of this story when he comes across a postcard of a painting, *The Light of the World*, which depicts Christ beckoning at a door with a lamp; Uncle Ben says he took a reproduction of the painting from the bather, with the name “Arcadio” written on the back (1, 7). From that, the narrator recounts the story he imagined based on the basic facts of Uncle Ben’s story. The narrator sums up the novel’s form rather succinctly, describing it as a “vision [. . .] made of true memory and outrageous fabrication” (1). The only “true” memories are Uncle Ben’s tale and the narrator’s memory of his telling the story; Arcadio’s narrative, which constitutes the bulk of the novel, is certainly “outrageous fabrication.” (The same can be said of *The House of Breath*, which is likewise comprised of stories and monologues only imagined by Boy Ganchion.) The novel’s form exemplifies what Goyen called the “teller-listener

situation,” an important technique he developed. In this dramatic situation, a teller shares a story with a listener, and the reader “overhears” the story (Gibbons, *William Goyen* 22-3). Uncle Ben tells his story to his listeners, but Arcadio’s tale is framed as an oral tale as well, with the unidentified listener invited to hear. Gibbons emphasizes the teller-listener situation, as Goyen developed it, as a rural phenomenon, representing a form of speech that came about “on the front porch, in rural quiet” (32, 33). Elsewhere, Goyen specifies the importance of his rural Texas origins in the development of this technique. He describes his preoccupation with speech as a “heritage,” since “the people of the region where most of my stories start or end [. . .] are natural talkers”; so along with the landscape of the region and its people, language became his “life’s work” (Preface x, xi). Further, the imperative to pass along stories is as important as the stories themselves. As Arcadio later tells his listener, the telling is what matters.

Parallels exist between the opening narrator and Uncle Ben and characters from *The House of Breath*. Foremost, the opening narrator and Boy Ganchion are similar. Both revive memories and stories from their childhood and describe their sexual awakening. Like Boy, the narrator in *Arcadio* describes how he reacted to the physical changes of puberty and his emerging desires as an adolescent, which he felt must be kept secret. First, he describes his fantasy of the “secret stranger” whom he hoped would visit him at night. This stranger could be “man-woman, saint-devil, comforter or destroyer”—it did not matter. He tells how he wanted the stranger to “touch my body which burned for touching and was so secret to me—how much longer could I bear the secret, keep my body a secret to others, consecrated only to myself?” (3). Like so many characters in *The House of Breath*, the narrator feels that these secret desires mean he must leave his small

town. He muses, “It is said we leave home—go out—at the urge of our young soul; but it is as much to break the secret of our body, in its name we go” (3). While these descriptions of secret sexual desires are shared by Boy, these experiences also sound like those of another queer character in *The House of Breath*, Ben Berryben, who likewise felt burdened by his secret and so was compelled to leave Charity. Later, after Uncle Ben shares his story, the vague vision of the “secret stranger” shifts to fantasies of the mysterious Arcadio. The narrator is amazed that such “[m]agical and mysterious and hidden” beings existed in the world and feels that they would share his solitary feelings (9). Berryben likewise had been driven away from Charity in hopes of fleeing its oppressive secrecy and judgment, feeling that elsewhere, others may understand him. Similarities also exist between Uncle Ben in this novel and Uncle Christy from *The House of Breath*. Like Christy, Ben had escaped this small town but begrudgingly came back was “made dumb” by this forced return (8). When Christy returns and then moves back into the Ganchion home, he was likewise “struck dumb.” As the well tells Boy, Christy became “quiet as a tomb” and “dumb as a doornail” (*House of Breath* 63), after being forced to return. Christy rarely ever speaks, cannot connect with others, and is constantly yearning to be elsewhere. Uncle Ben seems to share these feelings. The need to leave their small town because of secret or unfulfilled desires connects these characters, with the possibility of sexual variance linking most—if not all—of them.

Uncle Ben’s account of the mysterious bather is prompted by the narrator’s father’s observation about the peculiar people that turn up even in rural East Texas. His tale is rather unexpected. Ben recounts that, one day when he was hunting rabbits, he came upon a bather in the Trinity River. He crouched down nearby to watch the person,

when he realized that the bather was intersexed (although Arcadio is later referred to in masculine terms). He describes the bather's "beautiful body" as divided in two parts. He explains that "twas part a man and part a woman, the man part was sweetly washing the woman part and the woman sweetly the man" (6). Arcadio represents the synthesis of the male/female duality, a synthesis that Goyen seemed to progress toward in these three novels, as with the River in *The House of Breath* or with Mr. de Persia and the Thicket in *Come, the Restorer*. As Arcadio explains later, this synthesis is a personal and spiritual accomplishment. Thus, according to Uncle Ben, the bather becomes a representative of all humankind, as if "all men, all women" were "bathing together" in the Trinity River (7). The synthesis of another duality—spirit and flesh—is also important here. Uncle Ben describes how "the woman part was baptizing the man and the man baptizing the woman"; it "twas so holy and [. . .] twas so flesh, the body of this being was so holy and so flesh" (6-7). Uncle Ben himself feels divided between a physical and spiritual response. He is drawn by the tenderness and holiness of the figure, but he is also sexually aroused, starting "apanting" as he watches (7). Because he never speaks to the bather, Uncle Ben only learns the bather's name when he finds a reproduction of *The Light of the World* with Arcadio's name written on the back. Uncle Ben's tone in sharing his story is remarkable; he is upfront about his feelings seeing Arcadio and does not describe Arcadio in a derogatory way, unlike one of his family members who dismisses Arcadio as a sideshow freak (9). The bather thereby becomes an exemplar of what Arcadio will later describe as reconciliation. That Goyen uses an intersexed character as such an ideal representative is remarkable, particularly for this time and in a way that gives agency to the queer individual with the unruly body.

The opening narrator ends by evoking childhood memory, family, and his native region. Now far away in a city, he exhibits the same sort of displacement or mournfulness as Boy does in *The House of Breath*. Like Boy, the narrator follows his uncle's example in leaving East Texas, although he never returns as Uncle Ben does. Memory is a key impetus here. While he revisits this particular memory, he seems drawn to memory more generally, feeling that the people and the place are "live in [his] memory"; while the "first singer" (Uncle Ben) and "those listeners" are gone, the song still exists, ready to be sung again by the narrator. He transitions into his story by saying he "recollect[s]" in his remembered and imagined vision how he came upon Arcadio resting by the river (11). The place where Arcadio rests is pastoral; Arcadio sits in an Edenic bower by the river, beneath a trestle of the now-abandoned railroad. The abandoned railroad trestle and other signs of human activity have been overcome by nature, which is now free of the "dead weight of iron" (11). In a description reminiscent of Addis's time in the Thicket in *Come, the Restorer*, the narrator explains that "there I saw the being sitting under the trestle, in the latticed light, leaning against a leg of the trestle that [. . .] was green and garlanded with blooming vines"; in this "wild bower," Arcadio plays his harmonica and invites the narrator to listen to his tale (12-3). Arcadio seems attuned with nature. He subtly laments, "What in God's name have they put into the rivers and the streams? [. . .] who let them do that to the waters?" He, too, is from a small town in East Texas and says that he "stay[s] out of the stinking cities" (16). Later, he also questions why people would allow the factories to release so many dangerous chemicals into the air (117-8). These offhand comments are a continuation of the environmental critique that began with *The House of Breath*, yet Goyen avoids the polemics of *Come, the Restorer*. Instead, Goyen's

environmentalism has a subtle influence on the narrative. Having discovered this mysterious, alluring figure, the narrator now becomes the listener, joining Arcadio as he shares his story or “song.”

In his lengthy tale, Arcadio describes his time in a circus sideshow and his attempts to find his family, particularly his mother. Since this tale is imagined and “outrageous fabrication,” plausibility does not constrain the story, and Arcadio’s adventures are frequently improbable (and often impossible). This is an oral tale, representative of the teller-listener situation, with readers “overhearing” the story as told to the listener, who lacks any specific qualities or identity. Goyen emphasizes the orality of this story through repetition, as with the phrase “you wan hear” that punctuates the story, and Arcadio’s accent since he is of Mexican-American ancestry and uses both English and Spanish (or “Mescan,” as Arcadio says). Arcadio’s story is a tragic one, and he has been abandoned and exploited throughout his life. At the beginning, he describes himself as a “singer at large,” having left the Show. He then goes on an interesting journey, first to find his mother again and then to find his brother, Tomasso, and father, Hombre, with outrageous and often tragic adventures along the way. His primary hope is to bring his family together again, although he never does so. He never finds his mother again, Tomasso dies when Arcadio takes him along on the journey, and the corrupted Hombre, alcoholic and oversexed, dies as well. His story, as Arcadio describes it, is one of “losing and ahunting,” although in the end, his journey of self-actualization and redemption prevents his tale from being only one of sorrow (75, 83). He is persistent and consistently optimistic despite serious obstacles and the repeated times that people fail

him. Now, after a long journey, Arcadio is “reconciled” with himself and his story, as he says later, and has the freedom to tell his story.

Because of his gender presentation and time with the Show, Arcadio is similar to Folner from *The House of Breath*, the flamboyant gay man who escapes Charity with the circus, later becoming a female impersonator. Gibbons notes that Folner is the logical precursor to Arcadio as a representative of Goyen’s complicated and destabilizing representations of gender and sexuality (*William Goyen* 56). Folner understands what it means to be a “freak” in his small town, where he cannot adapt; he feels a recognition with or connection to the freaks he sees in the sideshow, the same type of sideshow Arcadio is relegated to. Arcadio explains that after running away from his father and the China Boy brothel as a teenager, he came upon the Show in rural East Texas. After revealing his body to the circus’s manager, Old Shanks, Arcadio was put into the sideshow, dressed in a way to indicate that he was intersexed, presumably wearing a mixture of “male” and “female” clothes, although he refuses actually to show his body to the spectators (*Arcadio* 45, 54). In the Show, Arcadio explains, he was a silent spectacle and object, not a speaking subject. He describes himself as being a “serene listener” under the “public gaze” when he would sit for the spectators to see. The ability to share his story freely now, then, is empowering. As he says, “Away from the gilded chair of serenely listening, I now sit in an open place and sing free” (14). For Folner, leaving with the circus is a means to escape; for the intersexed Arcadio, the sideshow may seem like his inevitable or logical place in society. Folner may have felt and been treated like a “freak,” and so stood out in Charity. What is more difficult to assimilate, however, than the unruly intersexed body of Arcadio, who also challenges sexual categories? As Davis

says, Arcadio is an exemplar of the “schismatic self” in Goyen’s fiction (309), particularly through his “mysterious body that contains both sexes (or all of sexuality)” (310). That Arcadio eventually takes back control of his body from the public gaze and from exploitation is important. His agency is evident in the selectiveness of how and when he reveals his body to others. Thus, Goyen offers a positive vision of agency and empowerment, albeit somewhat belated, for his queerest character.

Arcadio’s story is ultimately one of reconciliation and redemption. His account shows how radically positive and spiritual Goyen’s vision of the intersexed body is in this novel. Arcadio explains how he achieved what he refers to as reconciliation *through* his body, not *despite* it. His initial perception of his body seems to come, in part, from his experiences as an underaged prostitute in the China Boy in Memphis, Tennessee. His intersexed body attracts clientele and even Hombre, his father, who also sexually abuses him (38-40). Arcadio is influenced by these troubling experiences and overwhelmed by destructive lust, although he clearly was too young and too confused to understand sexual desire when he leaves. After he escapes, he initially plans to “fix” his body using a piece of glass, but he cannot decide “which of myself to try and eliminate” (i.e., the “male” or “female” parts) (41). Arcadio becomes a very spiritual person after he leaves the China Boy, and religion saves Arcadio from self-harm. Arcadio grapples with his unique body. As he explains, “Being all things in one, I was made self-sufficient. I am equipped for lust, [. . .] tantalized by my own [. . .] body” (58). This statement is reminiscent of the River and the Thicket, which are self-perpetuating, although it is less positive for Arcadio at first. His description of how he struggled with his body and an all-consuming lust is reminiscent of the scenes between Addis and Jewel in *Come, the Restorer*. A significant

difference is that Arcadio finds a way out of this destructive pattern. Arcadio gets beyond the binary of male and female—with its sexual challenges as well—and sees his body as unified. Religious belief offers a different path, one of “*reconciliación*” of the body. God commanded him, Arcadio explains, to “bring my separate parts to peace” (60). He continues, “For that long time my spirit was damned because of my body. [. . .] Yet twas my body got me to my soul” (61). It is through the body, initially one source of Arcadio’s spiritual struggle, that leads him to this reconciliation, a positive end that is denied many of Goyen’s characters.

Arcadio concludes his tale by emphasizing the importance of telling his story and suggesting that the listener must carry on his story. The opening narrator does so through this remembered, albeit also imagined, vision. Arcadio seems now more aware of the listener and underscores that sharing one’s story is an intimate act, one that can prompt love between the two figures in the teller-listener situation. The listener lacks any identity other than this intimate relationship with the teller. Sharing one’s story becomes an act of love and the basis for a unique affection. Arcadio may have lost those he loved—Chupa, Hombre, Tomasso, and others—but he has the listener, who he feels “half in love with”; the listener likewise listens “with love” (146). Goyen’s final novel thus brings readers back to what Hartley describes as a “comprehension of love” and interconnectedness between people in *The House of Breath* (xxi). This interconnectedness comes through in the end, when Arcadio feels an intimacy and affection for the listener. All along, however, Arcadio has shown himself to be deeply empathetic and affectionate toward all, even those who hurt or exploit him. Having heard this story, the listener in this vision fades away, leaving Arcadio alone, and the novel concludes with the initial narrator,

whose vision of Arcadio has now “passed” (146, 147). The narrator, now alone in “the ancient fragile city” is mournful and homesick, again, like the adult Boy Ganchion in *The House of Breath*. He laments, “Sometimes I want to go home, where we all were. That simple house [. . .] built again, melancholy house [. . .] But no one would be there to answer my call at the door,” echoing the image of Christ beckoning at the door in the picture *The Light of the World*. Through memory and imagination, though, the narrator can reunite Uncle Ben with his “beautiful creature” Arcadio (147). In terms of the teller-listener situation, the narrator takes on both roles himself, remembering his story and so telling it to himself, while the reader overhears his tale. Thus he describes himself as “both teller and listener, solitary maker, grand and absurd and homesick” (147). He concludes with his lonesomeness and isolation, a yearning for this lost place and people, and the poignancy of memory. This conclusion is the proper bookend to Goyen’s career.

Goyen’s fiction revels in the peculiar and the “freakish” aspects of East Texas—a “peculiar region” with peculiar people “you wouldn’t guess were here” (*Arcadio* 5). He shows that the people in this region are not always properly gendered or properly heterosexual. Goyen does for his native region, then, what Carson McCullers and Truman Capote did for the small-town South at midcentury. Same-sex desire is pervasive in *The House of Breath*, and Goyen provides multiple models of gender expression. Illicit sexuality and gender variance most often guide these queer characters elsewhere; their small town may not accommodate them in the end. Yet, like other characters in the other novels, Boy maintains his emotional connection to home and family. In *Come, the*

Restorer, Goyen mourns the devastating changes to the region, showing how significantly it had changed between his first novel and his later novels. It also offers a radical view of eroticism that differs significantly from the other two novels and is intense in its extremes. The radical potential of Addis's story is ultimately thwarted, but Arcadio's story offers a different outcome. In his final novel, Goyen tries to move beyond the problems related to sexual desire that he points to in *The House of Breath* and *Come, the Restorer*, and the unruly intersexed body becomes a means to redemption and reconciliation. A consistent foundation for Goyen's fiction is the region itself, with his queer tales tempered by a forlorn longing for a quickly changing region. As with McCullers and Capote, though, his love for his freaks and for his native region makes Goyen's novels so compelling.

CHAPTER V: RURALITY, REGIONALISM, AND QUEER IDENTITY IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Dorothy Allison and Randall Kenan pose new questions about sexuality and gender as they relate to place and region. In this post-Stonewall and post-gay liberation era, these writers benefit from greater freedom of expression. They must also contend, however, with new expectations of gay identity, visibility, and community. In “Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity,” Donna Jo Smith outlines two myths about southern and queer identities that speak to this moment. The first myth concerns southern identity as dependent on queer exclusion, assuming “that southerners have greater attachments to home, family, place, religion, and traditional gender roles, as interpreted within a conservative discourse that defines family as exclusively heterosexual, same-sex desire as evil, and gender roles as essential” (379). The second myth posits “that any allegiances queers (southern and non-southern alike) feel to home, family, place, region, and religion should be secondary to our same-sex desire and/or identity” (379). Obviously, these myths put southern queers in a difficult position, including potential marginalization or even complete erasure. The question of allegiances and identifications raised by these two myths are central in Allison’s and Kenan’s fiction, particularly when compounded by other factors such as class and race.

The question of regional and sexual identities connects to the rural/urban divide that is often connected to regionalism (albeit mostly implicitly). As Allison’s fiction particularly underscores, rural queer southerners face another set of expectations, namely

the metronorms that marginalize the backward South and deem queer existence there anomalous or even impossible. In Kenan's fiction, regional identification is a key topic, particularly since a central project for him is the creation of a fictional rural southern community, Tims Creek, that is the primary setting for his fiction. An example of this negotiation between regional identification and other identities appears in Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989). To break free from the exclusion and marginalization he feels as a gay person, the protagonist Horace Cross hopes to transform himself through magic into a bird that is native to his region. Regional identification, often with a queer twist, is thus central for Allison and Kenan. Smith proposes a productive way to study queer and southern identities and experiences. Her program is related to historiography but is useful in literary studies as well. She argues that "to best illuminate southern queer experiences, we must leave open questions of identity, both queer and southern"; further, we must be attuned to how experiences of same-sex desire have "been mediated by complex, intersecting identities." Lastly, one must be attuned to "the nuances of identity construction" on an individual and localized level (382). This nuanced approach not only counters dominant myths about southern and queer experiences. It also allows us to move beyond the metronorms and narratives that are associated with regional (in this case, southern) affiliation. Allison's and Kenan's writings about queerness and the rural South require a nuanced, individualized, and dynamic approach. These writers demonstrate the role of home, family, place, and region in identification and show that other allegiances (as to region or to family) need not be secondary for queer folks.

“Talking Bitchy Trash”: Southern Backwardness

In a short story from *Trash* (1988), “Violence Against Women Begins at Home,” two characters humorously illustrate Dorothy Allison’s attitude toward a regional and class identity. The narrator describes how an acquaintance, Bruce, was the “first gay man I had met who admitted having grown up and come out in a poor family in a small town—the same little crossroads town where I was born” (151). The two get together to “talk bitchy trash,” a phrase that echoes the “trash” identity that Allison reclaims in her fiction. The narrator and Bruce adopt an attitude that contrasts with the pretensions of other gays from the South. She explains, “Most of the other expatriate southerners we know pretend to membership in the petty aristocracy, a fact we both find very amusing. One would think southern gentry produced only queer offspring” (151). Here, with campy humor, Allison satirizes a history embraced by many southerners, presumably fussy southern gays among non-southerners. To be from the “petty aristocracy” is preferable to admitting being a backward southerner from impoverished, small-town communities. This scene illustrates the regional, class identity that is central to *Trash*, one based on Allison’s own background as a poor southerner from South Carolina. Further, it suggests what can be called Allison’s anti-urbanism. Allison resists queer metronormativity, instead strategically wielding a regionalized class identity. The phrase “talking bitchy trash” captures Allison’s anti-urbanism and her redeployment of stereotypes of southern backwardness as a strategy of resistance.

Allison’s fiction demonstrates a complicated identification with a marginalized southern identity tied to her impoverished, small-town southern background. In her

introduction to *Trash*, she describes an ambivalence that she had to personally work through regarding her childhood and origins. Allison begins by explaining that the “central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family” (vii). Poverty is undeniably the most important fact here. As she explains, she has spent her life trying to “overcome or deny” the “fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow oddly deserved” (vii). Further, she and her family were among the “bad poor” rather than the “good poor” who are perceived as “hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable.” She and her family, she explains, “were not noble, not even hopeful” and knew they were “despised” (vii). She sought a way to write about people like her family, who are notably absent from media and fiction, except as stereotypes and stock characters. Such representations did not capture, as she explains, the everyday reality of her family’s lives. She describes a process whereby she came to terms with her childhood and the shame inculcated by social stigmatization and exclusion. Importantly, Allison’s fiction reveals a conflict: while she must contend with shame, she also feels defiant against social, cultural, and economic disenfranchisement. Allison concludes that her “mean stories” are about “[s]hame and outrage, pride and stubbornness”; she explains that she “wrote to release indignation and refuse humiliation, to admit fault and to glorify the people I loved who were never celebrated” (xii). These issues related to region and class mark Allison’s attempt to understand her sexuality as well. As she recalls, “I did not want to be ashamed of my family, my sexuality, or myself” (xiii). These elements—class, region, and

sexuality—come together in Allison’s queer anti-urban stance, which challenges the perception that people like her and her family are shamefully backward.

Through her regional and class identifications, Allison also challenges metronormative views of rural areas and queer folks from the country. She resists the cosmopolitanism and urbanism that has become the norm in most assessments of queer identity and community. The stories in *Trash* exemplify what Scott Herring refers to as queer anti-urbanism, which is an oppositional stance or a “queer critique against compulsory forms of urbanization” (6). Herring uses the term “rural stylistics” to describe these strategies of resistance and critique. He argues that “stereotypically ruralizing stylistics of rusticity, stylelessness, unfashionability, anti-urbanity, backwardness, anti-sophistication, and crudity try to undercut the metronormative demands made on modern queer life” (22). Allison manipulates these various stylistics in her fiction, reveling in the crude and rustic and unsophisticated with defiance and humor. Most significantly, Allison redeploys the widespread perception of southern backwardness or the “stereotypical characterization of the U.S. South [. . .] as a geographic region that is socioeconomically, culturally, and politically lacking” (Herring 114). Allison embraces the backward southerner to make sense of her origins and her position within other communities, such as the women’s and lesbian feminist movements. She turns shame and marginalization into an oppositional stance against this other set of norms. While Allison never directly addresses urbanity as an issue, her redeployment of southern backwardness and other rural stylistics do undermine metronorms. Allison’s anti-urban stance is notable, but she also describes the troubling process whereby she could find her voice. While she contended with a “desperate shame” as a developing

writer, she discovered an authorial voice with a “drawl” that expressed her “shit-kicking anger” and the “joy and pride” she sometimes felt for herself and for those like her, particularly her family (7). Allison also describes how she sought to represent those like her and her family in a way that avoided stereotypes and presented their lived experiences more accurately, including their material conditions. Allison has been rightly commended for her representations of poor rural southerners in *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), but in the earlier stories in *Trash*, readers see Allison working toward this bold stance and authentic voice.

In the popular imagination, the most backward southerner is, of course, the stereotypical poor (white) “trash.” As Allison explains, her choice of the title *Trash* for this collection was intentional. In the introduction, Allison explains that, first, reclaiming the label “trash” was an act of “self-defense,” just as any marginalized group may reclaim a word. She notes that the term “had been applied to me and my family in crude and hateful ways”; so, when she initially wrote these stories, she settled on this title “to confront the term and to claim it honorific” (xv, xvi). For her, more broadly, reclaiming this title creates a community beyond people like her and her family. It includes a “nation” of “displaced southerners and children of the working class”; this group, in Allison’s opinion, must reclaim its “heritage with a full appreciation of how it has been disdained” (xvi). While Allison seems defiant in her use of a term like “trash,” she is direct in expressing the pain, shame, and material deprivation that accompanies such a term. Her decision to adopt and turn this label on its head is her strategy of resistance. To understand this deployment of this label as a specifically anti-urban strategy, one must recognize that “trash” frequently, though implicitly, refers to poor people in rural

environments. As David Bell explains, “white trash” as a “US construct of the underclass” is not regionally or locationally bound. It is based primarily on socioeconomic marginalization rather than rural location, but Bell concludes that there is a particular construction of “rural white trash” (85). The various terms associated with “trash,” such as “hillbilly” or “redneck,” suggest the implied regional and rural connections of this stereotype (86). Allison’s use of “trash” prefigures a central question posed by Herring in his discussion of queer anti-urbanism: “If queers way out there—broadly conceived—have too often been stamped with the scarlet letters that spell out backwater, rube, hillbilly, hayseed, redneck, shitkicker, and bumfuck, then what happens when this terminology turns against itself?” (6). To frame it as Allison does, what happens when one takes on a label like “trash” as an “honorific” and a strategy of resistance? Turning terminology against itself works to undermine homogenizing norms that marginalize rural queers.

“A Lesbian Appetite” provides a good example of this regional and class-based stereotype. The culture that Allison describes in this story captures the sort of social, cultural, and economic backwardness ascribed to poor, rural southerners. Allison’s description of the “bad poor,” which includes her family, provides a good background for this story. She writes in her introduction that the bad poor include “men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noses, watery eyes, and the wrong attitudes”; they “quit school, stole cars, used drugs, and took dead-end jobs pumping gas or waiting tables” (vii). In “A Lesbian Appetite,” something as trivial as bad or unhealthy food comes to signify a more

fundamental backwardness. Further, it posits the poverty of poor, rural southerners as “shameful, contemptible, and somehow oddly deserved” (vii)—“deserved” because these poor southerners continue to eat such foods despite warnings from outsiders. Allison offers another sketch of her family in “A Lesbian Appetite.” The narrator explains, “Poor white trash I am for sure. I eat shit food and am not worthy. My family starts with good teeth but loses them early. Five of my cousins bled to death before thirty-five, their stomachs surrendering to sugar and whiskey and fat and salt” (162). Yet, memory and familial, regional associations are connected to these traditional foods for the narrator, now living up North. She acknowledges the harm of the “diet of poor southerners” (162), yet this diet is tied up with memories of her mama (an important figure in these stories) and other family members, like aunts and uncles (163). She also satirizes other feminists who are obsessed with healthy food, vegetarianism, and macrobiotic cooking. This division puts the narrator in an ambivalent, emotional position. While she recognizes the harms of an impoverished childhood, she knows how important its culture is to her integral identities—familial, regional, and class-based.

The women’s movement of the 1970s and onwards was formative for Allison, as she acknowledges in the introduction to *Trash*. Women’s collectives and consciousness raising groups pop up frequently in this collection. In many of these stories, however, Allison shows how she was sometimes an outsider among communities that differed from her own southern upbringing. Allison embraces a “lesbian appetite” for too much raunchy sex and too much unhealthy southern food; she respects the lower-class bar dykes as much as—sometimes more so—than the enlightened and ideologically faultless lesbian feminists that frequently appear in her fiction. As Jaime Harker notes, Allison’s

“southernness communicated her cultural outsidership and allowed her to embody nonassimilation” (6). This anti-assimilationism occurs on multiple levels. Embracing the backwardness of southern identity, Allison further resists the expectations of metronormative and coastal sophistication, knowledgeability, and enlightenment of the communities she portrays. Many stories in *Trash* subtly satirize the national women’s and lesbian feminist movements, although her criticisms are tempered by humor. In “Muscles of My Mind,” however, her critique of lesbian feminists’ classism is more pointed. This story takes place in a boardinghouse filled with lesbians and feminists. While the narrator likes the lower-class, rough bar dykes, the others criticize them with “disgust,” positioning themselves as “good” dykes against the tattooed, pool-playing lesbians. The narrator, who defends the women, points to the hypocrisy of these radical feminists, telling one of the women, “You’re always talking about class, Judy, the working classes supposed to make the revolution. They’re the ones over there in that parking lot, leaning on tailgates” (135). The narrator finds kinship with these lesbians rather than with these sanctimonious radicals. As the narrator explains, “I preferred the women I brought home from the pool hall, the ones who liked me biting them, liked biting me, liked whispering dirty words, wrestling, and shoving their calloused fingers between my labia”; with these women, she notes, “I lose all self-consciousness, my fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. Their strength becomes my strength, and I love them for it” (138). Being with these women, who are more like her, allows her to avoid the pressures she feels with others.

Elsewhere, Allison depicts relationships in which her narrators (again, southerners from a lower-class background) are considered the “vulgar” ones compared to their more sophisticated, well-mannered lovers. In “Mama,” for example, the narrator describes

how, as a child, she picked up her habit of speaking vulgarly. For her mama, such talk was a way to cover up pain and show strength. The narrator describes how her mama knew all the “[c]oarse, crude, rude words and ruder gestures” and “taught [her] the power of nasty words” (40). Like her teachers when she was younger, the narrator’s lovers try to make her “clean up” her language. When she does not, her lovers became impatient and ask, “Oh honey, [. . .] do you have to talk that way?” (40). The narrator feels that yes, she *does* have to talk that way. If nothing else, it is part of the legacy given to her by her mama, who (like the narrator) knows more about hardship than these other women. As the narrator explains, “I know the value of the hard asses of this world. And I am my mama’s daughter—tougher than kudzu, meaner than all the ass-kicking, bad-assed, cold-assed, saggy-assed fuckers I have ever known” (41). In “Her Thighs,” Allison focuses on a similar relationship between a supposedly vulgar and uncouth narrator and the pretentious lover. The narrator’s girlfriend, Bobby, is uncomfortable with the narrator’s overwhelming sexual desire and believes “lust was a trashy lower-class impulse, and she so wanted to be nothing like that” (119-120). The women contrast significantly: Bobby “loves the aura of acceptability, the possibility of finally being bourgeois, civilized, and respectable”; the narrator represents the “uncivilized thing in [her] life,” which Bobby can only enjoy privately, although never admitting her own desires (122). Bobby leaves, the narrator explains, “when the lust I made her feel got too wild, too uncivilized, too dangerous” (123). The narrator, having endured Bobby’s verbal abuse, is left feeling lesser-than.

“Monkeybites” contrasts in its treatment of sexuality. Unlike Bobby in “Her Thighs,” Toni in this latter story embraces the narrator’s overwhelming lust, just as she

loves the narrator's humorous, grotesque tales. Toni is amused by the narrator's background, which is framed within the gothic tradition in this story. The narrator describes a time in her childhood when she was bitten by a monkey that was kept in a cage at a camp, a story that amuses Toni. After hearing the story, Toni tells her, "You think about what a queer sort you are, girl, you and your finger-eating monkey. You southern dirt-country types are all alike. Faulkner would have put that stuff to use, made it a literary detail. Faulkner would have had you in here spouting soliloquies to the monkeys" (87). Also alluding to Flannery O'Connor, Toni concludes, "Shit, girl, it's just too much, too Southern Gothic—catfish and monkeys and chewed-off fingers. Throw in a little red dirt and chicken feathers, a little incest and shotgun shells, and you could join the literary tradition" (87). Allison thus self-reflexively appropriates these traditions while also appropriating literary representations of these "southern dirt-country types" or backward, perverse southerners.

Family is significant to the regional, socioeconomic, and cultural context of the stories in *Trash*. The stories in this collection are often told from a common perspective. A woman from a poor, southern family and community must make sense of her difficult childhood, primarily because of poverty. Common topics include the importance of family, gender roles and norms within families, and the importance of familial relationships, particularly among women (i.e., between sisters, between mothers and daughters, and between aunts and nieces). In rural, southern culture, familial bonds and allegiances are vital, perhaps especially for marginalized groups such as the poor. Allison's characters are often ambivalent toward family perhaps due to the author's own troubled childhood (viii). Her presumably semi-autobiographical characters recognize the

importance of family and are often criticized for turning their backs on their families, although they might do so for good reasons. Even sexual difference, as Allison shows in “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” can be accommodated because familial bonds may supersede potential stigmas related to lesbianism. Again, Allison is motivated to write about people like her folks because they have rarely been adequately depicted in fiction and culture. In this way, her fiction is akin to William Goyen’s, a writer who was similarly determined to elevate the experiences of his poor East Texas family and their like, as with the semi-autobiographical Ganchions in *The House of Breath*. If Allison laments that people like her family have been either absent from or caricatured in popular representations, her stories give poor, rural, southerners complexity and depth. Allison refuses the “one dimensionality of traditional cultural stereotypes” (i.e., about trash) and so “allows her characters to move beyond them” (McDonald 18). To echo what Margaret L. Hartley says of Goyen, Allison thereby elevates her characters’ experiences to “the fulness of tragic human dignity” (289).

The stories in *Trash* that concern lower-class, southern families are often heartbreaking, even though many of these characters are remarkably tenacious. “River of Names” offers a catalog of stories of those who are seemingly dispensable because of their class and their location in the rural South. Early on, the narrator describes a conversation with her girlfriend Jesse. Hearing Jesse’s story, the narrator is left “wanting, aching for the fairy tale she thinks is everyone’s life” (9). While looking at photographs of the narrator’s family, Jesse (who does not know these are the narrator’s family members), merely “laughs at the broken teeth, torn overalls, the dirt” (10-11). As easily as Jesse can laugh at these people, the narrator shows how her family members “died and

were not missed” (11). She recalls some of the stories she told Jesse: of the eight cousins that died in one year, the four family members who disappeared, and the one who fell in a river and was never found; one was hit by a car and another shot running through the woods. Looking at the photos of her family members, the narrator feels guilty because she was able to get out, to survive while so many in her family (and presumably others like them) did not. Jesse cannot see the humanity of poor southerners or the pain of such stereotypes. The narrator is left in a conflicted position. She thinks, “All the times I had not spoken before, all the things I just could not tell her, the shame, the self-hatred, the fear; all of that hangs between us now—a wall I cannot tear down”; by not speaking up, “I am condemning us, [. . .] I cannot go on loving you and hating you for your fairy-tale life” (18). Jesse offensively, although naively, concludes that the narrator “tell[s] the funniest stories” (19), although these stories are not actually humorous and cycle like a “river of names” in the narrator’s mind.

In “Lupus,” Allison offers another revealing sketch of life in the rural South. This story is told from the perspective of an adult woman who has returned home to visit her cousin Temple. Allison underscores the narrator’s family’s poverty by positioning Temple as relatively well-off since she is a homeowner. Temple’s family resents her, claiming that she “[t]hinks more of that ratty-walled house than her family” (183). Their judgment contrasts with the actual condition of Temple’s house: it is weathered and slowly falling apart, and her bathroom is “still out back of the pines” (183). Following the deaths of her husband and her young daughter, and after losing her business, Temple is left in poor health, although seemingly content in her own world. The narrator, who has been living away in the city, is drawn back into this world, feeling as if she never left

home. In the country calm, she realizes, “I have not been this still in years, have not heard my own heart when I was not shadowed by full dark and bourbon” (185). The setting, Allison’s childhood South Carolina, is described by the narrator as idyllic. The area seems somehow stuck in the past, but not in a negative way. The narrator says, “They still have fireflies in Greenville, and green tree frogs, katydids, and rock-sucking worms. The muscadines still hang in sheets off the trees behind Old Henderson Road” (183). Allison vividly captures life in the country and elevates the experiences of often overlooked people like Temple.

In “Lupus,” The rural/urban divide shapes the narrator’s view of family, home, and place. The narrator, having gone away from Greenville, tells Temple “of New York and California, of cities she’s never seen” (184). The narrator obviously expected a different response, but Temple says, “How can you live in the city? All those pictures like to make my heart hurt. I could smell it—hot concrete, tar, and piss. No green for miles. No color a’tall. Lord, where’s the life in it?” (184). That final question is interesting considering the common assumption that the country is a void in comparison to the vibrant city, where “life” really happens. While the narrator describes the bridges and the highways and the skyscrapers, the country silence answers her, with no response from Temple (185). The actual description of the city is somewhat jarring, although the narrator does not intend it to be so. She recalls the “cold glare of metal” and “the cars growling rock music out their vents” (185). The narrator assumes wrongly that Temple feels distant from the world or that her life is incomplete. The narrator naively asks, “How do you live this far from the rest of the world?” (185), but Temple easily dismisses this question. Laughing, she asks, “What do I need the world for?” and concludes that

“the world’s too damn close to me anyway” (185). It is evident that she has something that the narrator may lack. Temple is “safe in her own mind, slow as myrtle leaves turning” (187). This story, through the narrator’s experiences returning home, contrasts the urban and rural. Temple is content in her life although the narrator assumes that her cousin, secluded in her country home, would feel as if she was missing something. Instead, Temple unexpectedly concludes that city life is no life “a’tall.”

A precursor to *Bastard Out of Carolina*, “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” takes a similar perspective, but in this story the narrator must face her past after she believes she has gotten away from her family and a traumatic childhood. This story deals with many significant issues, including gender and gender roles, relationships between women (particularly within families), violence, and sexuality, specifically lesbianism. The narrator has kept her family at a distance, literally and figuratively, but when her Aunt Alma suddenly appears at her apartment one day, she must face the reasons why she abandoned her family. The narrator describes herself as “five hundred miles and half a lifetime away” (96). Yet even this spatial and temporal distance cannot completely diminish the influence of her past and family. She feels tears “pushing behind [her] eyes” as she thinks, “It had been so long since I’d seen her or any of them! The last time I’d been to Old Henderson Road had been years back” (96). That the narrator has deserted her family is unacceptable to her aunt, who has tracked her down after all these years. Face-to-face with Aunt Alma, the narrator must deal with her decision to leave her family behind, even knowing that her mother needs her and despite the pain her family members may feel because she left. Aunt Alma is a powerful, intimidating figure, and her unexpected arrival is jarring. She is described as a “worn stubborn woman who didn’t

care what you saw when you looked at her”; she was the “oldest and most formidable” among the narrator’s aunts and is the “prototype” for the tough women in the family (95, 99). While the narrator admires the quiet strength of these women, the narrator resents their seeming weakness and unwillingness to challenge their troubled, often violent and subservient position within their families.

Gender and sexuality are central in this story. Interestingly, deviation from gender norms is viewed differently than lesbianism. As Aunt Alma tells the narrator, “I don’t care if you’re queer or not. I don’t care if you take puppy dogs to bed, for that matter” (103). Failure to adhere to gender expectations, however, is less acceptable, which is perhaps the opposite one might expect. First, even as a child, the narrator took on her uncles’ anger rather than the quiet power and dissatisfaction of her mama and aunts. That the narrator takes after her uncles is confusing for her aunts, whereas her sexuality is not:

It was my anger that my aunts thought queer, my wild raging temper they respected in a boy and discouraged in a girl. That I slept with girls was curious, but not dangerous. That I slept with a knife under my pillow and refused to step aside for my uncles was more than queer. It was crazy. (97)

Her aunts and mama never express such anger, rely too much on their men, and accommodate men’s negative, abusive behavior. They perpetuate gender roles by tolerating such behavior and by deeming a temper acceptable in men but not women. The narrator remembers, for example, when one of her uncles beat another aunt. The narrator recalls being shocked that the incident was dismissed by the women and so feels she has “to get away from them—all of them—the men who could do these terrible things and

the women who would let it happen” (98). Another way that the narrator fails her aunts’ and mama’s expectations is by not having children, which is particularly confusing for Aunt Alma. Yet, the narrator thinks, “Everything is so simple for you, so settled. Make babies. Grow a garden. Handle some man like he’s just another child” (102). The narrator refuses that life of having children and coddling men. While she may resent her aunts’ and mama’s actions in the past, however, she has an important realization, concluding that “there was no justice for my aunts and for my mama (106), and further, “If they were not mine, if I was not theirs, who was I” (108). Allison suggests that years later and miles from home, the narrator may be able to reconcile herself with the past or that she recognizes she must do so for her own benefit.

While tragedy is pervasive in *Trash*, it is important to remember the defiance and resistance that characterizes much of Allison’s fiction, an attitude that contributes to her anti-urban stance. A scene that frames another story complements the comedic exchange between Bruce and the narrator in “Violence Against Women Begins at Home.” In “I’m Working on My Charm,” a non-southerner tells the protagonist that “we have so much to learn from you—gentility, you know, courtesy, manners, charm, all of that” (63), unaware of the narrator’s lower-class origins and poor southerners’ distaste for “Yankees” like her. Looking over the crowd at the party, the narrator “heard the sound of my mother’s voice hissing in my left ear, YankeeEEEEEE!” (64). The story then shifts from this alien situation to the narrator’s background, specifically working at a small-town drugstore as a server. The narrator recalls many things she learned from her mama and the other women, including the ways of Yankees (a rather broad group seeming to include any non-southerner or any rude and unfamiliar person) and about using “southern

charm” to deal with them. Notably, these southerners are the ones that feel superior over these strangers and are knowledgeable about their ways. One strategy is to take advantage of the preconceived expectations these outsiders have. The narrator describes how her mama would “talk nice, drawling like she never did with friends or me, while she moved slower than you’d think a wide-awake person could.” The ploy works, while the southerners know the score: the Yankees “would grin wide and start slowing their words down, while the regulars would choke on their coffee” and give a “round of applause” when the customers left (69). This strategic deployment of stereotypes is humorous—and effective. As one of the women tells the narrator, “Sweets, you just stretch that drawl. Talk like you’re from Mississippi, and they’ll eat it up. For some reason, Yankees got strange sentimental notions about Mississippi” (70). Thus, these women are able to manipulate stereotypes, whether negative or positive, about southerners. While some southerners aspire to the petty aristocracy, as mentioned in “Violence Against Women Begins at Home,” these lower-class, small-town southerners deploy their supposed backwardness in defiant and humorous ways. This story, then, further illustrates how Allison develops an anti-urban stance through a regional and class-based identity that defiantly, and often humorously, challenges the marginalization of groups like poor rural southerners.

Claiming Space in Tims Creek

Most of Randall Kenan’s work centers on his fictional community, Tims Creek, a mostly black, rural town in North Carolina. His novel and short stories are either set in

this community or focus on a Tims Creek native. This community has an interesting history, as Kenan details in the title story from *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992). Tims Creek likely began as a “maroon society,” or a community founded by fugitive or recently emancipated slaves; according to legend, it was established by an otherworldly former slave, Pharaoh, who led a slave uprising and brought others to the backwoods area that became Tims Creek. Despite this fantastic history, present-day Tims Creek seems like the typical small southern town. As the narrator of “Clarence and the Dead” from *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* explains, the townspeople are mostly “wound up in harvesting corn, cleaning house, minding chickenpox, building houses, getting our hair done, getting our cars fixed” and so on (22). Life in Tims Creek, however, is much more interesting than this description suggests. For example, supernatural events sometimes occur, such as talking pigs and visits by angels. Yet, even on the human level, more is happening in Tims Creek than its residents may acknowledge. Trudier Harris explains that an “occasional aberration” may occur, but it is limited to that: an aberration from an otherwise unremarkable way of life. As Harris explains, though, beneath this “seemingly tranquil surface [. . .] is a smoldering cauldron of human emotions, sexual violation/perversion, [. . .] supernatural encounters with the natural, and bouts of insanity, infidelity, and ghostly transgressions against the human world” (160). Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* provides a nightmarish vision of what happens when these deviations are brought to the surface, while Kenan’s short stories in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* show the extent of the eccentricities and aberrations in this community. Nonnormative gender and sexuality are frequently at the center.

In *A Visitation of Spirits*, Kenan offers a lament about what has been lost in this small rural community, showing a deep affection for the region. Two sections, both of which detail agrarian communal activities, are central to his nostalgic vision. “Advent (or the Beginning of the End)” describes the practice of hog killings when neighbors would help each other butcher and preserve their hogs. The narrator addresses readers as “you,” putting them in the place of Tims Creek residents. (While the narrator is assured that “you know all of this,” readers likely do not, of course.) Each group takes part in this ritual. The narrator recalls the “chaotic symphony” of women talking and gossiping and recollecting; the men do the same but also taught the younger boys to shoot hogs, passing on the ritual (8-9). The narrator explains, however, that this communal ritual represents “a way of life that has evaporated”; the A&P has replaced the hog pen (9). Yet, the memory and legacy of such rituals linger because the “ghosts of those times are stubborn” and a phantasmatic herd of pigs still waits to be butchered—another example of the spirits that haunt this novel (10). The aptly titled “Requiem for Tobacco” functions as a coda, closing out the novel with a similarly nostalgic scene and bringing the story back to the community itself rather than individual characters. This section also focuses on a lost communal ritual, the harvesting and curing of tobacco. As the narrator of this requiem explains, “There was a time when folk were bound together in a community” and helped one another (254). This requiem evokes an agrarian life that is no longer the norm, just as commercialism has replaced the need for hog killings in “Advent.” Now, the “brown hands and sweaty brows and aching backs” have been replaced with “the clacking metal and durable rubber of the harvester that needs no men” (256-7). This requiem urges readers to remember that “once upon a time hands, human hands, plucked

ripe leaves from stalks, and hands, human hands, wrapped them with twine [. . .] And it is good to remember that people were bound by this strange activity, [. . .] bound by the necessity, the responsibility, the humanity” (257). Donnie McMahan finds interesting parallels between the critiques put forward by the southern Agrarians and Kenan’s contempt for the “industrial complex that threatens to damage southern life and the southern landscape” (43). An “industrialized modernity” becomes the “chief culprit for the South’s cultural shift and expiration of memory” (44). Yet, as McMahan makes clear, Kenan’s vision is an inclusive one in comparison to the Agrarians’, bringing black and queer voices to the fore. Of course, this nostalgic vision is significantly idealized. Industrialism and modernization are not the only problems this community faces.

Beneath the stability and relative conservatism of Tims Creek are fantastic occurrences and significant deviations from the town’s professed values and norms. *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* offers a sampling of such stories and strange individuals. In “Things of This World; or Angels Unawares,” for example, an angel appears one day in Mr. John Edgar Stokes’s yard. The lifelong bachelor then nurses the angel, Chi, to health. The two develop an easy intimacy that befuddles John Edgar’s friends, but they accept Chi. Other stories reveal a more sordid undercurrent in this community and the ways that the community deals with anything unpleasant. “Clarence and the Dead” concerns a talking pig and a young boy, Clarence, who is touched with psychic abilities, such as communicating with the dead. The people of Tims Creek do not know how to react to Clarence’s abilities, but later, an older man, Ellsworth, becomes infatuated with the boy after he shares messages from Ellsworth’s former sweetheart, who died long ago. This episode prompts a scandal in Tims Creek. As the narrator, presumably a community

resident, explains, “Nothing like talk of crimes against nature gets people all riled up” (19). After Clarence, Ellsworth, and the talking pig die, the community tries to move on, as they are accustomed to doing. In “Ragnarök! The Day the Gods Die,” the Reverend Barden (a recurring character in these stories) preaches at the funeral of Louise Tate, with whom he had an affair. The story is disorienting, alternating between Barden’s sermon and graphic descriptions of Louise’s body and memories of their secret meetings. Kenan does not specify whether other Tims Creek residents know of this affair, but at least Barden’s son does and criticizes his father’s hypocrisy. “Cornsilk” is a more extreme example of the perversions that lurk beneath the surface of Tims Creek. In this story, the narrator, Aaron, describes his sexual relationship with his half-sister, Jamonica. As an adolescent, Aaron is exposed to sexuality when Jamonica sneaks off into a cornfield with three boys. When he tries to tell his grandmother what he sees, he learns that such things are not spoken off, which is the implicit expectation in this community. Soon afterward, Aaron and Jamonica start a sexual relationship, which extends into adulthood. These fantastic occurrences and seedy secrets belie this community’s seeming simplicity.

Kenan’s only novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, is a tragic, otherworldly tale also set in Tims Creek. It centers on two characters, Horace Cross and his uncle James Malachai Greene (called Jimmy), focusing on the events surrounding Horace’s death by suicide. Horace is a gay, black teenager from Tims Creek who turns, after years of struggle, to the occult. On the night prior to his suicide, he performs a magical ritual in hopes of transforming himself. He hopes to transform himself to escape the expectations he faces from his family and community; further, he aims to overcome the tension caused by his conflicting identities as a gay, black teenager. After the ritual fails, Horace relives

significant moments leading up to this harrowing night as he wanders around Tims Creek. While Horace's story is most important, the novel is framed by Jimmy's attempts to come to terms with Horace's suicide, which he witnesses. Jimmy seems both to conform to the expectations of his family and community, but he is also a transitional figure, seeking new ways of understanding and helping others. Horace's story, however, demonstrates the inability for this community to readily change. Even more so than Kenan's short fiction, this novel shows that beneath the otherwise tranquil image of Tims Creek, there lies, as Harris describes it, a "smoldering cauldron" of sexual perversion, "supernatural encounters with the natural," insanity, and "ghostly transgressions against the human world" (160). Horace's story incorporates all of these elements, ultimately destroying him in the end; the supernatural and insanity allow him to escape the norms that deem him perverse.

The first section of *A Visitation of Spirits* that focuses on Horace begins mid-thought: "...What to become?" (11). This question introduces Horace's preoccupation on the final day before his suicide. He is preparing for a ritual to transform himself into an animal and thereby free himself from the pressures and demands that have become increasingly oppressive. If he were to become an animal, Horace thinks, he would be free from the "human laws and human rules" that bind him (12). Another key motivation for this plan is also clear: Horace feels he must escape the condemnations—by family, community, and religion—because of his gayness. He has internalized the message that he is wrong and sinful because of his sexuality. This "drowning in magic" is ultimately "an attempt to escape from that sin which would surely commit if he remained human" (20). Horace wants to stay in Tims Creek and feels connected to the land and region

itself. So, he chooses to become a bird (a symbol of freedom), the red-tailed hawk, which is native to the area. Horace feels connected to the land, mentally seeing the area from a bird's eye view. Among other sights, he sees the fields surrounding his grandfather's house; the woods with the "tall, massive long-leaf pines"; and the "miles and miles of highways, asphalt poured over mule trails that etched themselves into the North Carolina landscape" (14). Horace is thus intimately connected to his hometown and the region, but he cannot deal with the human pressures that bind him.

Rather than transforming himself, Horace instead breaks psychologically as he performs his ritual. He hears a demon voice that guides him through Tims Creek and his past. The evil, magical cohort that accompanies the demon's voice is externalized from Horace's psyche. The demon's voice beckons Horace to march through town (viewed as both past and present), and Horace imagines being "surrounded by hobgoblins and sprites and evil faeries and wargs—aberrations like himself, fierce and untamed, who frolicked about him with hellish glee at his acceptance of his doomed, delicious fate"; he is surrounded by these "fiends" who "fornicate" and shout profanities and blasphemies, among other debauched acts (28). They participate in the vices and actions that Horace would previously have rejected as unacceptable or sinful—the type of sinful behavior he has tried to avoid (although unsuccessfully). While it would not be impossible that such beings would be real, considering that otherworldly events happen elsewhere in Kenan's fiction, Kenan indicates that these magical beings are not real. He concludes this section by describing how Horace "pranced along *alone* down the road" and expresses doubts in the "small bit of his mind yet sane" (28; emphasis added). As the novel progresses, readers see more clearly why Horace has reached this breaking point. Throughout his

adolescence, Horace has had to contend with what he was taught are sinful feelings and desires. Each time he submits to those desires, he is consumed by extreme guilt. Further, he must contend with his family's expectations and his increasing inability to meet their standards and hopes for him.

Unsurprisingly, Horace's first destination as he makes his way through Tims Creek with this devilish horde is the First Baptist Church—the central institution of this community. When he arrives, he remembers and reimagines a sermon by Reverend Barden, who cites the biblical proscriptions against the men who “leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another; men with men working that which is unseemly” (77). While the broader, mainstream culture may be more accepting of gay people, Reverend Barden is firm in his warnings to his congregation that gayness is “unnatural” and “unclean” (78-9). Obviously, Horace absorbed this judgment and warning, as evident when he imagines a horde of “grotesque shadows” condemning him because of his sexuality. The message is directed toward him specifically. The shadows and voices deem him “wicked,” an “abomination,” a “man lover,” and a “sissy” (86). Further, gayness is connected to race—specifically whiteness. First, the Reverend describes a television program with gay couples who were “all white, you know,” suggesting that, of course, these gay couples could not have been black (78). Then, the voices condemn Horace as a “greyboy” and “Oreo”—two names that Horace is actually called by others—suggesting that his association with whites or the influence of white culture is partially responsible for his gayness. These memories and these disembodied voices are eventually replaced with the horde that has accompanied Horace. They remind

Horace that, because he would always be condemned and judged, he belongs with them, which Horace despondently accepts.

Kenan relies on other significant locations in town as a means for Horace to reassess his life. At the elementary school, where Horace goes next, he seeks a turning point when it comes to his sexuality. For example, he remembers how his childhood best friend, John Anthony, had once shared his interests in books and science but later became more interested in sports, sex, and girls, unlike Horace. By the time they were in high school, John Anthony had become a popular jock, “surrounded by girls and the aura of bullish masculinity” (96). When Horace tries to be like John Anthony and find a girlfriend, but he deters girls “like a polecat,” until he is finally told that girls were not interested in him because he was “weird” (96-97). While he is not necessarily very effeminate, he is different. He acknowledges that he “wasn’t like the other guys” and things like sports “just bored him” (97). In one memory, Horace recalls a time when his friends were taunting a visibly gay classmate, Gideon Stone. First, their exchanges are somewhat lighthearted, with the boys laughing at Gideon’s witty retorts. Horace has a more extreme reaction though, telling Gideon, “I think you’re disgusting, Gideon Stone. I think you’re low and... and... unclean. An abomination!” Yet, the worst and final insult is when he calls Gideon a “faggot,” which obviously crosses the line (100). Horace’s vicious retort to Gideon demonstrates his need to protect himself from being associated with gayness (he “proves” he is straight by joining in on the “queer-baiting”), but Horace is likely also motivated by resentment. He does not have the freedom that Gideon claims for himself.

Gideon and Horace find themselves in different positions in their families and in their community. Gideon does not shy away from his gayness and effeminacy. As Kenan writes, “Gideon had, as the old men say, sugar in his blood. But unlike decent folk, he was not reticent about it; in fact, he paraded it about. He cultivated a dainty, feminine air, delicate and girllike. His hands formed flowery gestures midair, and he had something of a mincing walk” (97-98). “Parading it about” may be a self-defense mechanism for Gideon, taking away the power of those who “snicker” at him, but his lack of reticence is important. The Stone family more broadly is rejected by the “decent” folk of Tims Creek, which may be one reason they do not exclude Gideon. Kenan writes, “Gideon was their godsend, and Gideon knew it, developing an arrogance that he wielded like a weapon against all outsiders” (98). Kenan suggests that family acceptance is crucial. Unlike the Crosses, who may never accept Horace as he is, the Stone family embraces Gideon, and this acceptance helps him face a hostile community and homophobic culture. The Stoneses know what it means to be outcasts. Others in Tims Creek treat them with hostility because of their bootlegging and because they are not religious. In contrast, the Crosses are perhaps the most respected family in Tims Creek and abide by the community’s expectations and norms. The Cross family has deep ties in the area and wield great influence in the community. They maintain their position, in part, by demanding conformity, uprightness, and loyalty of all family members. Maisha Wester shows how the people of Tims Creek (as is perhaps most evident with the Cross family) rely on certain conservative, oppressive ideologies, including religious fundamentalism, fixed racial identities (premised in part on racial separatism), and gender and sexual normativity. Those who fail to conform to the community’s rigid expectations are

marginalized and punished, as also happens within the Cross family. The Stone family, in contrast, maintain an outsider or marginal status in the community and so do not police themselves in the same way.

Jimmy Greene represents a potential transitional figure. Generationally he is between the older Crosses (the ones who tend to be most rigid in their beliefs, resentments, and expectations) and the younger Horace. While he takes on a central role in the community as reverend, he envisions himself as more understanding than prior leaders. Jimmy's newfound liberality seems to come about in part because of the traumatic experience of Horace's suicide. Kenan provides a flashback to two years before Horace's suicide, when Horace sought solace and comfort from Jimmy, but Jimmy can only reiterate the dominant views that being gay is "just a phase," abnormal, and a sin. While Horace wants desperately for Jimmy to tell him it will "be okay," Jimmy dismisses Horace's genuine fears and doubts (113-4). Kenan suggests that Horace's suicide may have been prevented if Jimmy had offered the compassion that Horace is denied by the community and the rest of the Cross family. Following Horace's death, however, Jimmy finds kinship with his nephew: "He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community [. . .] His reason for existing, it would seem was for the salvation of his people"; yet Horace was "flawed as far as the community was concerned." A central reason is because he was gay. Only *now* can Jimmy say that Horace's sexuality is "a simple, normal deviation" but one the community likely could never accept (188). While Jimmy can conform more easily, Horace likely would never be able to satisfy his family's and community's expectations, as Jimmy now realizes.

As the novel progresses, one sees the increasing tensions between Horace and his family, leading to Horace's dramatic breaking point. His family cannot understand when Horace later becomes friends with a group of white boys, and he is ridiculed by his black peers as well. One dramatic row occurs when Horace pierces his ear. His family says the "white fools" Horace has befriended have led him astray, and the earring makes him seem like "some little girl" or "one of them perverts" (184). The scene reveals, first, Horace's naivete about racism, and, secondly, the Cross family's self-protective racial separatism. The problem is that their construction of racial identity, as Wester shows, is too constricting, too unforgiving, based in part on rigid gender norms and sexual othering (1035-36). Horace is left with conflicting identities marked by race, religion, gender, and sexuality. For these reasons alone, one can see why Horace would turn to the occult and attempt to transform himself, as Jimmy now understands. The initial description of this argument is part of Jimmy's "confessions." After this replaying of the event, Jimmy comments on its significance, realizing that this incident "is what finally got to Horace" (188). Jimmy assumes correctly, as evident when Kenan again returns to this event later from Horace's perspective. For Horace, befriending this group of white boys represents another attempt to find a place for himself. He does not realize, however, that the world these boys represented will always be foreclosed to him because of his race. So, when separates from the group, he turns to "careless and loveless liaisons [. . .] and though he pretended not to care, he worried more and more for his soul, and his increasing confusion took on a harsher guilt and self-loathing" (240). Expectedly, this behavior is more destructive than fulfilling for Horace.

As Horace's memories unfold, Kenan reveals Horace's desperate physical desires and his overwhelming despair when he acts on them. His first physical relationship is with Gideon. Horace remembers Gideon as a first love, and his affection for Gideon makes him question why such love would be sinful. Horace also realizes the injustice of his position, lamenting that "the simple joy of being in love and expressing it was denied him" (153). At first, Horace remembers his relationship with Gideon sentimentally, but Kenan describes Horace's extreme and brutal reaction when he ends his relationship with Gideon. He follows a pattern, whereby he gives into his physical desires but then, because of guilt, reacts despairingly and aggressively. Horace becomes a "legitimate jock" and "one of the fellows"; he starts dating and having sex with girls and tries to convince himself that the feelings he felt toward other boys was "camaraderie," not attraction or lust (161). Echoing the earlier scene where Horace viciously calls Gideon a "faggot," Horace becomes physically aggressive when Gideon comes onto him later. Distancing himself, Horace tells Gideon, "What *you* do" is "wrong" (162; emphasis added). Notably, this scene occurs in a locker room, an all-male environment where Horace has tried to fit in. Afterward, Horace is left with the other spirits that haunt him: Gideon "turned and walked out, leaving Horace with himself, with the smelly ghosts of the men who, for all these months, he had told himself he did not lust after, with the realization that it was a lie and that soon, soon and very soon he would fall, and fall hard" (165). Horace's emotional state only becomes more volatile after this brutal scene.

What Kenan gradually reveals is the increasing sordidness of Horace's sexual experiences, which has prompted an even stronger reaction from him. As Wester puts it, by the end of the novel, one sees "how nightmarish sexuality has become for Horace";

Horace can only understand sexuality “in terms of pain, destruction, and horror” (1046). The problem for Horace is that, rather than directing his anger and resentment to the sexual norms that mark him as the deviant Other, he “directs his contempt at the prohibited sexual self” and embraces the “image of himself as a horrific being that does horrific things” (1047). Horace has no positive model for expressing his desires, and he becomes increasingly isolated from everyone around him—family, community, and peers. One of the final places that Horace visits on his journey through Tims Creek is the theater where he worked for a summer. As in Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case,” the theater opens up a new world for the gay teenager. For the first time, Horace meets other gay men; in fact, the men from the summer stock company are mostly gay. Among this group, Everett Church Harrington IV, a regal gay black man, stands out. One might expect that Everett would have been an empowering model for Horace, but instead this experience with the summer stock group is only more confusing for Horace. His sexual relationship with another actor, Antonio, only intensifies his confusion. The scene which prompts Horace to remember that summer and those affairs involves a startling “visitation of spirits.” The final apparition that he faces is, significantly, a doppelganger, dressed as a harlequin, suggesting the fool and masquerade. Further, Horace first sees the double putting on white face paint, a detail Kenan repeats several times, echoing the accusations earlier that Horace is a “greyboy” or an “Oreo.” This doppelganger makes Horace revisit the event that is the source of Horace’s greatest guilt and shame—an orgy with Antonio and other actors from the troupe after a night of extreme debauchery. This memory, Kenan writes, had “lodged itself in his soul like an unmelting, unmeltable sliver of ice.” Finding no alternative, Horace thought that death would mean “[n]o more, no

more ghosts, no more sin, no more, no more” (231). So he symbolically shoots the harlequin doppelganger as a final act before going back to the school where he commits suicide. Rather than transforming himself, then, Horace is overcome by the spirits—his sexuality, failures, and overwhelming desires—that have haunted him.

Two stories from *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* complicate Kenan’s representations of nonnormative gender and sexuality. In “Run, Mourner, Run,” Kenan focuses on a poor, white, gay character and considers multiple forms of oppression. “The Foundations of the Earth” features an optimism lacking in these other texts. It ends, critically, with the potential for reconciliation and change. In “Run, Mourner, Run,” Dean Williams is caught up in a nefarious plot. Percy Terrell, a recurring villain in these stories, plans to blackmail the secretly gay Raymond Brown, the wealthiest black man in Tims Creek, in order to get land that Percy wants. With these three characters, Kenan explores the relationship between racism, classism, and heterosexism. Privilege and oppression are shifting and relative. Percy benefits from his wealth, whiteness, and heterosexuality; Dean’s race provides him some privilege, but his poverty and gayness make him vulnerable; Ray is wealthy and so has some influence, but racism and heterosexism outweigh his class privilege, at least against Percy. The power thus lies with Percy, as expected. Nothing changes in the end, but Kenan’s nuanced analysis of these intersecting oppressions and forms of privilege is insightful. This story acts as a useful complement to Allison’s understanding of interlocking systems of oppression, but Kenan expands it by looking more closely at race, which builds on his work in *A Visitation of Spirits*. “The Foundations of the Earth” similarly addresses the interplay of various forms of difference (e.g., gay and straight, black and white, southern and northern), but Maggie’s

transformation in that story offers new possibilities for bridging such gaps and for a genuine acceptance of sexual difference.

Unlike most of Kenan's fiction, "Run, Mourner, Run" is told from the perspective of a white character, Dean Williams. At first, Dean seems almost pitifully childlike, swinging in a tire swing while thinking forlornly, although he is twenty-three and his legs are "lanky and mannish" (163). Dean has had a harsh life because of his poverty and his mother's illness and frequent unemployment. Kenan introduces Dean so that readers build sympathy for him before revealing his role in the blackmail plot against Ray. Dean is recruited by Percy, who uses Dean's poverty and sexuality as leverage and as a way to manipulate him. While he is also white, Dean is obviously not Percy's equal. Kenan writes, "In Percy's eyes Dean was nothing more than poor white trash: a sweet-faced, dark-haired faggot with a broken-down Ford Torino, living with his chain-smoking mama in a damn-near condemned house they didn't even own" (166). As Percy suggests, who would believe the "white trash [. . .] faggot" over the wealthiest and most powerful white man in the area if Dean tried to reveal the scheme? Despite his role in this plot, Dean is not necessarily an unsympathetic character. Percy offers Dean a better job as foreman at a new factory and a \$6,000 raise. While Dean acknowledges his own more selfish reasons for helping Percy, his poverty and his responsibility in taking care of his mother are serious concerns. Dean's participation in the plot, however, is abhorrent. He conspires with another white man to bring down a black man, and he feels no solidarity with Ray as a gay person. Yet, Kenan does not villainize Dean completely.

Like a counterpart to the Cross family in *A Visitation of Spirits*, the Terrell family is a dominant presence in the Tims Creek area. Percy is first introduced in “Things of the World.” In this story, Percy’s cruel, racist sons kill John Edgar Stokes’s beloved dog, and in response, John Edgar kills one of theirs. Afterward, Percy demands John Edgar’s arrest by the police he has bribed and manipulated. This incident shows that Percy is as motivated by a need to show his power as anything else. This story sets the tone for “Run, Mourner, Run.” Percy cannot stand being denied what he wants, in this case the property owned by Ray’s family. Dean remembers the day that Percy approached him, and his memory of Percy’s explanation reveals Percy’s racist greed. He wants Ray’s land because he needs it and because black people should not own such good property, or so he believes (166). Percy’s strategy to get Ray’s land is well planned, and he must have spied on Ray. In the end, Percy can renege on his promises without any repercussions. As a poor gay man, Dean does not possess the power that Percy wields ruthlessly.

Raymond Brown is positioned as Percy’s counterpart. While Percy is the richest white man in the area, Ray is the wealthiest black man in Tims Creek. He is the only black undertaker there and is a respected member of the community. Over six feet tall, Ray seems fashionable and regal, with his head held up “[a]lmost looking down on folk” (170). So, Dean is uncertain of how to seduce Ray, worrying that he will only see Dean as “white trash” (171). Protected by his wealth, Ray seems to have developed a secret life. This story, however, reveals Ray’s vulnerability as a black, secretly gay man. Ray is also married. As he explains to Dean, his wife should have figured out his secret by now, but she is blinded by her religion—and perhaps his wealth too. One can assume that others in his family and the Tims Creek community feign ignorance to protect Ray’s

standing. This strategy of evasion is common among Tims Creek residents until they are forced to face the unpleasant. While Dean worries that Ray will reject him as “white trash,” the two form a relationship that makes Dean question his participation in Percy’s scheme. They begin a long-term affair that is idyllic, especially when they spend their time at the secluded homeplace, the property that Percy is trying to extort from Ray. While Dean had felt this scheme would offer him a better life, he subconsciously realizes that his time with Ray makes his life better, although not materially, which is still a problem. Dean begins to think—even hope—that Percy might have forgotten about the plot, but Percy carries through with his plan. At first, Ray defies Percy before Percy reminds him of his standing in the community, his position at his church, his business, and his family. This threat of exposure—as Percy expects—is successful, and Ray sells him the property.

Kenan’s representation of the aftermath is somewhat ambiguous. While readers’ sympathy obviously lies with Ray, Dean is also trapped in a difficult situation. One begins to wonder who loses more in the end, Ray or Dean. Percy has no plans to carry through on the deal. Further, Dean has lost Ray, which seems at times the greater loss. Afterward, Ray ignores Dean in public and Dean is left with “one-night stands with nameless truckers in nameless truckstops and bored workers at boring shopping malls” (184). To assuage his guilt, Dean tries to hate Ray as a black man and to “dredge up every [. . .] cocksucking, motherfucking, sambo insult he could muster”; he wants to “relearn hate, fiery, blunt, brutal” and to “unlearn what he had learned in the very bed on which he was turning his back, to erase it from his memory, to blot it out” (183). Kenan shows, however, that such racist thinking is disingenuous, and it does not alleviate his

pain about losing Ray, his feelings of injustice at his social and economic position, or his guilt in taking part in this scheme. When he approaches Percy about their deal, Dean is again reminded of his powerlessness. His class status and sexuality negate any leverage he may have with the Terrells. Percy sums up Dean's problem: "Look at you [. . .] A pathetic white-trash faggot whore. Who would think any accusation you brought against me [. . .] would have any one bit of truth to it" (187). Subsequently, Percy's sons beat Dean, "taunt[ing] him with limp wrists and effeminate whimpers and lisps" (187); Dean realizes that "he could never really explain, never really tell anyone what had happened" (188). Kenan does not necessarily dismiss Dean's struggles altogether. Ray has lost his property, but Kenan does not show any other fallout from this incident. For example, Dean later meets Ray's wife, who offers him a ride in her Cadillac, suggesting that she never knew of the blackmail plot. At the end of the story, Kenan returns to the opening scene, with Dean swinging forlornly in his tire swing. While he tries to convince himself that "it will be all right," he also thinks of himself as "[w]aiting for the world to come to an end. Waiting for this cruel dream world to pass" (191). Dean's actions are deplorable, but by making this character somewhat sympathetic, Kenan emphasizes the ambiguous and shifting interplay of racism, classism, and heterosexism.

"The Foundations of the Earth" deals directly with the acceptability of sexual variance. It offers a notably positive outcome and suggests new possibilities regarding acceptance and understanding. At the center of this story is an odd pair. Maggie MacGowan Williams is a seventy-year-old widow and a pillar of the community; Gabriel is a young, gay, white man from Boston. He was also the longtime partner of Maggie's grandson Edward prior to Edward's death. Maggie represents the central values of Tims

Creek, including community involvement, religious participation, dedication to family, and industriousness. The death of her grandson, however, leads Maggie to reassess long-held beliefs and values. As is common in his fiction, Kenan deftly weaves flashbacks to Edward's death and funeral with the present scene, a Sunday dinner at Maggie's house. Maggie planned the dinner to give others the chance to socialize with Gabriel, who she has invited back to Tims Creek. The other guests include the Right Reverend Hezekiah Barden and Henrietta Fuchee. Maggie gradually begins to distance herself from the self-righteousness and fundamentalism of the Reverend and Henrietta, who appear comically fussy and sanctimonious. Maggie probes the past while trying to reconcile what she has learned from her current situation and changing views. The result is hopeful. Maggie comes to a new understanding and acceptance of her grandson, Gabriel, and gayness generally. More importantly, this story suggests the possibility for more significant change in this community and beyond.

Edward's death and the revelation of his gayness prompts Maggie to reconsider how she viewed her grandson. She was not aware of Edward's sexuality until his death and Gabriel's arrival in Tims Creek. Edward had distanced himself from his family while he was living in Boston, presumably so they would not know about his sexuality and his relationship with Gabriel. Maggie's granddaughter tells her that Edward has been "living with another man all these years" like "husband and wife" (56). Like Horace in *A Visitation of Spirits*, Edward had a tough childhood before coming to live with his grandmother, and also like Horace, Edward was also seen as having great potential for achievement. Maggie remembers her grandson as "train[ed] proper" and as "a well-mannered and upright fellow" before he left Tims Creek (55). She expected that Edward

would “rise up, go to school, be strong”; his victory would be her victory, and he would be her “champion” and her “hope” (69). This revelation regarding Edward compounds the sense of loss Maggie first felt when Edward became distant from her. Her most profound confusion involves reconciling what she knows now with her religious beliefs. She realizes, “Now he was gone. And now she had to come to terms with the news of his being ‘gay,’ as the world called what she had been taught was an unholy abomination.” She is willing to try, however, concluding that she “must learn better” (69). As this passage indicates, Maggie must contend with a label, an *identity*, one that represented a newly affirmative view of same-sex desire and relationships. Maggie thus faces a paradigm shift, even beyond Edward’s sexuality or relationship with Gabriel.

Her decision to invite Gabriel back to Tims Creek, however, is not the first sign that Maggie is changing. Significantly, the night before Edward’s funeral, she has a religious vision. Religion, rather than merely reinforcing her fundamentalist beliefs, actually pushes her to new acceptance through this otherworldly vision, showing the radical nature of Kenan’s message in this story. In a dream, Maggie envisions herself as the persecuted Job, but this self-righteous view of herself is quickly challenged. First, she sees Edward embraced in “the comforting arms of Gabriel, winged, who clutched her grandboy to his bosom and soared away” as if Gabriel is the archangel himself (58). Next, a voice, presumably God’s, challenges her, asking, “*Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?*”—thereby questioning her assumption that she fully understands God’s will and intentions (59). Another voice questions her presumptuousness in deciding who deserves love and who deserves condemnation, asking, “*Who asked you to love? Who asked you to hate?*” (59). This vision, although

Maggie does not understand it fully, reveals the flaws in her limited religious views. At first, she is not prepared to accept Edward's sexuality and Gabriel's presence, but the next morning her rage is "replaced by dumb humility and a plethora of questions" rather than the easy answers she had held onto (60). Kenan suggests that Maggie is changing when, rather than wearing somber tones to the funeral, she instead wears a flamboyant, bright saffron dress and blue scarf because she "thought Edward would have liked it" (60). Following the funeral, Maggie approaches Gabriel after earlier rebuffing his attempt to console her. Her feelings are ambivalent but show that she will try to change:

As [Gabriel] stood before her—raven-haired, pink-skinned, abject, eyes bloodshot—she experienced a bevy of emotions: disgust, grief, anger, tenderness, fear, weariness, pity. Nevertheless, she *had* to be civil, *had* to make a leap of faith and of understanding. [. . .] And though there were still so many questions, so much to sort out, for now she would mime patience, pretend to be accepting, feign peace. Time would unravel the rest. (60)

Following this moment, Maggie goes from feigning understanding and miming acceptance to possessing a genuine sense of compassion. She moves beyond nominal southern hospitality and Christian forbearance to sincere affection for Gabriel.

At first, Maggie judges Gabriel harshly, but her views change over time. In a description echoing Percy Terrell's judgment of Dean in "Run, Mourner, Run," Maggie initially dismisses him as a "pathetic, stumbling, poor trashy white boy" who flaunts "his sinful lust for her grandson" (57). She implies that this "white boy" is to blame for her anger, although she wants to mourn her grandson and follow through with the motions

expected of her as a grieving grandmother. Maggie's invitation to Gabriel months later is thus a significant change. She invites Gabriel back to Tims Creek so that she can sort out some of the questions she has about Edward. When Gabriel first arrives back in Tims Creek, she tries to convince herself that she was "comfortable with this white man, with this homosexual, with this man who had slept with her grandboy" (63), but again, she must convince herself that she is accepting. Maggie is also struck by Gabriel as an openly gay man, and the fact that he seems so "normal" bewilders her. A key question she wants answered is why Edward never told her that he was gay. Gabriel, who tells her that he is out to his own family, explains that Edward was afraid that "you might disown him. That you might stop... well, you know, loving him" (64). Kenan suggests that Maggie actually might have disowned him, as she herself seems to realize.

At the Sunday dinner, Maggie wants to show her acceptance of Gabriel and is determined that others accept him as well. Maggie thinks to herself, "At this stage of her life she depended on no one for anything, and she was certainly not dependent on the approval of these self-important fools" (53). Reverend Barden's and Henrietta's self-righteous behavior leads Maggie to realize that judging others is unnecessary and presumptuous. (Henrietta, for example, denies watching soap operas because it would seem foolish and worldly to Reverend Barden.) After Henrietta and the Reverend swap vapid platitudes about working on the Sabbath, they decide to confront Maggie's white tenant, Morton Henry, for plowing his field on a Sunday, and Maggie and Gabriel are taken along. As they walk to the field, Maggie realizes, "At that moment, she understood that she was being called on"—as if it is an external, even religious injunction—"to realign her thinking about men and women, and men and men, and even women and

women. Together... the way Adam and Eve were meant to be together” (63). In this moment, gayness is not a faceless, incomprehensible deviation or abomination; instead, the charming, good natured Gabriel humanizes gay people, allowing her to adjust her thinking on the issue. She is now able to even reconsider these questions in her familiar religious terms, as with the Adam and Eve paradigm. This passage echoes another scene where Maggie comes to understand Gabriel’s love for Edward. She thinks of him speaking as “the way a widow speaks of her dead husband. Or, indeed, the way a widower speaks of his dead husband” (65). This passage, along with the one above, shows how she can think more deeply about love between men.

The extent of Maggie’s transformation is evident at the end of the story. Morton’s explanation of why he must work on Sunday proves that abstract religious principles do not lead to genuine insight. As Morton tells Reverend Barden, “I got two jobs, five children, and a sick wife” (71). This explanation makes their sanctimonious posturing seem particularly absurd. Morton offers to quit plowing—and then move off Maggie’s land—if she does not want him to work, but Maggie responds simply, “You do what you got to do. Just like the rest of us” (72). She understands how shocking it is that she, a black woman, took a white man’s side against a black minister, but she is tired of hypocrisy and a lack of empathy. This confrontation is parallel to her own struggle to accept Edward and Gabriel and move beyond the religious values that have constrained her. She muses, “How curious the world had become that she would be asking a white man to exonerate her in the eyes of her own grandson; how strange that at seventy, when she had all the laws and the rules down pat, she would have to begin again, to learn” (72). “The Foundations of the Earth” gestures toward new possibilities. If Maggie, a pillar of

the community, can change then the community itself can change. Trudier Harris offers an insightful analysis of Maggie's transformation. She notes that the story reconciles many binaries: white and black, gay and straight, and northern and southern, among others. Maggie and Gabriel are able to bridge these significant differences. So as Harris concludes, Maggie's field, where this final scene occurs, represents a "transformative southern space"; she can reconcile her religious beliefs with racial and sexual diversity, thus her alignment with Gabriel and Morton rather than Reverend Barden and Henrietta, who are "incapable of growth" (169). Acceptance and understanding are not limited to urban and non-southern spaces. That such change occurs within what seems a rigidly ideological community is significant. "The Foundations of the Earth" thereby acts as a counterpoint to *A Visitation of Spirits* and "Run, Mourner, Run" in the possibilities that are inherent in Maggie's development.

Allison's *Trash* and Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* demonstrate the complex negotiation between region, place, sexuality, class, and race. Their fiction reveals a constant interplay between identities and affiliations, particularly at a time when gay identity was more rigidly defined, a key difference from the position of Allison and Kenan relative to earlier writers. Just as they raise questions about regional identification, they challenge, in different ways, the metronorms that have shaped how gay identity and community are viewed, including the need for an affirmative (urban) gay community and the insistence on visibility. They also reconsider how gay people navigate multiple allegiances. Allison's approach differs from Kenan's in

her antinormative positioning and affirmative redeployment of southern backwardness. Kenan's approach is more individualized and local, but "The Foundations of the Earth" suggests broader change. These authors thus provide insight, albeit often inconclusive and evolving, into the interplay of region, rurality, and queer identity.

CONCLUSION: THE RURAL QUEER EXPERIENCE

The literature included in this study challenges the urban/rural binary that has perpetuated reductive views of nonurban places, marginalized rural queers, and positioned urbanism as the norm. Nonurban areas do not lack gender and sexual nonconformists, many of whom have stayed in or returned to the country. Queer individuals in these places express themselves, define their identities, and act on their desires in complex ways. One cannot necessarily predict how queer people will express themselves in or respond to their environments, nor can one predict how those communities will accommodate them. Some general elements, however, link many rural queer texts: the importance of familiarity in rural communities or small towns; eccentricity—perceived by the self or by others—as a means to make sense of difference; and the ambivalence that often characterizes individuals’ responses to their communities, or alternatively, a community’s ambivalent response to its nonconforming residents. Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands,” from *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), illustrates how these elements shape a small midwestern town’s connection to one of its queerest residents, and so it prefigures many literary texts that would follow.

The tale of Wing Biddlebaum in “Hands” shows the complicated place that queer people occupy in their communities, one shaped by familiarity and ambivalence. Like Randall Kenan’s fictional Tims Creek, Winesburg has its share of odd, transgressive characters, but Wing is one of the most visible of these eccentrics or “grotesques,” as Anderson refers to them. Wing occupies a marginal position in the town, which is literalized through the location of his home on the very outskirts of Winesburg. He is

known for the feature that makes him grotesque: his hands with their “restless activity, like unto the beatings of the wings of an imprisoned bird” (28). Anderson encodes gender and sexual difference through Wing’s effeminacy, his affectionate qualities, and “love of man.” For example, while Wing’s hands are described as the “piston rods of his machinery of expression” (a masculine metaphor), he has “slender expressive fingers” (28). Wing shares his thoughts and his vision of same-sex intimacy, broadly defined, with a young reporter. He tells of his dream in which “men lived again in a pastoral golden age,” a homosocial setting that is suggestively physical (30). Because a “half-witted” boy made unfounded sexual allegations against him, however, Wing now lives in fear of intimacy, and of his own hands.

Eccentricity reflects the indeterminate status of queer people in rural communities or small towns, as Wing’s story illustrates. Rendering queerness as eccentric allows gender conforming, heterosexual residents of rural areas to make sense of their queer neighbors; it also gives outsiders a place, albeit an often marginal one. Those deemed odd or deviant can become local eccentrics, as in the works of Carson McCullers and Truman Capote. According to popular perceptions of nonurban areas, visible queerness can lead to ostracism, but familiarity can at times alleviate the potential for rejection or pressures to conform. Labelling gender and sexual nonconformity as eccentricity also represents a sometimes protective strategy whereby communities account for difference. That protectiveness is most evident in the story of Amelia Evans in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, whose influence on the town is so significant that her downfall prompts that of the town itself; similarly, Amos LeGrand in Capote’s *The Grass Harp* is a beloved figure despite his gender bending. In James Baldwin’s *Another Country* and McCullers’s *Clock*

Without Hands, however, racial and class privilege are more significant than familiarity within a community. In these novels, Eric and Jester Clane are tolerated, despite their sexuality and views on race, because of their privileged position and their families' social prestige, not necessarily as beloved or respected locals like Amelia and Amos.

In this study, ambivalence has been proposed as a common defining feature of the relationship between rural queers and their communities. Winesburg's ambivalence about Wing in Anderson's story is paradigmatic. As the narrator explains, "Winesburg was proud of the hands of Wing Biddlebaum in the same spirit in which it was proud of Banker White's new stone house and Wesley Moyer's bay stallion, Tony Tip, that had won the two-fifteen trot at the fall races in Cleveland" (29). Wing becomes part of the town's story, although his inclusion with a house and stallion puts him in an odd, objectified position. The town's pride does not translate to genuine intimacy or connection. As evident in some texts, feelings of freakishness can make queer individuals feel detached or, to borrow McCullers's term, unjoined from others, as is the case with Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* or Horace Cross in Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*. Similarly, Jessy Shannon and Bayard Frost in Thomas Hal Phillips's *Kangaroo Hollow* suffer with feelings of difference and discontent because of their outsider position in relation to their family and community. Wing feels similarly detached; his fear and shame contrast with the odd reverence of his neighbors.

Personal ambivalence is perhaps most poignantly expressed by Harvey Merrick, the sculptor in Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral." Regarding his dull prairie hometown, Merrick concludes, "It's not a pleasant place to be lying while the world is

moving and doing and bettering, [. . .] but it rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from in the end” (*Troll Garden* 44-45). Many characters express similar feelings, including Clara Butterworth in Anderson’s *Poor White* and Boy Ganchion in William Goyen’s *The House of Breath*. Like Cather’s sculptor, Boy cannot resist the allure of home, but he also contends with the limitations of the small town of Charity. Other writers express similar ambivalence. Dorothy Allison’s identification with and resistance to southern identity has intrigued many contemporary readers. Phillips’s *The Bitterweed Path* notably avoids this ambivalence. Darrell Barclay’s life in rural Mississippi is rewarding, as are his relationships with Malcolm and Roger Pitt. This affirmative novel offers a consistently optimistic view of queer life in the countryside, although Phillips does address the potential problems for queer men in his other novels.

This dissertation has relied on a central premise of the rural turn: when one decenters urban-based perceptions of queer identity and ways of life, one finds a multiplicity of worthwhile experiences that have been too often overlooked. The rural queer experience is shifting and unsettled—even contentious at times. This study has thus avoided romanticizing rural places and the lives of queer people; instead, it has aimed to highlight the dynamic presence of queer people in rural areas and the complicated exchange between them and their communities. Metronormative paradigms and standards will no doubt linger, but this study should suggest the potential of literary studies to provide new insights into the lives of gender and sexual nonconformists in nonurban spaces.

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