NOT MY FATHER'S SON: THE GAY SUBJECT AND WHITE MASCULINE IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION

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FOR THE DEGREE

OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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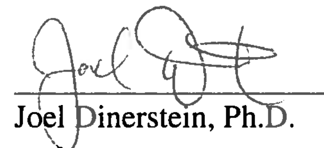

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NOT MY FATHER'S SON: THE GAY SUBJECT AND WHITE MASCULINE IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN LITERATURE

AN ABSRACT

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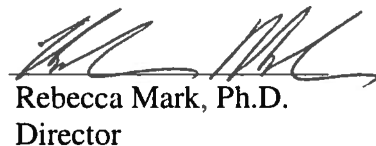
APPROVED: 

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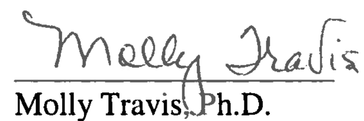

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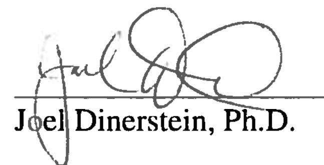

Joel Dinerstein, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

My dissertation, “Not My Father’s Son: The Gay Subject and White Masculine Identity in Contemporary Southern Literature,” explores a new generation of white southern sons in the late twentieth century whose resistance to the southern father’s problematic construction of masculinity and the violence needed to sustain it allows them both the freedom to acknowledge openly their same-sex desires and to embrace life, as opposed to death, in the face of a homosexual identity that lies before them. Rather than excavate queer subjects that may have been coded in earlier mid-twentieth-century texts, my dissertation examines the psychological shifts concerning white masculinity that must occur for these gay subjects to exist openly and without compromise. In addressing the struggle these sons face in revising a problematic vision of the father, I discuss selected fiction and non-fiction from southern, white male authors written in the past thirty years, including two recently published memoirs by gay, southern, white men, Kevin Jennings and Kevin Sessums; a memoir by Lewis Nordan; and selected fiction from both Nordan and Jim Grimsley. I argue that these historical and literary depictions of white, gay, southern men in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century invoke a new paradigm in which the sons’ challenge to the historical forces of supremacy (racism, sexism, and homophobia) inherent in the legacy of the white southern father opens up new spaces for both gay characters and gay men to exist.

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Introduction: Gay Southern Sons and the Prospect of a Livable Future

> Any consideration of the future of southern writing must take note of how powerfully the historic forces in earlier poems and stories and novels have denied characters a future.
>
> -- James Applewhite

Writing about the inability for southern white male characters in mid-twentieth-century literary texts to move beyond the past, James Applewhite, in his 1996 essay "Southern Writing and the Problem of the Father," explains how the southern white male writer's penchant for a mythologized male leader often foreclosed any possibility of a future for the next generation of men. Mid-century poets like Allen Tate mythologized Confederate figures like Robert E. Lee "whose status in extreme honor and defeat puts him almost beyond the bounds of ordinary human interaction" (21). Such a treatment, as Applewhite notes, leaves the next generation of white men at a loss. Not only are they unable to have a real connection with such a distant, idealized father figure, but they are unable to take part in "the old war." Consequently, this generation of men in the mid-century remains static, "unable to act," a condition most powerfully represented by Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (22). Quentin has, according to Applewhite, "inherited a time without an *is* or *will be*. Everything important *was*" (24). Quentin is the most notable example of the white southern man who is unable, or unwilling, to live in a world in

which southern honor, one of the defining characteristics of southern masculinity, has been emptied of meaning.

Quentin Compson's influence looms large for those writing after Faulkner, and he has become an important literary touchstone for this ongoing struggle to keep white southern sons alive as they confront the legacy of the white southern father. More so than their fathers before them, these sons face a South in transition and can no longer depend upon racial and gender subordinates to ensure the white male supremacy enjoyed by their fathers. As Susan Donaldson asserts in "Keeping Quentin Compson Alive: *The Last Gentleman*, *The Second Coming*, and the Problems of Masculinity," Quentin Compson "serves as a highly appropriate symbol *of* tradition—of white southern masculinity under siege—for both Faulkner and Percy" (62). White men like Quentin Compson and Will Barrett in Percy's *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* encounter a South in which their white male identities no longer seem natural or self-sustaining and subsequently find "it increasingly difficult to perceive themselves as protectors, providers, and patriarchs" (Donaldson 65-66). Unable to fulfill this narrow definition of southern white masculine identity needed to sustain white male superiority, Quentin turns to suicide as a way to achieve the vision of white male honor that eluded him in life. As Donaldson argues, "only through self-destruction, apparently, can he resolve his problematic relationships with women and black subordinates and questions about his own masculinity" (69). As a result, this tendency toward self-destruction in light of the overshadowing presence of the traditional masculine identity of the white southern father has emerged as part of the literary legacy inherited by writers like Percy, and it poses a significant challenge to

the continuation of the lives of those sons who cannot or will not conform to such a rigid vision of white masculine identity.

Moving beyond the emphasis placed on heterosexuality in a purely Freudian reading of the oedipal tensions in father/son relationships, more contemporary scholars reframe Quentin's problem and position it in terms of his inability to act upon his queer attachment to his roommate, Shreve, in *Absalom, Absalom*, given Quentin's continued investment in a southern culture that does not offer homosexual men a viable future. Most notably, Michael Bibler, in his book *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*, argues how new threats to white male supremacy after the Civil War prevented the fulfillment of same-sex desire between white men of the same class because white male superiority could no longer be exclusively maintained through the subordination of women and blacks: "In the post-Civil War South, all forms of masculine difference must be suppressed or denied in order to protect white male superiority, thus closing the loophole in the taboo against male homoeroticism and leaving Quentin and Shreve, like their queer forbears Henry and Bon, tragically unable to consummate their desires without also suffering the dire social consequences" (65). The potentiality of gay life for white southern sons after the Civil War diminishes as homophobia becomes necessary to solidify white male superiority, and those queer sons like Quentin face a particularly bleak future, one that offers little space for them to live openly as homosexual men.

For those sons who exhibit same-sex desire, the problem of white masculine identity becomes increasingly dire, for they remain unable to replicate the father's

heterosexual identity and thus disrupt the process of paternal succession necessary to maintain white male supremacy. As a result of the son's non-traditional masculinity, in those texts containing men who embody the old, white, southern father figure, the queer son has had little space to express his same-sex desire within the father's house. This space was too restrictive, too dangerous, or too filled with the pressure to conform to the heterosexual narrative of paternal succession for the son to express his homosexuality openly. As such, resistance to this imperative of heterosexuality manifests inwardly through acts of self-destruction, a move that returns us once again to the suicide of Quentin Compson. Too many men have followed Quentin down this path of self-destruction, and to his suicide, we should add those of Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Allan in *A Street Car Named Desire*, Folner in *The House of Breath*, and more recently Roscoe in *The Optimist's Daughter* and Horace in *A Visitation of Spirits*, though Horace's African American subject position suggests a different association with this historical legacy of the white southern father. Even when the son does not commit suicide, his resistance to this stifling conception of white masculine identity remains limited to other avenues of self-destruction. In Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick slowly destroys *himself* through his alcoholism despite Big Daddy's rather permissive tolerance of homosexuality, and his continued presence in his father's house at the end of the play signals his inability to defy the trap that procreation (and thus heterosexual succession) has become for him.

Such an observation should not be understood as a totalizing claim that seeks to view all manifestations of same-sex desire in southern texts under a singular representation of gay life nor a suggestion that all of these potentially gay men

commit suicide for exactly the same reason. As recent work by scholars interested in exploring same-sex desire in southern literature shows, male homosexuality depicted in mid-twentieth-century southern texts exists in a variety of incarnations and does not always conform to contemporary expectations of gay male life. Gary Richard's *Lovers and Beloveds*, for example, identifies the complex permutations same-sex desire takes in southern fiction published primarily in the 1940s and 50s and subsequently demonstrates that all narratives involving such desire do not end in tragedy or an untimely death for the queer character. Nonetheless, this tragic vision of gay male life remains an all too common one in mid-twentieth-century southern texts and paints an exceedingly limited picture of life in the shadows of the closet, primarily because an open life remained exceedingly rare in a country that still criminalized certain homosexual acts. The almost impossible task of leaving the closet continued to contour depictions of gay life in literature in the 1940 and 1950s in ways that it does not in southern literature written in the past thirty years. Though the closet still emerges as a defining feature influencing contemporary representations of gay male life, the prospect of a life after the closet has come into focus in recent southern literature in ways that it simply could not in literature of the Southern Renaissance.

Forgoing an exploration of representations of same-sex desire in these earlier historical periods that both Bibler and Richards address, my project explores a new generation of white southern sons whose resistance to the southern father's problematic construction of white masculinity and the violence needed to sustain it allows them both the freedom to acknowledge openly their same-sex desires and to

embrace life, as opposed to death, in the face of a homosexual identity that lies before them. These contemporary sons explored here face a southern white father who is cognizant of his diminished status and subsequently tries through anger and violence to assert his power over his family and those around him. An aura of defeat pervades these fathers' lives, and they often feel betrayed, as if they have been cheated out of the privileged lives their race, gender, and sexuality once guaranteed their male ancestors. In addressing the struggle these sons face in revising this vision of the father, my project explores selected fiction and non-fiction from southern, white male authors written within the past thirty years, including two recently published memoirs by gay, southern, white men, Kevin Jennings and Kevin Sessums; a slightly older memoir by Lewis Nordan; and selected fiction from both Nordan and Jim Grimsley. These historical and literary depictions of white gay southern men in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century invoke a new paradigm in which the sons' challenge to the historical forces of supremacy (racism, sexism, homophobia) inherent in the legacy of the white southern father opens up new spaces for both gay characters and gay men to exist.

Rather than excavate queer subjects that may have been coded in earlier mid-twentieth-century texts, my aim is to examine the psychological shifts concerning white masculinity that must occur for these gay subjects to exist openly and without compromise. To change a culture that has denied its gay sons a future one must do more than advocate tolerance of homosexuality. As contemporary theorist Patrick D. Hopkins argues, "to form a genuine challenge to homophobia, therefore, will not result from or result in a merely increased social tolerance, but will be situated in a

fundamental challenge to traditional concepts of masculinity itself" (97). Being aware that masculinity is not a natural or fixed state, as Quentin does, is only the first step in this process. Having the will and the imagination to create new models of masculinity that do not depend upon the same methods of sexual and racial subjugation requires a conscious effort to resist earlier images of the father. Not all attempts to forge new models of masculinity equally address the issues of racial, sexual, and gender discrimination, so while white gay men may be cognizant to fight the homophobia of the father, they may be unwilling to challenge his racism. Likewise, straight men may be willing to address the father's racism but pay little attention to challenging his homophobia. If other minority subjects (gays, African Americans, and women) are to have their own spaces to exist, all men, regardless of sexuality, must begin to question this stifling conception of masculinity and take steps towards forming more open and less restrictive ideas about what it means to be a man.

Of those southern authors writing during the mid-twentieth-century, Truman Capote emerges as an important forerunner committed to this aim of creating textual spaces in which gays, African Americans, and women can exist apart from the oppressive presence of the southern white father. At the core of Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* lies the attempt by Dolly Talbo; Collin Fenwick, her proto-gay nephew; and Catherine Creek, their African American friend, to form an alternative community based upon friendship rather than bio-genetic bonds. The tree-house community, one later joined by Riley Henderson and Judge Cool, presents a queer alternative to the oedipal model of family dynamics and thereby offers its members a

momentary reprieve from the expectations of a heterosexual regime invested in reproduction, succession, and replacement. But even as these characters escape to the natural environment in order to find a place of their own apart from the seemingly obligatory relationships of their biological families, it remains a tenuous space at best, one vulnerable to the "regimes of the normal[1]" various town members impose upon them in their flight from social respectability and responsibility. Ultimately, though, their unity through bonds of friendship becomes threatened by a heterosexual white man, as the marriage proposal Judge Cool extends to Dolly in the tree house reasserts the primacy of heterosexuality and once again affirms its position in the "natural" order of life development.

Skully's Landing in Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* also functions as an alternative space capable of sustaining the lives of these marginal subjects, such as that of the cross-dressing cousin Randolph who helps the proto-gay narrator, Joel Knox, recognize and potentially accept his own homosexuality. Not coincidentally, Capote minimizes the influence of Joel's father by stashing him away in an upstairs room where he lives out his days as a mute quadriplegic. Nonetheless, the freedom of this alternative space of Skully's Landing, as with the tree-house in *The Grass Harp*, comes at the cost of the fulfillment of same-sex desire, or rather the freedom presented in this space cannot fully overcome the societal taboo against homosexual acts. As Richards observes about Capote's first novel, "what thus remains largely absent in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is the physical actualization of same-sex desire

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[1] In Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi, he argues that the term "queer" develops a "critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual." As such, normal signals not simply normative notions of sexuality but a broad field of behaviors, relations, and identities that constitute normalcy in our society.

between men" (38). Both the room to which the young Joel Knox casts his gaze in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* to watch his cross-dressing cousin beckoning to him and the tree house to which the young Collin Fenwick flees in *The Grass Harp* offer limited possibilities for the physical expressions of their same-sex desires.

Ultimately, Capote's young boys stay boys and thus do not develop into an adult sexuality complete with the consummation of their sexual desires. Though Capote signals the end of Joel Knox's boyhood in *Other Voices, Other Room* by implying that he will accept the model of homosexuality offered to him by his cousin Randolph, this acceptance closes the novel, thereby saving Capote from having to depict Joel's adult life as a homosexual. Collin and Joel remain in that necessarily ambiguous space of the desexualized child—necessary because of the level of obscurity needed in order to publish in a culture still unprepared for forthright depictions of homosexuality, not to mention adolescent homosexuality. The same can be said for the proto-gay male children in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding.* While the effeminate Dill from Harper's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and equally queer John Henry from *The Member of the Wedding* do not seem on track to repeat the masculine identity of the traditional southern white father, neither reaches sexual maturity, and thus they do not confirm the gay identities their non-normative expressions of masculinity may imply.

Such a characterization should not be taken as an aspersion to the narrative decisions of these authors but as an acknowledgment of the limited narrative possibilities at the disposal of these authors given the public's intolerance of more graphic depictions of same-sex desire. One only needs to read Gary Richard's review

of the homophobic responses to the 1948 publication of Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* to understand how hostile the public actually was to Capote's depiction of homosexuality in the novel. Only in more recent texts whose authors do not labor under the same restraints of the public's homophobia are these writers free to imagine gay male life in ways that fundamentally reform the masculine identity of the southern white father. The contemporary authors examined here begin to imagine gay life as significantly different than that of the father in three primary ways: 1) by imagining alternative spaces temporarily free not simply from the direct reach of the southern white father but the expectation of succession that his presence alone suggests 2) by bringing the proto-gay child into a state of maturity so he can actually acknowledge his same-sex desires, and 3) by keeping the son alive so he at least has the opportunity to embrace gay life should he so desire it.

The authors represented here usher in a new era in which the critic can speak of the development of a specifically gay identity rather than point to instances of same-sex intimacy or same-sex desire that may or may not signal a gay identity for the characters involved. Such an observation is not to suggest that in these contemporary texts confusion over one's sexual identity does not still exist or that sexualities defying the binary logic of heterosexual and homosexual cannot occur. Rather, it suggests that many of these contemporary texts examined here do not depend upon the obfuscation, indirection, and innuendo that characterized so many of the depictions of homosexuality in these earlier texts, which resulted in a critical preference for the label of queer given the hesitation on the part of critics to view these characters as identifiably gay. With the exception of chapter one in which I

discuss Nordan's treatment of queer heterosexuality, the texts examined here chart the development of an identifiably gay identity formed in spite of the often tyrannical presence of the southern white father.

In depicting the son's development of a specifically gay identity, contemporary authors are beginning to change the way sons express their resistance to the legacy of the white southern father. In these recent texts, the desire to overthrow the father's influence often manifests itself in two primary motifs: the desire to kill the father and the desire for escape when confrontation does not seem possible. Glenn Gregg, in Lewis Nordan's novel *Wolf Whistle*, attempts to burn alive his abusive, alcoholic father. Sugar Mecklin, another of Nordan's characters, attempts to shoot his emotionally distant, alcoholic father (a scene adapted from Nordan's real life in which he attempts to shoot his step-father). In Jim Grimsley's first novel, *Winterbirds*, the closeted gay son tries to evade the drunken tirades of his alcoholic father by escaping to the river and creating an imaginary, surrogate male figure who is capable of giving and receiving love. In another of Grimsley's novels, *Dream Boy,* the teenage boys who fall in love intuitively recognize that their survival rests on their ability to leave the oppression of their fathers' houses. In the cases of memoirists Kevin Sessums and Kevin Jennings, they must flee not simply their fathers' houses but the entire South itself, which they still see as operating under an oppressive patriarchal regime that does not allow openly gay men to exist.

In addition to challenging this literary tradition of the son's self-destruction when confronted with the legacy of the white southern father, these contemporary authors have also had to revise an equally damaging psychoanalytic framework for

interpreting the son's homosexuality that arose from a Freudian model of adolescent development. The problem with the father, as Applewhite frames it, lies not only in a problematic literary heritage but also in a faulty theoretical approach for interpreting the lives of gay sons specifically regarding their attitude about their fathers, one that became pathologized by many psychoanalysts in the mid-twentieth century. Since many of the chapters included here position rejection of the father's masculine identity as a necessary factor for the healthy development of the son's homosexual identity, it is important to understand how an earlier Freudian model characterized this rejection of the father as a pathological component of the male child's homosexuality.

For decades before 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual of mental disorders, psychoanalysts attributed male homosexuality to problems between the child and the parental unit, most commonly an aloof, emotionally unavailable, or absent father and an unusually doting and suffocating mother. Convinced of the pathology of homosexuality, psychanalysts scrutinized the father-son and mother-son relationships for the genesis of the son's homosexuality. In the early sixties, in what is now known as the "weak father" theory of male homosexuality, psychoanalyst Irving Bieber argued that male homosexuality originated from a distant and passive father (Bieber et al., *Homosexuality*). Assured that homosexuality was indeed an illness, psychoanalysts, such as Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides, fought diligently against the removal of homosexuality from the diagnostic manual. Arguing in a 1963 *New York Times* article, Bieber states that "he does not approve the attempt by organized homosexuals

to promote the idea that they represent just another minority, since their minority status is based on illness" (qtd. in Isay 4). While Bieber and Socarides' belief that homosexuality is an acquired, problematic condition and subsequently in need of treatment is no longer the accepted paradigm explaining the etiology of homosexuality, their "weak father" hypothesis still resonates today among a small number of psychologists and psychoanalysts, particularly among those who believe that male homosexuality is a social process dependent upon environmental and familial influences.

Writing in 1991, psychologist Joseph Nicolosi concluded that male homosexuality was an illness rooted in the problematic relationship between the father and "gay" son. Nicolosi argues that "the primary cause of homosexuality is not the absence of a father figure, but the boy's defensive detachment against male rejection" (34). In one swift move, Nicolosi further shifts the locus of "pathology" onto the homosexual child, for in his estimation, no matter what role model the father provides, the real "problem" lies with the child's inability to develop a "normal" relationship with the father and/or other paternal figures. This lack of an intimate relationship from infancy onward between the father and son, Nicolosi further explains, leads to a lack of connection between the son and male peers later in life. Consequently, the male homosexual "is still seeking that initiation into manhood through other males" (42). Nicolosi's reading of gay men's rejection of the father as model provides an equally problematic framework for interpreting the son's actions. Believing that the heterosexual father presents the best role model for the gay son, Nicolosi characterizes this rejection as intensely problematic: "Although heterosexual

men may describe their fathers unfavorably, homosexual men are stronger in their *rejection of the father as a model*. . . . With homosexual clients, I have often observed a grudge, an axe to grind" (emphasis added 45). Completely ignoring the father's homophobia as a motivating factor for the gay son's rejection, Nicolosi never considers the idea that the models these fathers provide could be completely inadequate for their gay sons' healthy development. Indeed, the very notion of healthy development for a gay son is incompatible with his beliefs about male homosexuality. Far from being a contributing factor to the son's pathology, I argue that this rejection of the heterosexual father as model (and indeed all that society constructs him to be) often exists as an impulse of survival, a necessary step in the developmental progression of the gay male, as the fiction and memoirs of gay writers demonstrates. For gay authors Jim Grimsley, Kevin Sessums, and Kevin Jennings, this rejection of the father is not simply one about the resistance of heterosexuality, but about the rejection of a specific masculinity, one in which violence and abuse becomes instrumental in the construction of male dominance.

Within the field of psychiatry clinicians were initially slow to address how the specific personality traits and masculinity of the father may affect the homosexual son's rejection of him as a heterosexual model. Psychiatric attitudes about this idea of paternal rejection by the homosexual son have been an evolution in process. Inherent in the rejection of the heterosexual father is the rejection of heterosexuality as the idealized outcome of adolescent male development, a position which many psychoanalysts were initially unwilling to accept. Only until psychoanalysts abandoned the model of homosexuality as "pathology" could other interpretations of

this rejection emerge. Importantly, not until the 1970s did psychoanalysts actually posit that a healthy developmental progression of the gay adolescent actually exists, an attitude that owes much to the pioneering work of Richard Isay. Isay offers a more nuanced and complex picture of the interaction between the father and gay son, one that allows him to arrive at different conclusions about the son's rejection of the heterosexual paternal model. Questioning the cause and effect of these psychological theories that posited homosexuality as the effect of a distant father, Isay reversed years of accepted thought by arguing that in many cases the father often becomes distant when he initially notices the son's difference from other heterosexual boys or when he becomes uncomfortable with the son's close attachment to him. In these cases, the father's rejection of the son becomes the initial break in the relationship, one that often results in feelings of self-loathing and inferiority in the gay son.

In other cases, the gay son initiates this rejection, but in true psychoanalytic fashion, Isay theorizes that the gay son's rejection of the father stems from the son's repression of sexual attraction to the father. Just as heterosexual sons repress erotic feelings towards the mother, gay sons, according to Isay, exhibit similar instances of repression regarding the father. As Isay explains about these cases, the tendency of the homosexual son to view the father "as detached, absent, or hostile stems from the need to distort the memory of the early erotic attachment to his father" (34). Drawing upon one of his therapeutic sessions with a gay client, Isay contends that allowing the son to acknowledge the repression of these erotic feelings toward the father, which has been accomplished by the son reconceptualizing the father as cold and distant, helps the son to develop a more accurate perception of the father. The patient is then

able "to recall and to let himself experience more of the father's warmth, acceptance, and love" (38). This shift in perception of the father facilitates the patient's "successful attempt to find a lover" (38). In both cases, however, Isay still treats "rejection" as a psychological hurdle, one that must be worked through for the gay son to enjoy a sense of well-being and happiness.

Only in his 2009 update, *Becoming Gay*, of his groundbreaking work, *Being Homosexual*, does Isay begin to characterize the important function of gay role models in the developmental progression of the gay son. As Isay explains:

> there are still too few gay athletes, politicians, actors, or celebrated teachers, lawyers, and doctors who come out publicly, believing they have too much to lose. Unfortunately, a homosexual boy in his early adolescence is thereby deprived of those models who might help him to acknowledge his homosexuality and enable him to say to himself, 'I'm gay like you and want to be like you when I'm older.' As a result of all these factors, most homosexual adolescents hope that their desire for those of the same sex is simply a transient difficulty in a generally troubled period in their lives, a way station to becoming heterosexual. (64)

A key distinction should be made here between the rejection of the father as a unique individual with specific personality and character traits and the rejection of the father as a model for heterosexuality. As Isay implies, the gay son must be able to reject the heterosexuality of the father as the desired outcome of sexual development in order to facilitate the healthy progression of his homosexual identity. That some sons continue to invest importance and credence in this model of the father often leads to a path of repression and denial. The heterosexual father remains inadequate, unable to model a homosexual identity, thus leaving the son to turn to other (homosexual) men for a sense of validation.

The purpose of this overview and my project as a whole is not to engage further the issue of the etiology of homosexuality but to demonstrate how the field of psychoanalysis initially created a damaging theoretical framework for interpreting the narratives of gay men's lives, particularly with regard to the father-son relationship. Until the past forty years, psychoanalysts have crafted a theory of pathology surrounding gay men based upon what in many cases was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nicolosi argues, "I do not believe that the gay lifestyle can ever be healthy" (13); consequently, he turns to the troubled father-son relationship as proof of the inherent pathology of male homosexuality. Such assessments, based largely upon the testimonies of those gay men seeking reparative treatment, attempt to universalize a narrative of male homosexuality that is now being questioned by more gay affirmative therapists such as Isay.

Following Isay's lead, a new interpretive model of the father and gay son relationship has emerged, one that offers a more compassionate understanding of the unique factors involved in adolescent gay male development. In short, the notion of the ideal model of the father and his masculine identity must be revised in order to conceive of a better, more constructive relationship between the father and gay son. To that end, the texts examined here attempt to narrate the story of the gay son and father differently. Narrating gay development from a gay perspective, the gay writers studied here, Grimsley, Sessums, and Jennings, provide a crucial counter-narrative to the one constructed by psychoanalysts intent on proving the pathology of homosexuality. Though Lewis Nordan is not gay, his short fiction exemplifies how this shift from an earlier Freudian model of adolescent male development to a queer

alternative, the model of the queer heterosexual, allows the son a greater range of possibilities regarding the development of a masculine identity that does not necessarily end in a repetition of the father's heterosexual masculinity. Emerging from the critical work of those straight- identified theorists participating in the contemporary field of queer theory, the queer heterosexual model suggests a destabilization of the binary categories of sexuality (hetero/homo) and gender (male/female) from the subject position of one who does not participate in same-sex acts.

Thus, my first chapter examines two distinct narrative trajectories in Nordan's short fiction that present contrasting visions of the relationship between Gilbert Mecklen and his son, Sugar, characters Nordan returns to and alters over the course of his writing career. In Nordan's own words, these multiple incarnations of a character are inconsistent and do not necessarily create a cumulative portrait of either the father or the son. Rather, they emerge as alternative possibilities of the father and son that in certain cases allow for the mutual acceptance of both parties. Those stories in which the son can acknowledge his same-sex desires, rather than repress them as required in the Freudian model, offer the greatest potential for the son's healthy identification with the father. The son's embrace of the queer heterosexual model in "The All-Girl Football Team" and to a lesser extent "Porpoises and Romance" offers a critique of the more problematic aspects of the father's masculine identity, his alcoholism and emotional unavailability, which inhibit the son's identification with his father in both "Sugar, The Eunuchs, and Big GB" and "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog."

Continuing with my analysis of Nordan's fiction, chapter two explores representations of gay subjects in two of Nordan's novels, *Wolf Whistle* and *The Sharpshooter Blues*, both of which focus on the communal response to two tragic, albeit very different, acts of violence – the lynching of Bobo (a historical recreation of Emmett Till) in *Wolf Whistle* and the point blank shooting of two armed robbers in *The Sharpshooter Blues* along with the subsequent suicide of the novel's protagonist, Hydro Raney. Invoking a historical period in which white men resort to violence as a way to counter threats to their masculine identities (and thus their supremacy), *Wolf Whistle* depicts the devastating consequences minority figures face when violence becomes an indispensable component of white masculinity. In the gaze of the violent white southern father, African American and gay subjects become silenced and subsequently marginalized, useful only in their ability to solidify the white heterosexual identities of their attackers. Only when Nordan departs from this gaze of the violent white southern father does the gay subject truly come into focus in *The Sharpshooter Blues.* Both novels evoke Nordan's belief in transformation, and this chapter charts how white men begin to transform themselves and their masculine identities in response to this violence. A psychological shift occurs in these men as they go from viewing violence as a means of continually reasserting their masculine identities to viewing violence as alienating and destructive, to both its perpetrators and its victims.

In the third chapter, I turn to the fiction of Jim Grimsley and to a more concentrated consideration of his depiction of the white southern father and gay son relationship and the dangers it poses to the formation of these sons' homosexual

identities. In Grimsley's novels *Winterbirds* (1984), *Dream Boy* (1995), and *Boulevard* (2002), he constructs a model for the gay *Bildungsroman* and subsequently offers another alternative to the Freudian model of adolescent male development. Charting the development of a southern white gay identity often formulated amid the oppression of a tyrannical father figure, these novels position the rejection of the father's heterosexual identity as a vital factor in the survival of the gay son. This rejection of the father most often manifests in the motif of escape from the father's house. The father's house in *Winterbirds*, Grimsley's first novel, is literally too dangerous and too violent for the son to express his burgeoning sexuality, which remains coded in the text, and the son's life becomes one of sheer survival. In *Dream Boy*, the gay son must not only escape the father's house, which becomes the sight of incestuous sexual abuse, but also a legacy of traumatic violence associated with the South's patriarchal plantation tradition. By locating the site of the nearly lethal gay bashing in an old, abandoned plantation house, Grimsley demonstrates how the masculine ideologies of the past still reverberate in the present and pose a real threat to contemporary gay subjects. Grimsley's next novel, *Boulevard,* challenges the popular perception of the urban space as a place of freedom and safety for homosexual men and subsequently complicates any purely utopian vision of escape as a means of achieving sexual liberation.

In an effort to link the lives of these fictional gay characters to the real lives of gay men in the South, I examine in my fourth and final chapter three recently published memoirs dealing with father and son relationships and the son's formation of a non- traditional form of masculinity. Kevin Jennings' *Mama's Boy, Preacher's*

Son, Kevin Sessums' *Mississippi Sissy*, and Lewis Nordan's *Boy With a Loaded Gun* serve as contemporary manifestations of what critic Fred Hobson terms the white southern racial conversion narrative "in which the authors, all products of and willing participants in a harsh, segregated society, confess racial wrongdoings and are 'converted,' in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment" (2). In all three memoirs, these white authors confront a culture of racial bigotry that has informed the spaces from which their own masculine identities have emerged. As such, these memoirists specifically address the racial implications of the white southern father's masculine identity and demonstrate how in an attempt to reform this paternal model they must confront and ultimately separate themselves from a legacy of white supremacy. As unconventionally masculine men in a culture that has little wish to embrace them, all of these authors to varying degrees identify with African Americans and the alienation they experience, yet their memoirs show that such an early identification does not always lead to an ongoing commitment to addressing racial inequality.

Though both Jennings' and Sessums' racial conversion narratives sharply critique the destructive Christianity of the fathers as their precursor Lillian Smith does in *The Killers of the Dream*, they are less keen on positioning a more authentic form of Christianity as a solution to the problem given the Christian church's continued opposition to homosexuality. Only Jennings manages to reconcile with Christianity, but he can only do so by abandoning the father's religious vision in favor of a more liberal, humanitarian, and ultimately redemptive one. Jennings' and Sessums' memoirs present the convergence of this racial conversion narrative with the coming-

out narrative specific to gay and lesbian literature and thus address the homophobia of the father as another significant barrier that must be overcome in the construction of a their own masculine identities. Depicting how these gay white men struggle to identify with fathers whose masculine identities seem implausible models given the sons' homosexuality, these memoirs record how such an early exposure to the public's acceptance of a traditional heterosexual masculinity causes them to internalize a self-destructive homophobia that they must later dispel as adults in order to arrive at a healthy homosexual identity. Though Nordan is not gay, his memoir records the lasting damage such a rigid definition of masculinity levies on one whose imagination defies the limitations his southern community places on masculine behavior. Deeply affected by the nearby lynching of Emmett Till, the early death of his natural father, and his mother's second marriage to an emotionally unavailable alcoholic, Nordan emerges as a different sort of white man, one who is highly aware of the dangers of white violence and one who seems sensitive to the need for fathers to be open, compassionate, and communicative, even if he does not always succeed in enacting these qualities in his own life.

For these men the South is a liability, a confining space that inhibits them from expressing their full selves, but it is not one completely bereft of spaces of nurturance and acceptance and supportive role models. Kevin Sessums takes refuge in the Jackson, Mississippi, house of Frank Hains, a local, gay, arts columnist, whose regular parties draw a host of artistically minded and queer friendly thinkers like Eudora Welty. Such exposure proves vital in Kevin's life, and Frank becomes a gay mentor who provides him with an alternative model of southern masculinity. For

Kevin Jennings, his mother's nascent feminism and subsequent political activism aimed at challenging gender discrimination in the workforce provides the foundation for the queer activism he participates in as an adult. For Nordan, the predominantly black space of Beale Street in Memphis gives him a glimpse of an alternative creative environment in which artistically minded men could exist in ways that defy the imaginatively deadening space of Itta Bena, Mississippi, which he associates with his step-father and his circle of male friends. Yet, even as the South provides isolated spaces of acceptance for these men, they continue to see it on a whole as antithetical to their overall health, a factor that causes all of them to leave it for the more cosmopolitan urban centers of the North. Even as these white men end up "tell[ing] about the South," as Quentin does, from the northern spaces to which they have landed, they, unlike Quentin, remain alive precisely because they have finally stopped investing in and defining themselves by a southern white masculine identity that offered no future in which men like them could exist.

Chapter 1

Queering Heterosexuality: Rewriting Oedipal Structures in Lewis Nordan's Fiction

One may not expect to hear Lewis Nordan's name among a list of authors who are at the cutting edge of a new terrain for the representation of queer desire in contemporary Southern fiction. None of Nordan's narratives features an openly gay protagonist, and queer characters comprise a relatively small place in his canon of literature. However, some of Nordan's most provocative fiction uses same-sex desire as a way to expose problems with a rigidly conceived masculine identity, one that presents heterosexuality as always being the healthiest and most desirable resolution to a young boy's sexual development. Focused on the dynamics of father and son relationships, much of Nordan's fiction interrogates the problems sons have with forging a sustainable masculine identity in the shadows of fathers who function as less than desirable role models. While this process is undoubtedly a complicated one for heterosexual sons, Nordan's fiction involving sons who demonstrate interest in same-sex attraction gives us a glimpse of the nearly impossible process they face in developing alternatives to a heterosexual identity in a South not usually known for its positive portrayal of gay male role models.

Whether the son might eventually identify as gay or straight, Nordan's fiction remains adamant in its insistence that the father's masculinity should not be a model for emulation unless it can be significantly altered, a lesson Nordan learned through his own

relationship with his step-father and his exposure to a white, patriarchal, supremacist southern culture that informed his life as a child in a still segregated, World War II-era Mississippi. As the son of a dead father and step-son to an emotionally unavailable alcoholic, Nordan frequently translates these real life relationships into the pages of his short story collections: *Welcome to the Arrow Catcher Fair*, *The All-Girl Football Team,* and his quasi novel, *Music of the Swamp*, an accumulation of thematically interrelated short stories. In these texts, Nordan examines the delicate balance between the son's desire to love the father but his realization that this love should not end in a repetition of the father's masculine identity or in his investment in the systemic forces of oppression (racism, sexism, and homophobia) that defined a generation of southern fathers before him. Nordan is acutely aware of the damage the father's alcoholism and emotional inaccessibility have levied on those who have loved him the most. Consequently, the impulse to redefine the father's masculinity becomes an essential impetus to the crafting of many of Nordan's narratives. This impulse manifests itself most prominently in the relationship between Sugar Mecklin and his step-father, Gilbert, who appear in several of Nordan's stories. Like the real life Nordan, whose family sometimes called him Sugar, Sugar Mecklin struggles to connect with his step-father, Gilbert, who, like Nordan's own step-father, was a house-painter and alcoholic.

By using this father/son relationship as a central theme of his fiction, Nordan joins a long line of white Southern male writers who have narrated the son's struggle to define himself against a less-than-ideal paternal model. Proposing a literary history of just such a struggle between fathers and sons, James Applewhite, in his 1996 essay "Southern Writing and the Problem of the Father," offers advice to contemporary southern authors

writing in the 1990s about the need for the South to move beyond myth and nostalgia in an effort to develop a more "clear eyed" vision of its fathers: the South "needs to disavow through understanding the hollow lost leaders, those larger-than-life, hieratic fathers who once led it to a crushing defeat disguised as moral victory" (31). Applewhite begins his critical analysis with the Fugitive poets, namely Allen Tate and Donald Davidson, who were enamored with what they saw as idyllic models of Southern manhood, like Robert E. Lee. The boys depicted in Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains," who idealize Lee as a mythic father-figure, suffer under a paternal lineage from which they feel exceedingly alienated. Vaulting Lee into iconic status and thereby taking him out of the realm of "human interaction" creates a problematic oedipal rivalry in which the father figure becomes "too distant to allow any easy and healthy identification" (Applewhite 21-22).

Highlighting the cyclical nature of this process, Applewhite further contends that the post-Civil War southern white male as depicted in mid-twentieth century southern fiction has not presented a healthier image of the father, which has left yet another generation of sons at a loss. As Applewhite explains, this representation of the white male, typified in Peter Taylor's *Summons to Memphis*, once again foreclosed the possibility of a successful relationship developing between fathers and sons:

> the post-Civil War white male, in a position of authority, seemed to feel an almost crushing responsibility. He felt himself partly impotent, hemmed round by partial knowledge and by known and potential foes. He felt he had to protect his land, his family, his community against forces of moral and financial chaos. He became a tyrant, a dispenser of Truth and Order as he saw it. The more aristocratic version of this figure is consummately portrayed by George Carver, the narrator's all-powerful father, in Peter Taylor's *Summons to Memphis*. This powerful male treated women as children, children as dumb animals, and blacks as separate species. His racism and sexism were automatic, part of a patriarchal stance of responsibility that sought to uphold an intuitive 'righteousness,' in the

> image of the Old Testament Father, against a social and even natural order that threatened to return to precreation chaos. (29)

As Applewhite's characterization of the father in Taylor's novel makes clear, the danger in this father figure lies not only with sons who desire a paternal connection, but also with all those who fall under the father's influence. That these automatic expressions of racism and sexism could be components of not simply a patriarchal stance but specifically a heterosexual one escapes Applewhite's notice. Throughout his essay, Applewhite never directly discusses the sexual dynamics of the oedipal rivalry depicted in southern fiction and thus does not address alternative resolutions to the son's sexual development, an omission which implicitly positions heterosexuality as the preferred outcome.

Although Applewhite concludes his essay with a call for "the male South . . . to face its collective Oedipal complex," he appears unwilling to question the father's heterosexuality as the only viable model of sexual identity for the son (31). The critical interrogation of heterosexuality emerges as an issue in need of further consideration. As Lewis Nordan's fiction demonstrates, part of facing the South's oedipal complex depends upon an ability to imagine alternative resolutions to the son's development that do not end in a repetition of the father's heterosexual identity. Though clearly responding to Applewhite's call, Nordan pushes beyond its original scope by questioning the assumption of heterosexuality on which the oedipal rivalry is based. Only with a careful exploration of figures like his father and the larger society of southern white men to which he belongs can Nordan attempt to isolate those characteristics that he sees as detrimental to the development of a healthy masculine identity free from the sexism,

racism, and homophobia that defined the men in his own step-father's circle of friends. Having grown up in the small, Mississippi Delta town of Itta Bena, only miles away from Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till was lynched in 1954, Nordan is carefully attuned to the danger posed by violent white men. He is fully cognizant of not repeating the problems of the past, and his fiction bears witness to his own belief in telling the story of white men differently.

Nordan's stories, particularly those involving the Gilbert/Sugar relationship, give voice to a complex relationship between white southern fathers and sons. Far from the idealized fathers Applewhite discusses in the poetry of Davidson and Tate, the fathers in much of Nordan's fiction seem broken, mangled, and defeated, mere shells of the once mythologized white male leaders revered in the poetry of decades past. Increasingly, the problem of the father in contemporary southern fiction, as exemplified in Nordan's work, is not with fathers who seem "overly idealized" but with fathers who appear all too human. They exist as only remnants of the post-Civil War white male who felt overwhelmed by the pressure to protect "his land, his family, [and] his community from forces of moral and financial chaos" (Applewhite 29). Increasingly, as in Nordan's fiction, the fathers become the cause of familial chaos (as perhaps they always were), but while these men may be tragically flawed, Nordan never dismisses them. Instead, he insists on examining the multiple facets of their identities, intent on learning what qualities must be discarded for the past not to be repeated. To that end, much of Nordan's fiction seems compelled by a desire to understand the father on both a personal and political level, as a man and as a mythical icon in the southern imagination.

While critics such as Thomas Ærvold Bjerre and Bridgette Craft note the oedipal quality of Nordan's writing and frame his work within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, they are reluctant to address the implications of its queer contours,[1] yet only through such an exploration can we understand the full extent of Nordan's engagement with masculine identities in his work. Most provocative are the places in Nordan's fiction that radically disrupt, if only momentarily, the expectation that the son will follow in the father's heterosexual identity. By speaking of the son's same-sex desire, Nordan's fiction broadens the landscape of permissible masculine identities and questions a system of compulsory heterosexuality that has often limited the possibility of depicting openly queer characters in earlier southern fiction. The most compelling of these alternative stories feature Sugar's budding awareness of same-sex attraction and present queerness as a productive disruption of the heterosexual identification process—thus striking an alternative version of Freud's model of the oedipal struggle, in which same-sex attraction functions as merely something that must be overcome in the formation of a stable heterosexual subjectivity.[2] My use of the term "queer" to describe Nordan's work draws

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[1] See Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, "Shocked into Maturity: Sex and Death as Initiation in the Fiction of Lewis Nordan," *Mississippi Quarterly* 60.4 (2007): 735-747; Brigette Wilds Craft, "Developing on the Margins: A Regional Critique of the *Bildungsroman.*" *Southern Quarterly* 35.4 (1997): 39-49. While Bjerre calls attention to moments of "gender confusion" in Nordan's work in which male children momentarily reject masculinity in favor of the feminine, he falls short of connecting this confusion with anything queer and does not link it to moments of same-sex desire. Rather than read these moments as merely ones of confusion, I read them as productive disrupters that open up positive spaces for greater self-understanding.

[2] See Sigmund Freud, "A Letter From Freud," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 107 (April 1951): 786. In Freud's now famous letter to an American mother seeking treatment for her homosexual son, he appears reluctant to view adult homosexuality as an illness in need of psychological treatment. Nonetheless, he characterizes homosexuality as a case of "arrested development," which implicitly positions heterosexuality as the only fully realized resolution to this process.

heavily upon the definitional framework Annamarie Jagose provides in her 1996 introductory text, *Queer Theory*, in which she argues that "queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire" (3). Rather than detailing the formation of an alternative gay identity, Nordan's stories queer heterosexuality by dramatizing the complications that arise when Sugar's object of sexual desire does not conform to the model of normative, heterosexual development. Nordan's representations of same-sex desire implicitly affirm the possibilities for queer, that is, non-heterosexual identities within contemporary southern culture precisely because his stories dramatize the incoherencies within heterosexuality itself.

This chapter focuses on these moments of what I call productive disruption to show how Nordan's evocation of same-sex desire opens up new possibilities of identity formation, particularly for Sugar, and how the father figure becomes a constructive contributor to the son's process of development. The stories examined here fall into two primary categories: those stories that depict the maturation process of the ostensibly heterosexual Sugar as he struggles to identify with the traditional masculinity of his father and those stories that depict a queer version of Sugar as he explores alternatives to the vision of heterosexual masculinity expressed in the former stories. While the first two stories "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B." and "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game" offer a critique of the father's damaging masculine identity, they do little in the way of providing the son with alternatives to the typically Freudian pattern of heterosexual development. As a counterpoint to the more conventional models of heterosexual development he proposes in these stories, Nordan queers the father-son relationship in

"Porpoises and Romance" and "The All-Girl Football Team." Although Nordan tentatively raises the prospect of same-sex desire in "Porpoises and Romance," a story/chapter contained in his 1991 publication of *Music of the Swamp*, his earlier 1986 publication of "The All-Girl Football Team," in a collection of the same name, represents his most sustained and direct exploration of how a certain embrace of the potential for queerness, rather than the suppression or repression of it, can function in the construction of a healthy, masculine identity and expose the limitations that restrictive and oppressive forms of heterosexuality can place on masculinity. In so doing, he destabilizes the normative heterosexual narrative and offers a glimpse at an alternative resolution to the oedipal tensions at play not only in his own work but also in father-son relationships in much of the fiction written by southern men of the generation before Nordan.

To understand how these queer moments of productive disruption in Nordan's fiction serve as a counterpoint to the first group of stories, it is first necessary to understand the version of masculinity these more typically Freudian stories present. As Bjerre already points out, Nordan's stories "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B." and "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game" follow the normative trajectory of the oedipal complex in which the young son, seeing his father as a rival for the mother's affection, desires to kill the father. In "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B.," the most oedipal of all of Nordan's stories, the eleven-year-old Sugar attempts to shoot Gilbert, his father, while Gilbert is practicing "shooting fours," a ritual in which he systematically lines up and drinks four shots of Early Times while periodically checking his reflection in the mirror. Narcissistically absorbed with his own image and thus his status as a white man, the father fails to *see* his son and does not provide Sugar with the attention he desires.

Sugar's motivation for shooting at his father appears not to be some oedipal attachment to the mother but his repressed anger over his father's inability to function as a loving, masculine role model. During these episodes of drinking, his father obsesses over a sword swallowing woman whom he loved years ago, and his mother appears consumed with the task of trying to receive love from a man who is entirely unable to express it. Both the vision of himself in the mirror and the fantasy of the sword swallowing woman avert Gilbert's gaze away from those in his immediate family and onto himself, a narcissism that compels his wife to deliver an ego-boosting speech to convince him "that he was an artist, that he was special and perfect and magic, that his pain was special."[3] To the eleven-year-old Sugar who desires nothing but the simplicity of a father and mother's devotion to their only son, the scene is a powerful reminder of his own marginality.

Consequently, in the moment of the shooting, Sugar feels loneliness rather than anger, for he plays no part in the unfulfilled dreams his father rehearses during his drinking episodes. After shooting twice and missing, Sugar remarks, "I looked at my mama and believed that she was all women in the world, beauty and grief, and at the same time nobody at all, as shadowless and invisible as myself beside the white bare limbs of the fig trees. Then the lights were out and I was alone in my invisibility" (*AG* 33). Like the mother's own invisibility in the presence of the fantasy of the sword swallowing woman, Sugar remains invisible to a father too intent on satisfying his own

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[3] Lewis Nordan, "Sugar, The Eunuchs, and Big G.B." *The All-Girl Football Team.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 32, hereafter cited by page number in the text with the abbreviation *AG*.

desires. Using the contrast of shadow and light, black and white, Nordan also racially codes this invisibility, imbuing darkness, or more precisely its ability to differentiate itself from whiteness, with the positive connotation of selfhood, one that becomes consumed by the father's narcissistic celebration of his own whiteness. Caring only for his own (white) reflection in the mirror and the whiskey in his glass, Sugar's father remains emotionally unavailable to both his son and wife. The father's inability to reciprocate declarations of love becomes a common motif in many of Nordan's stories, which chart the consequences of this failure with regards to both Sugar and his mother. For Sugar, his father's unavailability leaves a void in his life, and when he returns to bed at a friend's house after shooting at his father, his body and heart cries out "*I want I want I want I want*" (*AG* 33). Sugar's primal and unspecified expression of desire echoes throughout the story as he tries desperately to forge some kind of lasting connection with his father.

In the absence of such a connection, Sugar, not surprisingly, turns to a friend's father to fill the void. In the weeks before the shooting, Sugar begins to spend more time at the house of one of his friends, whose father, Big G.B., becomes a surrogate father who is capable of giving Sugar the kind of attention and masculine instruction he does not receive at home. Big G.B. introduces Sugar to the masculine world of guns, treating him, for the first time, like a traditional man. As Big G.B. tells Sugar, "'I wouldn't show you men these here firearms if I didn't know I could trust you'" (*AG* 29). This level of trust builds an intimacy with Sugar that he finds missing from his own relationship with his father, and the room in which G.B. houses his guns becomes the antithesis of the room where his mother pleads with his father to let her love him. In Big G.B.'s house,

"the room seemed orderly and under control and full of love" unlike the room Sugar witnesses as he stands alone and invisible outside his own house (*AG* 30).

The impetus for this scene with Sugar standing outside of his father's house intent on shooting him derives from Nordan's own life, which he chronicles in his 2002 memoir, *Boy With a Loaded Gun*. In it, Nordan states rather bluntly, "eventually, I tried to kill my father, of course" (69). The "of course" speaks to Nordan's own internal conflict over the motive for his action, for while it appears to suggest a natural tendency for a son's desire to kill his father, it also speaks to the resentment Nordan feels toward a step-father whose alcoholism makes him a poor substitute for the biological father Nordan idealizes. While the logistics of this episode in the memoir coincide with the fictional scene Nordan re-creates, the anger Sugar exhibits toward the father in the short story seems to be significantly tempered in his memoir, which appeared fourteen years after the 1986 publication of "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B." in *The Southern Review*. The older Nordan, having the advantage of time to form a more distanced position regarding his father, approaches him with much more understanding and compassion than the young Sugar Mecklin is capable of doing in the short story.

Perhaps, though, the greatest difference between the story and Nordan's retelling of it in his memoir lies with how he makes sense of this patricidal attempt. In the memoir, Nordan, who dismisses any Freudian implications, offers only a "poetic" explanation that rests squarely on the benefit of hindsight:

> I'll never believe mere anger and Freud led me to that desperate night when I might have killed the man I loved most in the world. I'll not believe that mere luck or mere God saved me from the consequences of my attempt. Something in me had caused that pistol not to fire. . . . Some instinct deeper than animal and specific to one person on this earth, this

> Buddy Nordan whose blockhead image was sitting inscrutable in a chair in their shared room, reached from my heart and into the chamber where pin and primer seemed to meet and stopped the ignition of the nitrol and saved my ass from a million billion trillion prisons, not just the one at Parchman but the imprisoned heart, the home-shackled fate, the never-executed great escape. (71)

Nordan's answer, coming from the now writer, producer of literature, seems apropos of one who traffics in the imagination, for it is the budding writer in Nordan, the boy who knew that the small, Mississippi town of Itta Bena was a death-nail to a writer's imagination, who he credits with preventing him from killing his father: "A bullet in my father's chest, or even a bullet that missed his body and only cracked a window, punctured the hot-water heater, busted up the plaster on the wall, would have kept me there in Itta Benna, in the cramped spaced of my limited imagination, forever" (*BWLG* 71). The boy's imagination remains cramped not simply by the narrowness of geography but more importantly by the narrowness of his father's vision of masculinity, one that would consign the young artist to the imaginatively deadened spaces of his father's life.

In contrast to the memoir in which Nordan specifically discredits any Freudian explanations for why he shoots at his own father, the fictional version he creates in his short story has unmistakable Freudian undertones. Sugar, for example, models Freud's theory of paternal identification, particularly when he experiences guilt over the shooting attempt. As Freud explains in his writings about identification, "identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal" (105). Sugar's attitude does turn into "an expression of tenderness" after the shooting, and he begins in earnest to model the identification process. As Freud argues, the boy "will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would

like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may say simply that he takes his father as his ideal" (105). Sugar, who is deeply upset by the potential harm he could have caused his father, begins an earnest effort of becoming him. Sugar finds the suit his father has kept inside the closet and tries it on in an effort to inhabit the life of his father: "I was wearing the rhinestone-studded coat of my daddy, which was too big for me, and I was looking at myself in the mirror" (*AG* 36). Though he identifies with the father's show-business dream of being a performer, Sugar ends up replicating the father's narcissistic gaze and seems on track to repeat the father's self-absorption that originally distances him from his family. In even a more clear-cut expression of this desire to repeat the problems of the father, Sugar declares, "I wanted to drink whiskey and be like him, to find a woman who swallowed swords and fire, to marry a woman like my mama, who could grow ugly with love (*AG* 37). While Sugar's actions, especially trying on the suit, are imaginative attempts to understand his father's secret life, to place himself squarely inside his father's own dreams from which he has been denied access, his desire to replicate the father's masculinity without questioning its more dangerous elements points to the inherent problems in a purely Freudian notion of viewing the father as an "ideal" model for identification.

One of the dangers of Sugar's desire to identify with his father remains his romantic belief in his father's own magic, an idea Sugar develops from the kind of self-effacing love his mother shows towards Gilbert. Unlike other instances of magic in Nordan's work that can be transformative and redemptive, the magic Sugar associates with his father places Gilbert beyond the real and turns him into an iconic figure, which obscures the reality of his father's flaws. Only until Sugar mentions his belief in his

father's magic to someone outside of the family does he begin to see his father from a different and perhaps more realistic perspective. Announcing to his surrogate father, Big G.B., that his own father was magic, Sugar receives a flat out rejection of his assessment followed by a more cryptic explanation: "'Your daddy ain't magic. . . . There ain't no magic. Magic is the same as sentimental. Scratch the surface of sentimental and you know what you find?—Nazis and the Klu Klux Klan. Magic is German in nature and evil and not real. Scratch magic, Sugar, and you're looking for death'" (*AG* 39). Although hyperbolic and essentializing in his logic about the nature of evil, Big G.B. offers an explanation that takes on specific meaning given the context of Sugar's declaration about his father. Considering that Sugar's conception of magic involves creating an aura of idyllic white masculinity around his father, Big G.B.'s pronouncement that magic is sentimental and that beneath sentimental one finds Nazis and the Klu Klux Klan underscores the dangers in blindly valorizing *white* masculinity. By evoking two historical groups whose outward display of the power and perfection of white masculinity often under girded the racist logic at the core of their philosophy, Big G.B. effectively warns Sugar of blinding himself to his father's own faults. Most importantly, B.G.'s response warns Sugar about the danger in romanticizing the father's own narcissistic gaze upon whiteness, suggesting how the incessant preference for one's own self (adult, white, male, heterosexual) combined with an attitude of supremacy and proclivity toward violence have the potential to blind one to the reality of others' humanity and that the logical extension of such blindness in history has led to the deaths of minority subjects.

Learning to see his father apart from the romantic haze of magic that he and his mother have cast over him signals Sugar's movement from child to adult. As his

surrogate father, Big G.B. takes Sugar on a hunting trip, which serves as his initiation into adult masculinity, but it is not a masculine identity significantly different than that of his father. Having been thwarted from their hunting trip by a deluge of rain, Big G.B., Sugar, and G.B. Junior all take refuge in the Arrow Café, along with all the other hunters who could not return outside. Sitting beside Big G.B. and having been poured a cup of coffee just like him, Sugar reaches his apotheosis:

> I felt like a king. In the midst of these men and their camouflage and, in my nostrils, the smell of coffee cooking and breakfast and whiskey and the fragrance of wet rubber raingear and canvas and in this room full of breached firearms and the click-click of ammunition in the pockets of these men—in my own pockets—and the fine low sound of manly laughter and good southern whiskey voices, I felt for the first time free of my daddy, his magic if there was magic. (*AG* 42)

Having been elevated to the status of "king," Sugar no longer needs to contend with his father, who has essentially been dethroned. No longer under the burden to uphold his father's mythical status, Sugar gives himself permission to feel anger towards the man who became a celebrity of the community after the shooting attempt. His masculinity no longer being threatened by his own father, Sugar feels that he has space to be his own man, but it remains a traditionally masculine space, one in which he has merely replaced the father without reforming the problematic aspects of his identity.

Finally unburdened by his guilt over what he has done to his father, Sugar transfers his love to Big G.B. and the other men in the café: "I leaned on my stool far to the side so that my shoulder touched Big G.B.'s sleeve and allowed my heart to fill up with love for this big man, and for all these men who were not my daddy" (*AG* 43). With the uncomplicated love Big G.B gives to him, which he calls "love without pain," Sugar is able to experience, for once in his life, the feeling of being at ease with returning

paternal love (*AG* 42). Even as this showering of attention from an adult male provides Sugar with a much needed break from the self-absorption of his father, the scene in the café remains an illusory fantasy, an escape from the reality of his life that mirrors the father's dream of the sword swallowing woman. Only an older, wiser Sugar, narrating the story from the distanced perspective of an adult can offer a more introspective account of the scene in the café:

> I had believed in the Arrow Catcher Café that I had become another man's child that because I had fired his .22 pistol into tree stumps and had driven his truck through the cattlegaps and fished his ponds and lain on his floor in his den in front of his television set and fallen asleep and been carried in his arms to a warm bed and had loved him that all my terrible past had not really happened, that I had never been born into the family of a drunkard, handsome and tragic and fine as any man who ever walked across a movie screen, and that I had never learned from mama that Daddy was magic and should be worshipped until she and I and everyone else who loved him grew ugly and pure and mad with love. (AG 44-5)

Only time and distance allows the adult narrator to see the problem inherent in the boy's desire to replicate the father's dangerous masculine identity, but such an insight, occurring as it does after the formative years of adolescence, provides little hope in the way of alternative paths of development for the son. Though time affords the adult Sugar healing from the damage of his early life and brings him to the point where he can believe that "nothing [Gilbert] had ever done—his drunken violence and self-pity, his bullying and meanness and pettiness—was unforgivable, nothing too terrible to embrace," the story as a *Bildungsroman* remains a lamentable one, a cautionary tale about the tragic inability of a son to find substantially different alternatives to the masculine identity of his father within his immediate environment (*AG* 45).

Even more so than "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B.," "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game" exemplifies the kind of social and imaginative death the father signals for his immediate family. Just as in the earlier story involving Big G.B., Sugar offers a first person narration, but instead of using the oedipal rivalry as the narrative drive, Nordan probes the tension that arises from how Sugar and the mother view the father/husband differently. For while Nordan encapsulates a scene in which Sugar again picks up a gun in the presence of his father, the oedipal reading of the scene arises from the mother and should be read more as an accurate depiction of her own desires than those of her son. In fact, "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game" is just as much about Sugar's mother as it is about his father, and the mother's frustration over her husband serves as a counterpoint to the empathetic view the younger Sugar holds of him. By the end of the story, a more mature Sugar begins to see his father through the eyes of another woman, a vision that offers him a better understanding of the pitfalls of adopting his father's identity as a model for his own masculinity. Told from the perspective of a now adult Sugar, the story that begins as a coming of age narrative becomes another cautionary tale about the dangers of paternal emulation. Unlike the optimism Sugar experiences in the eventual reconciliation with his father in "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B.," "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game" offers a bleaker vision of the tragedy Gilbert's life has become.

Like the previously discussed story, "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game" depicts Sugar's process of identification with his father, which initially seems strengthened by his mother's own mental instability. Depressed and unhappy in her marriage with a man who "had no imagination," Sugar's mother resorts to creating fictional lives for the models she encounters in the Sears and Roebuck catalog. As Sugar

says of his mother's game, "Sears and Roebuck was a real world to me, with lakes and cities and operas and noisy streets and farmlands and neighborhoods" (*AG* 48). For the mother, the game becomes an imaginative act of inventing alternative worlds as a way to escape the loneliness and boredom of small Mississippi town living and of enduring a marriage with an alcoholic man she does not love. Speaking of his mother, Sugar declares, "drama was the thing for [her]. When there was none she invented it. When one came along, she milked it for its every effect" (*AG* 49). Such imaginative capabilities are in stark contrast to her husband's own proclivity toward silence and repression. According to Sugar, his father "had no imagination. He disapproved of the game. It is more fair to say that he was baffled by it, as he was by all forms of imaginative invention" (*AG* 48). Far from merely a stereotype, the father and his deficiencies of imagination in the story mirrors Nordan's own step-father who he describes in his memoir with similar language: "My new father seemed to have no imagination. He was not one to tell stories. He didn't care much for movies. . . . He had no gift for narrative" (*BWLG* 17).

In the story, the father's imaginative lack not only prevents him from participating in his wife's game but also from processing his own emotions concerning real-life events. The story, for example, begins with the shock Sugar experiences when he witnesses the drowning of a teenage girl at the local public pool, an event he sees while he and his father are out painting at the local high school. The father's response is one of silence, for he is either unable or unwilling to vocalize his emotions about the child's death. Speaking of his father after they return home that evening from their job, Sugar says, "Father sat in his room in his overstuffed chair and drank glass after glass of whiskey

until he slept. He was not grieving the death of the child. Death sparked no tragic thoughts for him, no memories, he drew no tragic conclusions" (*AG* 49). Gilbert, however, is a war veteran, as Sugar reveals near the end of the story, and as such, he is highly unlikely to have emerged from it unscathed by memories of death. The girl's death sparks no memories for Gilbert not because he is unacquainted with memories of death but because the repression of such memories, often aided by the numbing effects of alcohol, allows him to avoid having to process them altogether.

While Sugar's mother does encourage him to talk through his feelings about witnessing the girl's drowning, telling him that "after an incident of this kind, the healthiest thing in the world is to talk about it," her own suicidal impulses cause her to idealize death's possibilities (*AG* 51). After observing Sugar playing with his father's gun in the room where his father is sleeping, she misreads the scene as a moment of oedipal tension and tells Sugar "she understood why [he] wanted to kill [his] father. 'It's natural. Every son wants his father to die'" (*AG* 50). Sugar chooses not to correct his mother's interpretation for fear that it "would spoil the drama of her pronouncement," and in return, he receives another baffling pronouncement: "Death is a beautiful thing. Death is the mother of beauty" (*AG* 50). The remark could be read as a possible response to the thought of her husband's death, a death that may signal her own rebirth into a life of happiness and fulfillment, which she never found in her marriage to Gilbert. However, she makes the remark immediately before asking her son, Sugar, if he would kill her, an act she disturbingly associates with the level of her son's love for her, implying that if he truly did love her, he would be willing to kill her. In light of the mother's mental

instability, the comment reads as a painful expression of a suicidal woman who sees in death the beauty she never found in life.

Framed as it is by the now adult Sugar, this vision of the mother remains limited by a masculinist gaze that cannot empathetically enter into the feminine consciousness. Sugar's obsessive desire to affirm his identification with the father turns his attention away from the mother, resulting in a diminished interest in knowing the complexity of his mother's life. In this regard, Nordan appears to be illuminating an aspect of his own life, of how his incessant desire as a child to know his biological father who died when he was an infant eclipsed further interest in his mother. As Nordan explains about his real mother in his memoir *Boy With a Loaded Gun*, "back there in the unknowable darkness of prememory she had shared a life with a man I did not know, and my longing for him, that core invisibility, had overwhelmed the unknowable about her" (35). Such a comparison is not to suggest that in his fiction Nordan's creativity cannot transcend the limitations of biography, but to reveal that in fidelity to the gaze of a son whose desire for paternal identification remains strong, the reality of the mother's life may remain untold and indeed unknown.

Living such a life bereft of beauty with a husband she does not truly love, Sugar's mother lapses into madness, which culminates with her attempt to kill herself by slicing open an artery in her arm with a razor blade. Sugar witnesses the event, and immediately before moving to save his mother's life, he comments about what he sees in his mother's face: "I saw all her life in her shattered face—the hidden tyranny of her father, her frightened acquiescent mother, a drunken husband she never loved, a child she never wanted—and at the same time a sad dream of dances with the governor's son on

someone's cypress shaded veranda, the wisteria and jonquils and lanterns and laughter and music" (*AG* 53). Not surprisingly, the son substitutes the stereotypical dream of the southern belle for a more complex understanding of his mother's desires. Though the accuracy of Sugar's account of his mother's unfulfilled dreams may be questionable, he gives expression to the ways in which men have failed to live up to his mother's expectations. Sugar, the young child, can acknowledge the effect his father has had on his mother's life, but he does not yet understand the implicit danger in seeing his father as an ideal model of emulation.

His mother's suicide attempt and his successful intervention to save her life only solidify Sugar's identification with his father. As Sugar says of his life-saving action, "It was the kind of simple, necessary thing that my father could understand and appreciate, and now I could appreciate it too. I could do it and then go on living, with no replays of the event in dreams, no additions or corrections, no added details, no conclusions about life. I was my father's son" (*AG* 54). Facilitated by the absence of his mother during her stay in the hospital, Sugar's identification with his father is born out of necessity: "we were alive and beautiful together, two men in the fullness of our need and love" (*AG* 55). Sugar's desire to see himself in his father is a psychological attempt to distance himself from the personality of his mother, a personality that he sees as being the cause of her mental instability. Like in the previous story, Sugar, the child, initially idealizes his father and wishes to become him, but in keeping with Nordan's narrative motif, a seminal event causes Sugar to cast a more discriminating and critical gaze on his father, and the adult Sugar, narrating from the wisdom of past experience, signals either implicitly or

explicitly a more mature understanding of the danger in embracing the father as a suitable model for emulation.

For the child narrator, though, the event that signals the beginning of his maturation process, that movement from naïve child to a more enlightened adult, is his and Gilbert's attempt to play the catalog game in his mother's absence. Without the woman's imaginative force to propel the game forward, the men are at a loss to envision the lives of the models in the catalog. They try to imagine the life of one particular female model who is standing alone in the wind looking "off into the distance," but her expression and her body language prove to be too much of an enigma for them (*AG* 56). Their inability to see the woman in the catalog as a subject, one who possesses the power to look herself and thus one who exists as more than an object of sight, only confirms their inculcation into a history of a male dominated visual culture. As John Berger argues in his influential 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, the visual history of representing women in Western culture relies upon a binary division of surveyor and surveyed that breaks along gender lines: "*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves" (47). Writing only a few years later, Laura Mulvey reiterates Berger's initial claim, suggesting that "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed" (62). In the now exclusively male space of the kitchen, Gilbert and Sugar are initially unable to see beyond the limitations of the male gaze and thus cannot see the woman as a subject to be known instead of an object to be seen.

Only after trying the game again does Gilbert begin to understand what the woman in the catalog might see in the distance. Gilbert says, "she sees me," and thus his imagination is born (*AG* 57). In developing an empathetic imagination, Gilbert can see himself as she sees him, thus reversing the previous roles of subject and object under the male gaze. As Gilbert momentarily becomes the object of sight, the woman emerges as a subject for the first time, but this vision of him through the eyes of a woman proves to be a terrifying one, for it releases all of the unflattering memories of himself he attempts to repress through alcohol. He finally speaks of the war he has tried to forget and the lost love he knew who was a sword swallower in the circus, and "he thought about his childhood" (*AG* 58). His imagination opened, Gilbert "could weep real tears over this loss" of the woman he loved years ago. However, they are memories Gilbert is unequipped to handle, and he begins to act out in more destructive ways, which causes Sugar to proclaim that "The Sears and Roebuck catalog had ruined [his] father's life" (*AG* 58).

Reading Gilbert's acquisition of imaginative language as the cause of his ruin, Robert Rudnicki argues that "Nordan suggests that only in the *literal* world, and not the fictitious, not the metaphorical, will his characters find happiness. . . when Gilbert 'begins to see,' or catches on how to use language not tied to the world of things, his life is ruined. He loses his sense of reality, which spirals out of control in a cycle of secrecy, lies, and flights of the imagination" (57). Such an assessment minimizes Gilbert's responsibility for his life before this incident and does not take into account the actual image of him this woman in the catalog sees. What is it about this image of him seen through a female lens that unhinges Gilbert so? Perhaps he sees, for the first time, a man

who is already an alcoholic, one who would rather drink than talk to his wife about the days' events and one who has been so unavailable to her that she had to resort to creating alternative lives in order to find happiness. What he sees then is not some fictionalized life disconnected from the real world but more of a clarifying vision of him apart from the alcohol induced haze through which he had tried to escape his own emotions. Commenting on this story in an interview with Blake Maher, Nordan suggests "that somehow by finding his [Gilbert's] imagination, he lost it, his grasp, and drank himself to death as a result of it" (116). However, as Nordan demonstrates earlier in the story, Gilbert is already prone to drinking when he encounters trauma, such as the death of the child he and Sugar witness while they are painting. Likewise, the vision of himself he begins to see is equally traumatic, and Gilbert responds in the only way he knows how: to drink. Thus the game and the subsequent birth of Gilbert's imagination are not the *cause* of Gilbert's destruction but merely the means through which he is able to acknowledge how his life has *already* been destructive to others.

Not wishing to let go of his own idealized image of his father, Sugar interjects, "this game is not true. This is Mother's game," but he cannot undo what the game has allowed him to see: "It didn't matter. The damage was already done. I looked at my father through the eyes of the model in the picture and saw what she saw: the face of a yellow corpse beneath our house and in that face an emptiness too vast never to be filled up or given meaning. I looked away, in fear of what else I might see" (*AG* 58). Searing in his critique of the damage the father's alcoholism, emotional inaccessibility, and lack of imagination have levied on those who have loved him most, Sugar's nihilist image of the father whose emptiness is so vast that it could never be "given meaning" is Nordan's

most forceful and unambiguous critique of a masculine identity unsuitable for emulation. By being able to empathize, to step into the vision of another person to see his father from a female perspective, Sugar is able to understand the emotional toll his father must have had on his mother's life. This scene forces the reader to reexamine the mother's mental instability and read it through a feminine lens, which depicts the father as a husband who has been unable, until now, to see how his actions have contributed to his wife's unhappiness. Just as Big G.B. does in "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B.," the woman in the catalog (who is a thinly veiled fictional representation of the mother) offers Sugar a clarifying vision of his father, a vision that irrevocably alters the way in which Sugar relates to him.

As profound and unambiguous as the story's conclusion is in depicting the emptiness and danger of this type of father, the story and the previous one mentioned before it offer little in the way of alternatives for the young Sugar. What kind of man will Sugar become? What can Sugar do differently to avoid the pitfalls of his father's example? What pieces, if any, of the father's masculine identity can be salvaged, and what pieces must eventually be discarded? Fortunately, Nordan's treatment of the Gilbert/Sugar relationship does not end with these stories. Other stories explore alternative options for Sugar even if they only provide glimpses into lives that will inevitably lead him on a different path than the one readers see with Gilbert in "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game." Although published five years after the appearance of "The All-Girl Football Team," "Porpoises and Romance" more readily follows the Freudian model of the oedipal complex that Nordan evokes in "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B." and "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game." While "Porpoises and Romance" begins

the pattern presented in these earlier two stories through its invocation of the failure of the father as paternal model, it complicates and questions the traditional heterosexual resolution to Sugar's development. In "Porpoises and Romance" and "The All-Girl Football Team," Sugar clearly exhibits interest in same-sex desires that add complexity both to his character and to Nordan's exploration of white southern masculinity and its limitations.

In "Porpoises and Romance," Nordan contrasts Sugar's sexual awakening and interest in same-sex desire with the failure of Gilbert's attempt to rekindle the romance in his loveless marriage. That Sugar's interest in same-sex desire culminates amid the backdrop of his parents' troubled heterosexual relationship demonstrates Nordan's interest in moving beyond the limitations that the father's heterosexuality imposes on Sugar's identity formation. Nordan's rather abrupt interjection of same-sex desire in a story dominated by the inner-workings of Sugar's parents' sexual relationship signals the growing rift between Sugar and his father. Homosexuality, although never directly acted upon in the story, emerges as a positive alternative to what Nordan depicts as the failure of the father's expression of heterosexual love.

Chronicling Gilbert's attempt to rekindle the romance in his stale marriage by taking his wife on a second honeymoon, the story vividly demonstrates, on a darkly comic scale, the disparity between Gilbert's intentions and reality. Gilbert, for example, takes the family to the beach on the Mississippi coast for what he hopes will be a rebirth of his love for his wife. Only days before their visit, however, a hurricane turned the once pristine beach into a graveyard of dead animals so that when Gilbert and his wife attempt to walk along the shore, their vision becomes one of "dead fish and other animal

carcasses, including a whale full of buzzards."[4] Nordan's narrative technique of undermining the metaphors associated with the father's vision of heterosexual romance becomes a recurrent structuring device in the story. Behind each of Gilbert's metaphors for romance lie images of death, and these images serve as a visual critique of not just Gilbert's failure to make love work but also of the failure of heterosexuality to work for all people.[5] By implication, Nordan's story reveals how the cultural proliferation of these metaphors of heterosexual romance function as an imaginative death[6] for the queer son seeking a sustainable, visual model of same-sex desire.

Nordan's most salient example of this technique occurs when Gilbert consults a magazine called *Connections* designed for people "who wanted to put the zip back into their marriage" (*MS* 119). Following the magazine's advice to "find a metaphor for romance, and pursue it with all your heart," Gilbert finally decides upon the image of

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[4] Lewis Nordan, *Music of the Swamp* (New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991), 116, hereafter cited by page number in the text with the abbreviation *MS*.

[5] Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, "Shocked into Maturity: Sex and Death as Initiation in the Fiction of Lewis Nordan," calls attention to the ways in which sex and death often serve as a catalyst, initiating the sons in Nordan's fiction into adult heterosexuality. In this story, the death of Gilbert's heterosexual romance seems at odds with his son's question about homosexual life.

[6] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War against Effeminate Boys," *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1993) and Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), for a discussion of the ways in which heterosexual society manifests the "wish that gay people did not exist" (Sedgwick 161). I derive my concept of "imaginative death" from Sedgwick's and Stockton's idea that because the "proto-gay child" has "no established forms to hold itself in the public, legal filed," he or she cannot fully identify as homosexual during childhood (Stockton 6). This prevention of homosexual expression by the "proto-gay child" enacts what I call an imaginative death, but what Stockton terms delay, in which the queer child is prevented from identifying as gay and must therefore grow sideways. According to Stockton, the queer child's homosexual identity comes into focus only at the moment that the "heterosexual" identity of the child dies and passes out of existence, but it is a form of "backwards birth" since such a queer identity can only be made by the grown adult in a retrospective assessment of his or her childhood.

porpoises as an apt metaphor (*MS* 120). Gilbert chooses this image in part because it recalls a happier time in his life in which he and another woman spent an idyllic evening on the deck of a ship that was being followed by a pair of dolphins. Not truly understanding what the word "metaphor" actually means, Gilbert views it as being akin to a sign from God, a signal that his relationship with his wife will be successful. He eventually finds the porpoises he was looking for, but what they signify becomes much more complicated to decipher, for the actualization of his metaphor in real life looks quite different than the romantic vision from his memory.

Gilbert and his wife see groups of porpoises that have been attracted by a large school of bluefish, which the porpoises have corralled together in an effort to feed upon them. Standing as a witness to what his parents saw, Sugar provides an account of the scene: "the porpoises were frightening, there were so many of them, they were so fierce, so large, so mechanical and maniacal in their feeding. . . . Like seeing a hundred, two hundred hungry bears tearing into some frightened frantic grouping of small stupid trapped animals" (*MS* 128-9). Like the corpse-strewn beach on which they are standing, Gilbert's attempt at finding heterosexual romance through metaphor leads invariably to images of death. Far from the harbingers of romantic bliss, the porpoises, seen up close, become agents of destruction as violence replaces love as the connecting agent in Gilbert's metaphor. The scene signals that Gilbert's romantic enterprise has not worked and implicitly warns Sugar about what he and his life may become if he chooses to follow in his father's footsteps.

Had the story ended with this scene as its ultimate resolution, it would not have provided an alternative to the pattern of child development found in both "Sugar, the

Eunuchs, and Big G.B." and "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game," in which a young Sugar, having seen an undesirable image of how his father's life has turned out, seeks to avoid becoming the same kind of father. In "Porpoises and Romance," Nordan alters the heterosexual resolution of the oedipal complex by tentatively envisioning an alternative life for Sugar, one that may not lead him down the troubled path of his father. Bisecting Gilbert's journey for sexual renewal is Sugar's own process of sexual awakening. Only with Sugar, heterosexual sex does not interest him at this moment. Initially, Sugar's interest in homosexuality seems purely informational. When his father finishes reading the *Connections* magazine, Sugar, rather abruptly, asks his father, "What's a queer?" (*MS* 121). Uncomfortable with defining "queer" for Sugar, Gilbert instead offers a critique: "Don't say queer, Sugar. Queer is dirty" (*MS* 121). Only after he asks his father to define queer for him again does Gilbert give him a direct answer:

> I said, "What's a queer?
> He said, "Do you know anything about cocksuckers?"
> I said, "Some."
> He said, "It's the same deal."
> I said, "Thanks."
> He said, "No problem, don't sweat it, glad to be of help." (*MS* 123)

The abruptness of the exchange beginning with Sugar's initial question about queers surprises not only Gilbert but readers as well, for it seems to be a non-sequitur to Gilbert's discussion of the *Connections* article he has just read, the one that advises him to create a metaphor for romance. Sugar's timing, while apparently random, serves a purpose, for it acts as a disrupting voice to Gilbert's discussion of *heterosexual* romance and furthers Nordan's undermining of the father as the authoritative model for the son's sexual development.

The passage highlights the growing disconnect between the father and son, for while Gilbert contemplates ways to enhance his romantic connection with his wife, Sugar contemplates the meaning of queer. Further developing this disconnect, Nordan demonstrates at the end of the story how both the father and son exist in two separate mental spheres. One day while the family drives along the coast, Gilbert begins to talk to his wife about wanting to read more books and of his recent encounter with a man who was writing a book on "sex facts about animals" (*MS* 132). Sugar does not listen to his parents because while they are conversing in the front seat of the car, he sits "in the backseat thinking about cocksuckers" (*MS* 132). Disrupting his father's discussion once again with a question about queers, Sugar asks his daddy, "What if I wanted to grow up to be a cocksucker?" (*MS* 132). Sugar's question simply hangs in the air, as neither his father nor mother can articulate a response.

Signaling more than just a desire for information, Sugar's question reveals his own interest in the possibility of a queer identity, and it marks a key moment in his own process of sexual development within the context of the story. While not exactly an admission of Sugar's sexual preference (as he could very well not understand fully the nature of what he asks), the question forces readers to contemplate the reality that Sugar may not emulate his father's heterosexuality and to imagine what Sugar's life may be like if he is, in fact, interested in same-sex desire. The hypothetical phrasing of Sugar's question leads to multiple interpretations about what kind of answer Sugar seeks. Does he want his parents' approval, their acknowledgment that this desire is not just an achievable one but an acceptable one as well? Is he asking what his life will look like if he is gay? Does he want to know if there would be any place for a gay man in his father's world or

even in the South? While Sugar may or may not be seeking the answers to these questions, Nordan drives his readers to consider them. In this light, whether or not Sugar's question exists as an accurate representation of his desires becomes ancillary to the effect it produces in Nordan's readers, for while Sugar may not eventually turn out to be gay, his question raises readers' awareness that there are boys in the South who do turn out this way.

Though Gilbert cannot articulate directly an answer to his son's question, he does give what Sugar believes to be a response. After a long silence, Gilbert begins to speak of a friend he once knew when he was stationed in Sarasota, Florida. As Gilbert talks, Sugar thinks, "He seemed to be talking to me. I wondered if this was an answer to my question about cocksucking" (*MS* 133). The friend, Gilbert explains, was a sword swallower in a winter circus in Sarasota, and during a moment of spontaneity, he wonders if they could possibly drive to the circus and meet his friend: "If we had an extra day or two we could drive down there. I wonder if he's still alive. He could take eighteen inches right down his throat" (*MS* 133-4). If readers are to believe Sugar and read Gilbert's response as a metaphorical answer, it proves to be as ambiguous as Sugar's initial question. By comparing "cocksucking" to the art of sword swallowing, Gilbert suggests that both are dangerous acts, ones that may limit the lifespan of those who practice them. Gilbert's response also acknowledges the geographical limitations imposed upon the performance of such acts. Reading both practices as atypical, Gilbert implies that these acts must be practiced in certain designated spaces, ones in which "freakish" behavior becomes not only acceptable but normalized. Underlying Gilbert's comment, if readers

extend the logic of his metaphor, is his suggestion that Mississippi is no place for "cocksuckers."

Readers never really know if Gilbert's intends his comment as one of admonishment, an indictment of "cocksuckers" as "freaks" who belong in a circus, or as a serious, albeit flawed, attempt to warn his son about the harsh reality of being gay in a South where "cocksucking" can only be practiced in the confines of a few acceptable spaces. No easy answers exist to Sugar's question. How does a boy survive in an insular, small, Mississippi town if he wants "to grow up to be a cocksucker?" (*MS* 132). What remains clear in Nordan's story is that Gilbert and his romantic metaphors provide little guidance for his son, especially if the son later identifies as gay. Rather than posit the son's queer identity as an idyllic and thus more favorable answer to the problematic, heterosexual identity of the father, Nordan's story consciously disrupts the oedipal narrative so often evoked in earlier southern literature by having the son speak of queer desire without the inhibition often attributed to the father's generation. Sugar, perhaps due to his young age, has not yet internalized the homophobia of the father and thus does not seem stymied by the prospect of a gay life. Sugar can, after all, publicly acknowledge the possibility of his own queer identity, thus bringing to the surface what only remains subtext in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Unlike Brick in Williams's play, who seems stifled not only by his own internalization of homophobia but also by his potential failure to become the heir and subsequent *heterosexual* successor to his father, Sugar does not appear inhibited by the thoughts of such failure. In Nordan's story, the failure rests squarely on the *father* who has trouble making heterosexuality look like a desirable option for his son.

While critic John S. Bak reads Brick as an exemplary model of the "queer heterosexual," primarily because Brick refuses to adhere to any one category of sexuality imposed upon him bysociety,[7] I believe he resembles more closely the father Nordan creates in Gilbert; both men routinely use alcohol to suppress memories and feelings they cannot fully work through in the conscious register, and both men have trouble forging connections with their sexual partners. Sugar, as opposed to Brick, exists as the more desirable model for the "queer heterosexual" son, for he has not, as of yet, internalized his father's admonishment to not say queer because "queer is dirty" (*MS* 121). In Williams's play, the son, Brick, has already internalized this association of dirtiness with homosexuality, and it is he who voices this attitude to his father when Big Daddy finally forces him to face the nature of his relationship with Skipper: "You think we did dirty things between us, Skipper an' . . . You think that Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men?" (120). Although Sugar begins to adopt the derogatory language of the father through his repetition of the term "cocksucker," he appears unaffected by an internalized need to suppress the possibility of his own homosexual inclinations. For Sugar to continue to avoid the internalization of his father's homophobia, he must see positive and socially sanctioned alternatives to the type of masculinity his father represents. In short, he must be able to see that queer life is possible. He must be able to emulate the image of

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[7]See John S. Bak, "'Sneakin' and Spyin' from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick, and Homosexual Existentialism." *Theatre Journal* 56.2 (2004): 225-249. For a rebuttal to Bak's characterization of Brick as a "queer heterosexual" (240), see Douglas Arrell, "Homosexual Panic in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*." *Modern Drama* 51.1 (2008): 60-72.

a man who defies the masculine/feminine and gay/straight binaries that regulate sexual desire and sustain heterosexuality as normative behavior.

In Nordan's work, the various incarnations of Gilbert and Sugar can be contradictory, and he does not develop them chronologically even though they reappear numerous times in different texts published after the first introduction of them in *Welcome to the Arrow Catcher Fair* (1983). Gilbert, for example, dies two different deaths in Nordan's fiction, once as a result of a tornado and once under a house as a result of his alcoholism.[8] Thus, the Gilbert readers experience in Nordan's 1986 short story "The All-Girl Football Team" offers a positive alternative to the homophobic version Nordan returns to in "Porpoises and Romance." Harnessing the subversive potential of drag, Nordan creates a gender-bending narrative in "The All-Girl Football Team" that complicates the heterosexual coming-of-age motif in "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B." and "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game." Far from the alcoholic, emotionally unavailable, and imaginatively challenged father Nordan depicts in these stories and in "Porpoises and Romance," Gilbert appears here as a highly expressive, cross-dressing father who openly displays pride in a son whom he teaches to feel beautiful like a woman. In this story, the roles of father and son have been reversed, and it is the son who needs to change in order to accept the kind of queered life his father offers as a representative model. In opposition to the destructive and stifling image of masculinity the father embraces in these other stories, the queered Gilbert presents to

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[8] For a further discussion of how Nordan changes facts and renarrates similar stories in his fiction, see Marcel Arbeit, "'An Arm's Length Relationship to Violence': An Interview with Lewis Nordan." *Mississippi Quarterly* 60.4 (2007): 622-33.

Sugar an identity that affords him a greater spectrum of possibilities regarding his own embodiment of masculinity.

Sugar, the much older narrator commenting on an event that happened to him when he was sixteen, understands the subversive nature of a story that has drag as its primary focus, and he initially attempts to reframe this practice within the traditional logic of heterosexuality. Beginning with a declaration that “dressing in drag was not new to” him because his father had been known to wear a dress for the community’s annual staging of the Womanless Wedding,[9] Sugar proceeds to reaffirm his father’s traditional masculinity, and thus his heterosexuality: “My father was all man. His maleness defined him to me.”[10] By allaying his own conservative fears over the radical core of a story containing queer desire, Sugar attempts to resist the threat drag poses to the masculine image he has of his father. As Judith Butler warns, “drag is not unproblematically subversive” (231). As she argues in *Bodies that Matter*, “there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony *through* its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies that reidealize heterosexual norms *without* calling them into question” (231). Nordan’s story dramatizes the subversive potential of drag by calling attention to the ways in which it can disrupt the naturalization process of heterosexuality,

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[9] For a detailed history of the Womanless Wedding and its queer implications, see Craig Thomas Friend, “The Womanless Wedding: Masculinity, Cross Dressing, and Gender Inversions in the Modern South,” *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South Since Reconstruction* (U Georgia P, 2009), 219-45.

[10] Lewis Nordan, “The All-Girl Football Team.” *The All-Girl Football Team.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 113, hereafter cited by page number in the text with the abbreviation *AG*.

but it also demonstrates, via Sugar's attempts to reassert his father's traditional masculinity and his own heterosexuality, how drag can be used to "reidealize heterosexual norms" (Butler 231). Even if Sugar does not embrace the possibility of same-sex desire, his drag performance inevitably alters his rigid conception of appropriate masculine behavior, thereby allowing him to experience a healthier and more productive connection with his father.

The subversive nature of Nordan's story lies partly in its ability to reimagine those male bonding moments that reinforce traditional notions of masculine identity in the South. Nordan undermines traditional gender identities via the South's most cherished sport, football, a game best liked, perhaps, because of its unambiguous prescription of gender roles: men play football, and women cheer them on. At first, Sugar revels in the idea of this drag performance in which the high schools girls will don the masculine paraphernalia of pads and cleats and play against each other in a charity game designed to raise money for the school. Sugar seems reluctant to participate in the game when someone suggests that the boys should extend this drag performance by dressing up as cheerleaders. Speaking to his father, Sugar makes the argument against his own participation: "It would take a fool. To dress up like a girl, when there are women—women, Daddy, not girls—dressed in pads and cleats" (*AG* 118). Sugar's logic here is problematic, for while his comment suggests that his "performance" of femininity would only mock and thus degrade the essential femaleness of these women, whom he holds in great respect, it also carries traces of his own sexism. Sugar's comment implies not only that these women's performance of masculinity should be taken more seriously than his own performance of femininity, but also that the very act of performing "masculine"

traits enhances one's status as a woman while the performance of "feminine" traits can only devalue one's status as a man.

Sugar's defense for his refusal to participate in the game does not elicit the type of response he had imagined. Expecting his father to be sympathetic to his concerns, Sugar is nearly speechless when his father tells him, "I will dress you in a skirt and a sweater and nice underwear and you will feel beautiful" (*AG* 118). By placing value on the male performance of femininity, Gilbert counters the logic by which his son consistently devalues feminine behavior. In light of his son's speechlessness, Gilbert follows up his comment with, "You have never felt beautiful" (*AG* 118). Implying that such an absence is neither desirable nor healthy, Gilbert challenges his son to open himself up to behavior that defies social conventions. Intuitively understanding the limitations that accompany adherence to normative gender roles, Gilbert embarks upon a radical disruption of the conventional emulation process by which the father initiates his son into the ways of adult masculinity.

As a revision of the scene in "Sugar, the Eunuchs, and Big G.B." where Sugar becomes initiated into adult masculinity via the rituals of a hunting trip, this scene queers the emulation process by having Gilbert teach his son how to feel beautiful by dressing as a woman: "Father drew my bath and put almond oil into the water and swished the water back and forth with his hand until it foamed up. . . . He showed me how to shave my legs and underarms. . . . He gave me the clothes I would dress in" (*AG* 118). Not simply a casual observer to his son's drag preparation, Gilbert functions as a conscious participant, actively coaching his son in the ways of female impersonation. Such engagement defies earlier depictions in other stories of Gilbert whose aloofness and unavailability cause his

son emotional distress. Most profound, however, remains its disruption of the social expectation that the father would be disapproving of, if not hostile to, a son who agrees to this feminine performance. While Gilbert's initial encouragement of his son's drag performance could be read as his attempt to facilitate Sugar's male bonding with the boys from school who have already agreed to dress as cheerleaders, Gilbert's role in the process inevitably queers this idea of male bonding by introducing the prospect of same-sex desire.

By adopting the outward display of femininity, Gilbert can achieve a level of emotional intimacy with his son that he cannot accomplish under the strictures of socially sanctioned masculine behavior. Throughout the story, the queering *potential* of Gilbert's own proclivity for dressing in drag remains unspoken by the adult Sugar as narrator who constructs the story in such a way as to deflect any suspicions of his father's sexuality. Despite Sugar's declaration that his "father was all man" (*AG* 113), Gilbert, in this particular story, exists in an interstitial space, one neither entirely known by heterosexuality or homosexuality, masculinity or femininity; he is, in essence, the embodiment of the "queer heterosexual."[11] He is a man who owns and shoots guns, but a man who also occasionally Nairs his chest and bleaches the hair on his arms. Gilbert

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[11] For a brief overview of the origins of the concept of the queer heterosexual and its emergence in queer theory, see Calvin Thomas' forward and Richard Fantina's introduction to *Straight Writ Queer: Non-normative Expressions of Heterosexuality in Literature* (McFarland & Company, 2006). Thomas explains that the use of the term "straight queer" was in circulation as early as 1991 in an anonymously authored pamphlet published in London. Fantina cites Calvin Thomas, *Straight With a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (U Illinois P, 2000), with editing the first book length volume devoted to the study of queer heterosexuality in literature.

keeps in his closet fishing tackle and feathers of birds he has killed, but he also keeps in his closet wigs and plastic breasts.

The closet serves as a regulatory device, allowing for queerness to exist as long as it has been safely excised from the larger community. Just as the community in this story must continually reinforce heterosexual norms through the limiting of drag performances to two heavily scripted events out of the year, Gilbert must regulate his own investment in this queering performance. While male drag performances are not always indicative of homosexual men, Gilbert remains unable to register how the pleasure he experiences in drag affects his sexual desire. Gilbert's exposure of this drag performance to his sixteen-year-old son, who is in the midst of his own sexual awakening, opens up the link between gender performance and sexual desire, and it is this complex relationship that the story explores in depth. As the queer heterosexual father, Gilbert lacks the violent homophobia that has defined a generation of heterosexual fathers before him, and he challenges his son to not let his own homophobia prevent him from participating in events that may lead to a greater self-awareness. The son's experience with drag, however, exposes the father's inability to acknowledge how drag can be linked to queer desire. During the session in which Gilbert teaches his son how to dress as a woman, Sugar becomes sexually aroused by the process. Sugar thinks to himself, "my dick, for no good reason, was stiff and aching" and publicly acknowledges to his father that he's "got a hard on" (*AG* 119). Although such a scene raises the prospect of incestuous desire, Sugar's thought process seems less focused on an object of desire than on the eroticism of breaking the societal taboo of cross-dressing for the first time. Removing the restrictions of gender behavior that normally accompany male heterosexuality allows for the

emergence of sexual desire that must otherwise be repressed or denied for heterosexuality to remain intact. Realistically, however, erections for sixteen year old boys are not uncommon occurrences under any circumstances.

Sugar's vocalization of sexual arousal during the process of putting on feminine clothing disrupts the belief that his drag performance will have no effect on the supposedly stable heterosexual boy underneath the clothes. Exemplifying Jagose's definition of queer, this moment serves to "dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire," and the football game which Sugar attends as a cheerleader becomes the stage upon which these incoherencies manifest themselves (3). Contrary to Gilbert's suggestion that dressing as a woman will enact an internal transformation, Sugar initially believes in the stability of his own gender and that his heterosexuality forms an essential component of it. Thus, while Sugar wears women's clothes, he is still a man underneath, and even though the objects of his desire are wearing men's clothing, he is really attracted to what he knows are women underneath the clothes. After performing as a cheerleader, Sugar has an epiphanic moment concerning his father's concept of "feeling beautiful": "Suddenly I knew that my father was right, that I did feel beautiful, except that now beauty had a different meaning for me. It meant that I was who I was, the core of me, the perfect center, and that the world was who it was and that those two facts were unchangeable" (*AG* 120). Still trying to frame his experience within the logic of heterosexual essentialism, Sugar believes that dressing as a woman will not subvert his unchangeable core.

Moments later, however, Sugar experiences a mystical transformation that challenges him to rethink the composition of this core and to acknowledge the power to be gained from the fusion of the masculine and feminine, one in which the acknowledgement of the feminine becomes a crucial component for achieving greater self-awareness:

> my small breasts had become a part of me, not rubber but flesh. My cock, beneath the lacy underpants, was what it had always been, this odd hard unpredictable equipment I had been born with, and yet it was also a moist opening into the hidden fragrance of another self that was me as well. My arms were woman arms, my feet woman-feet, my voice, my lips, my fingers. I stood on the sweet sad brink of womanhood, and somehow I shared this newness with my father. (*AG* 120)

Through this union of both male and female sexual organs, the penis and the "moist opening," Sugar obtains a level of self-knowledge that has been previously denied to him. Sugar's moment of transgendered transformation blurs the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, not just through a conscious self-fashioning of the surface, but also through the fusion of anatomy, suggesting that the reduction of one's sex to a binary system of biological difference cannot account for the complicated ways in which we actually experience ourselves. Such a fusion disrupts the underlying structures of heteronormativity by questioning the supposedly incontrovertible biological division of the sexes that makes heterosexuality culturally legible.[12]

By consistently devaluing the feminine within himself, Sugar limits his own self-perception, and through this drag performance, he can tap into this source of knowledge.

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[12] For a discussion of how the biological argument for the difference in sexes leads to a heterosexually based system of oppression for women, see Monique Witting, "One Is Not Born a Woman." *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. (Beacon Press, 1992), 9-20.

More than just a subversive tool that serves to deconstruct the supposedly stable binary of sexual difference, drag here also functions as a constructive act, one that serves to create an identity imbued with meaning and significance, no less important because of its constructed nature. This notion of drag as a simultaneous act of construction and deconstruction runs throughout much of the sociological literature focused on the motivations for why men participate in drag performances. In a sociological study of male drag queens at a night club in Key West, Florida, researchers Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp argue that the men's drag performance serves not just as a "strategy for undermining normative gender arrangements," but also a means of enacting a "collective identity" (121). As one drag performer in the study notes, "Out of drag, I feel like I'm acting. In drag, I feel like myself" (122). This paradoxical statement speaks to the heart of the complex transformation Sugar undergoes during the football game. Through the artifice of performance, Sugar can arrive at a more complete, and thus richer, experience of his self.

But who is this new "self" Sugar experiences, and how profound are the changes it effects on other aspects of his identity, such as his sexual desire? Despite the gender-bending quality of the crowning of the homecoming queen, who is a guy dressed up as a woman, the visible framework of heterosexuality remains intact, which serves to allay Sugar's fear of the entire performance being too queer. Nadine, the woman dressed up as a football player, crowns Jeep, the guy dressed up as a woman, who enacts the part with vigor. Still a "man" and "woman" participating in the ceremony, the suggestion of same-sex desire remains suppressed, albeit only momentarily. Sugar experiences yet another transformation, but he cannot as easily envelop this one into a heterosexual frame. What

surfaces during this moment is the possibility of same-sex desire, one which the story suggests has been given the space to occur through this conscious disruption of normative gender roles.

Surprised by his feelings of desire, as he was by his bodily transformation, Sugar acknowledges his same-sex attraction. Sugar declares that "there was lust and even love in [his] heart" for Toni Pirelli, the young football coach who, for the moment, is "wearing a business suit with a black-pleat in the skirt" (*AG* 124). Breaking the heavily scripted performance of drag, this spontaneous moment of same-sex attraction emerges despite Sugar's earlier profession of love for the girls. Registering his own internalization of homophobia, however, Sugar declares that he "hated [his] thoughts and [his] feelings" (*AG* 124), and he fears that his own emotions are a betrayal of his father's expectations: "I was certain my father could read them all the way to the top of the bleachers" (*AG* 124). Nonetheless, Sugar allows himself to acknowledge the depth of attraction he feels toward Toni Pirelli: "I had never seen anyone so beautiful as Tony Pirelli. He never smiled, and now his sadness called out to me, it made me want to hold him and protect him from all harm, to kiss his lips and neck, to close his brown eyes with my kisses, to hold his small breasts in my hands and to have him touch my own breasts" (*AG* 124). This disruption of Sugar's previous heterosexual desires confounds his ability to label himself. Attempting to explain this shift, Sugar declares, "I believed I was a lesbian. What else could I call myself?" (*AG* 124). Sugar's question speaks to the complex permutations sexual desire can embody when the regime of normative gender roles has been momentarily lifted.

By admitting to himself this feeling of same-sex desire, Sugar breaks the cycle of self-ignorance and denial that has allowed these drag performances to continue without the threat of homosexuality being attached to the performers. Through honest introspection, Sugar acknowledges what his father does not, but this conscious articulation prohibits his continued participation in the performance. Having spoken of the same-sex desire that exists as the subtext of these drag performances, he can no longer ignore its reality. Panicked by the thought of his homosexuality, Sugar runs away from the football game before it ends and retreats toward the safety of his father's house. Looking to reaffirm his heterosexuality, he heads to "the safety of [his] father's room" where his masculinity can once again be restored amid his father's "fishing rods and reels with names like Shakespeare and Garcia, the suits of camouflage and the rubber hip waders" (*AG* 124). Yet, for all the ways in which the adult narrator wants to contain the queerness, the reality of queer desire remains, for his return to the phallic rods and reels signals a queer attachment to his father's masculinity.

As if to clear up the sexual chaos the drag performance produces, the older and supposedly wiser Sugar as narrator again tries to resist the radical core of a story containing same-sex desire. As Sugar walks back to his parent's house, he experiences another epiphany that conveniently serves, as Butler argues, "to reidealize heterosexual norms" (231). Disavowing the authenticity of his gender performance and his moment of same-sex attraction, Sugar declares, "I did not feel like a woman. I was not in love with a boy. I was a boy in a costume for one night of the year, and I was my father's child and the child of this strange southern geography" (*AG* 125). Sugar's confirmation of his heterosexuality here exemplifies Butler's argument that drag performances are almost

always ambivalent. Using the drag film *Paris is Burning* as an example, Butler argues that drag can be simultaneously an appropriation and a subversion.[13] As for Nordan's story, even though Sugar subverts the notion of masculinity that originally stymied his sense of self-perception, he ends up appropriating female impersonation as a means to limn the boundaries of his own heterosexuality.

Nevertheless, the end of Nordan's story suggests that Sugar's drag performance has not failed to alter for the good his beliefs about what is appropriate masculine behavior. At the close of the story, after everyone changes back into the clothes of "proper boys and girls," Sugar imagines, as he dances with Nadine Johnson, what his life will turn out like: "I imagined I would marry. . . and that together we would have sons and that we would love them and teach them to be gentle and to love the music we were dancing to and to wear dresses and that, in doing this, we would somehow never grow old and that love would last forever" (*AG* 125). While Sugar no longer questions the inevitability of his heterosexuality, Sugar's desire to teach his own sons "to be gentle" and "to wear dresses" marks his own acceptance of a different form of masculinity, one that promises to reshape the destructive masculine identity Nordan depicts in his other representations of the father. The various incarnations of Gilbert and Sugar in Nordan's fiction thus emerge as a metaphor for the multiple notions of masculinity needed to face the "collective Oedipal complex" Applewhite saw at work in earlier southern fiction (31). Far from the emotionally detached, alcoholic, and silent father Sugar experiences in other stories, the cross-dressing father in this story who teaches his son how to dress as a woman and the son who openly accepts his father's guidance emerge as healthier and

[13] See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* (Routledge, 1993), 125.

vibrant alternatives. Precisely because of this openness at the end of "The All-Girl Football Team," Nordan can return to Sugar's queer desire in "Porpoises and Romance," one which similarly creates a productive disruption of a rigid heterosexual masculinity and offers Sugar a more positive vision of adult masculinity to which he can aspire.

Chapter 2

From Abject to Agential: The Queer Subject in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* and *The Sharpshooter Blues*

Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1993) and *The Sharpshooter Blues* (1995) function as psychological seismographs, registering shifts in the emotional topography of his fictional town of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi, after the tragic deaths of children, one black, one white, during the mid-nineteen fifties. Both novels use real-life events, *Wolf Whistle*, the lynching of Emmett Till, and *The Sharpshooter Blues*, the suicide of Nordan's son, as springboards for fictional explorations of communal responses to traumas.[1] Questions of culpability abound in both novels and force his characters to interrogate their own participation in the process of othering and ultimately the deaths of these vulnerable members. In doing so, the novels probe the value attributed or denied to the lives of those who are different and marginal in southern culture, and the health of his community rests on how it responds to the violence that befalls these figures. While critics such as Terrell L. Tebbetts, Roberta S. Maguire, and Huey Guagliardo[2] address the themes of accountability, scapegoating, and alienation, respectively, in Nordan's fiction,

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[1] See Thomas Ærvold Bjerre "'Longing for a Male Love': An Interview with Lewis Nordan." *Mississippi Quarterly* 60.4 (2007): 754 for Nordan's suggestion that his son informed elements of Hydro's story in the novel.

[2] See Terrell L. Tebbetts "Are We All Alone? Solitude and Agency in Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues*" *Mississippi Quarterly* 60.4 (2007): 677-695; Roberta S. Maguire "The 'Idea of Order' in Arrow Catcher, Mississippi: Scapegoating and Redemption in *The Sharpshooter Blues*." *Lewis Nordan: Humor, Heartbreak, and Hope* (UP of Alabama, 2009), 71-82, and Huey Guagliardo "'A Life of Loneliness and Oddity': Freaks, Alienation, and the Consoling Power of Narrative in Lewis Nordan's Fiction." *Southern Quarterly* 41.3 (2003): 64-77.

they have yet to consider how Nordan's concern with the marginal, the "freaks," and the "oddities" of small-town southern life makes possible his exploration of alternative sexualities, specifically same-sex desire between men. Though Nordan's fiction remains carefully attuned to how a patriarchal culture sustained by homophobia, racism, and sexism works to prevent the fulfillment of sexual desire outside the bounds of heterosexual, intraracial unions, queer subjects emerge in spite of such a culture and act as disrupting agents, forcing readers to question a heterosexual masculinity in crisis.

Though Nordan frequently alludes to a cosmic, universal alienation as the cause of his characters' unhappiness, the problems facing his male characters can be traced back to a destructive pattern of fathers initiating their sons into a harmful, debilitating masculinity conditioned by silence and emotional reticence. Once the sons grow into men, this proclivity toward silence negatively affects all of their relationships, with men and women alike, and they struggle to express themselves outside the sanctioned avenues of violence and domination. An integral but often critically overlooked part to challenging this identity, Nordan affirms, lies in confronting the lingering threat of homosexuality that prevents men from connecting with each other in healthy and emotionally fulfilling ways. Such a confrontation proves vitally important for Nordan's gay male characters who must learn to develop an emotional intimacy with other men that defies the traditional logic of male interaction. In challenging the heterosexual imperative that underlies such a rigid masculine identity, Nordan creates textual space for queer characters to surface, and their appearance signals a positive step in the overall health of his community.

In the writing of *Wolf Whistle* and *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Nordan undergoes a paradigmatic shift regarding his representation of queer characters, one that reveals when and how the lives of such men come into focus. In *Wolf Whistle* queer characters appear only via the imagination of violent, heterosexual white men, a nullifying gaze that diminishes queer life to the distorted projections of bigoted minds. All but one of the queer subjects in *Wolf Whistle* are absent by the text's opening and thus remain offstage, at the fringes, their lives untold and silenced, enlivened only by the imagination of a character unable to process his culpability in his violent attacks against them. Readers experience the other potentially queer character, Hoyty-Toyty, through the jealous, homophobic-laced rant of Lord Poindexter Montberclair who accuses him of sleeping with his wife, Sally Anne (hence the reason why Hoyty-Toyty is only "potentially" queer.) Ironically, the very presence of these gay men in the text highlights their intended erasure from a homophobic society unwilling to contain them.

Wresting the focus away from these violent white men, Nordan, in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, invokes an omniscient narration and enters into the mind of the queer subject himself, allowing readers to understand Leonard Reel (later identified as Leonard Greer)[3], the now older Hoyty-Toyty, from his own perspective. No longer confined to a heterosexual gaze and finally allowed to have a name rather than merely a pejorative, the gay man in *The Sharpshooter Blues* does not die, nor is he the victim of homophobic violence. Rejecting a culture of silence and shame connected to a damaging compulsory heterosexuality, Leonard undergoes a life-affirming transformation in the novel, one made possible through open communication and shared vulnerability between

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[3] In keeping with Nordan's tendency for narrative inconsistencies, Leonard undergoes a series of seemingly inadvertent name changes. In *Wolf Whistle* Nordan identifies Leonard's last name as McCarty, whereas in *The Sharpshooter Blues,* Nordan gives Leonard's last name as Reel and then later as Greer.

men. Such mutual vulnerability extricates same-sex intimacy from the cycle of violence and domination that accompanies it in *Wolf Whistle*, and gay sex in *The Sharpshooter Blues* emerges as an authentic and healing act of physical connection, one that offers Leonard a form of redemption, which presents a positive alternative to the ubiquitous suicides of gay men in earlier southern fiction: Allan in *A Street Car Named Desire*, Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Folner in *The House of Breath*, Roscoe in *The Optimist's Daughter*, and Horace in *A Visitation of Spirits*.

Such a literary history should not be taken as an aspersion to those narrative decisions—for these authors' characterizations reflect the complex and difficult task of representing queer life in a hostile and oppressive culture. As insightful and perhaps accurate as these depictions are, however, they offer more of an understanding of queer death, of the impossibility of living in a homophobic South that will not contain them, rather than the possibilities of queer life, of how gay men learn to overcome such self-loathing and avoid the pernicious effects of internalized homophobia. The advantage in time no doubt grants Nordan greater latitude in writing *The Sharpshooter Blues* than these other authors in imagining the intricacies of queer life, for he is looking back at a nineteen fifties' South from the mid-nineteen nineties, a time during which the nation became increasingly more comfortable with seeing gay lives depicted in print. In fleshing out queer *life* in the nineteen fifties by exploring what remains silenced in those texts published around the mid-twentieth century, Nordan says without obfuscation what could only be coded, oblique, and marginal in these works. Nordan, a white, straight male from Mississippi demonstrates just how far southern authors have come in imagining gay male subjects, for while gay authors have been chronicling gay life for decades, relatively few

straight authors and even fewer straight white men have approached queer life with the compassion, insight, and hope that Nordan does in *The Sharpshooter Blues*.

Although *Wolf Whistle* uses the 1955 murder of fourteen year old Emmett Till as a historical frame, it does not offer a conventional rendering of Till's story. In fact, the narrative's central focus is not Till, the black boy from Chicago who was murdered in Mississippi after allegedly wolf-whistling at a white woman, but the white citizens who were implicated, by varying degrees, in his death. Nordan, who grew up in Itta Bena only miles away from where Till was lynched, confesses in his essay "The Making of A Book," which he wrote shortly after publishing *Wolf Whistle*, that as a young boy he knew several relatives of J.W. Milam, one of the two men accused of murdering Till. His step-father even developed a friendship with a brother to one of the killers. Given these circumstances, Nordan declares that he felt as though his race and geography implicated him in Till's death (75). Exacerbating this feeling of implication was the pervasive silence among Nordan and his family and friends that followed the tragedy. As Nordan explains in an interview, "We never spoke of the murder. . . . I never said anything, and nobody else said anything about it either. We were horrified by it. We were so shocked we couldn't deal with it at all, couldn't even talk about it" ("Interview," Ingram and Ledbetter 84).

Nordan's internal drive to write such a novel attests to his need to say something in the face of such mindless violence, to break the silence so often integral to maintaining the status quo of racial subordination and white solidarity. Nordan's guilt here is one primarily of omission, one of silence in the face of racial tyranny, but it is only one manifestation of the complex web of silences he interrogates in the novel. Regarding the

issue of silence, the primary focus of scholarship on the novel deals with Nordan's attempt (or lack thereof) to flesh out the interiority of Bobo, the Till figure of the novel, and to give voice to a character without which the novel would not have been written. The question of whether a white writer, one with such close geographical ties to the tragedy, could or should attempt to recreate Till's voice remains a source of debate among scholars. Defending Nordan's narrative choices, Bethany Perkins argues that "Nordan's remedy for stunned silence and qualms over misappropriation lies in an indirect narrative approach" (697), but such a reliance on rhetorical maneuvers of indirection ultimately proves insufficient for several black critics, such as Randall Kenan[4] and Donnie McMahand, who view the absence of Till's voice disappointing in an otherwise successful novel.

Taking Nordan's cue that the novel is not exclusively Till's story in any conventional, historical sense, I want to redirect the focus of this debate surrounding Nordan's perceived silence regarding Till's voice and explore what the novel reveals about other types of silences, shifting the perspective from silence in the aftermath of racial violence to the silences instrumental to its genesis and implementation. More specifically, I want to address the novel's exposure of the cultural silences that remain integral to the construction of heterosexuality and the violence needed to maintain it during moments of crisis. Heterosexuality, as the novel demonstrates, relies upon a series of strategic silences to remain culturally intelligible, and its intelligibility remains crucial to the continuation of white supremacy. The concept of a culturally intelligible identity, as Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble,* begins with the notion of gender identity since "'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with

[4] See Randall Kenan "Mississippi Goddam." *Nation* 15 Nov. 1993: 592-95.

the recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (22). Heterosexuality, as Butler further explains, becomes a necessary condition for establishing "'intelligible genders' . . . those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (23). Far from a natural, self-sustaining, and stable condition, heterosexuality, as it appears in Nordan's text, exists as a constructed, dependent, and precarious position. In Nordan's creation of the murderer, Solon Gregg, he effectively reveals the connection between threatened masculinity, homophobia, and violence, suggesting that an examination of racial atrocity is not complete without an interrogation of the ways in which maintaining white supremacy relies upon a constant reassertion of heterosexuality.

Nordan's rhetorical strategy, as Thomas Ærvold Bjerre notes, echoes Eudora Welty's evocative use of first person narration in "Where is the Voice Coming From" to explore the mind of Medgar Evers' killer, Byron De La Beckwith ("Shocked" 739). In *Wolf Whistle* Nordan employs similar moments of narration through which readers gain access to Solon's psyche. Only through such a rendering of Solon's interiority do readers become privy to both those ideas he cannot speak aloud and the twisted logic by which he sanctions the multiple forms of violence he commits or wishes to commit. Unlike Welty's piece, Nordan's novel contains multiple shifts of perspective, including omniscient narration from other white male characters who begin to reject the accepted model of masculinity represented by Solon. The novel's inclusion of these other moments of stream-of-consciousness narration suggests that Nordan is not only interested in understanding the pathology of a racist, criminal mind, but also in how white men can and should begin the complex process of divesting themselves from the modes of

thinking that foment racial bigotry and violence. In doing so, *Wolf Whistle* investigates the cycles of white male violence passed down from father to son and questions whether future generations of white sons are doomed to repeat the sins of the fathers.

Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*, then, is in part a story about the calamitous failure of white southern fathers and the damage they exact, not just on their sons, but on the many others who become warped into their orbits of influence. Locating the genesis of Solon's psychic damage in the traumatic relationship with his father, Nordan implies that Solon's path towards violence arises out of familial dysfunction and a failed initiation that prevent Solon from entering into an adult masculinity. In addition to being a product of a racist, segregated South, Solon emerges as an irreparably damaged son who proves impotent to stop his father who continually molests Solon's sister, Juanita. Rather than standing up and confronting his father, Solon flees home, leaving his younger brother to stay and sacrifice "his whole life trying to keep their daddy from fucking Juanita" (64). Undermining the myth of the black beast rapist, Nordan has Juanita find protection and happiness in the arms of a black man who, ironically, distances her from the vile molestations of a white man. Solon's inability first to protect Juanita from her father and then to prevent her from an interracial relationship questions not just his whiteness but also his manhood. In analyzing how the threat of interracial relationships continually surfaces in white supremacist discourse, Abby L. Ferber argues that "gender is central to the process of constructing whiteness. Consequently, the reestablishment of racial boundaries and the reassertion of white identity also require the reestablishment of gender boundaries and the reassertion of traditional gender identities" (135). Solon's failure here

positions him as the uninitiated son, the child forever seeking other forms of initiation that can confer on him the status of both whiteness and an adult masculinity.

The lingering effects of Solon's failed initiation materialize unexpectedly when he tries to explain his rationale for defending Lady Anne Montberclair (a southern white woman) from the advances of Bobo (a black boy) who whistles at her in Red's Goodlookin Bar and Grocery. Clearly identifying how his previous failure to protect Juanita plays a pivotal role in his defense of Lady Montberclair, Solon tells her husband, Lord Poindexter Montberclair, that he and Sally Anne are friends and that he wants "to protect her like a brother" (53). When Lord Montberclair begins to question the intimacy of Solon's relationship with his wife, Solon makes explicit his connection between Juanita and Sally Anne:

> I got me a sister in St. Louis, Mr. Dexter, baby sister name of Juanita, call her Neat, run off and married a nigger pimp and set up for a ho and broke our mama's heart, . . . and she's got this little nigger baby, little boy, and me his onliest uncle in the world. Onliest woman in the world I'd die for, Mr. Dexter. I miss her so much I want to die sometimes, so instead, I go down to New Orleans and roll queers, killed one of them, maybe, I don't know, probably did if I could remember it. (57-8)

In positioning his act of rolling queers as a response to the racial boundary breaking of his sister, Solon exposes the connection between interracial sexuality and its threat to normative heterosexuality. This process of rolling queers serves as part of the ongoing work of reasserting Solon's masculinity, for in punishing those men who have stepped outside the boundaries of normative gender roles, he attempts to solidify his own heterosexual status. Although Solon never consciously acknowledges it, he readily understands the legitimizing quality of his homophobia, for as Michael S. Kimmel notes, "homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood"

(129). Solon even thinks that such homophobic violence could serve as a point of interracial connection between him and Neat's husband when he claims that "he would try to find something in common with the pimp, too, Neaty's husband. What did nigger pimps like to talk about? he wondered. He could tell him about rolling queers in the Quarter" (65). His logic, as unsettling as it appears, underscores the way in which violence often facilitates heterosexual male bonding, but it is a thought that Solon ultimately keeps to himself.

Solon's confession to Lord Montberclair contains an intentional silencing of the prospect of queer desire, for while he does indeed speak about potentially killing queers, he does not tell about receiving oral sex during these episodes. Only through Nordan's omniscient narration do readers learn the full extent of Solon's robberies in New Orleans: "Sometimes he would wake up the next morning with folding-money in his pocket and new suits in his closet, and maybe a wet dick in his pants, and not know where he got any of them" (59). The normalizing effect of Solon's actions rests upon his ability to contain their queering potential, and he hopes that his focus on the end product of violence, of "kill[ing] one of them" (57) or "leaving them bleeding in the hotel room" (59), will serve as a legitimating factor that reaffirms the heterosexuality of an event that under other circumstances could be read as gay. For Solon, beliefs, desires, and actions that do not fall under the purview of socially acceptable heterosexual behavior must be exorcised and expelled through the displacement of these tendencies on an Other who must be violently punished and effectively ostracized from the body politic. These potentially dead queer bodies hover at the very edges of Nordan's text; they remain there but not there, integral to the formation of normative heterosexuality, but entirely absented from the text itself,

an exemplification of Judith Butler's theory that the construction of normative heterosexuality relies upon the acknowledgement of an abject homosexual identity that does not conform to cultural norms but one that is nonetheless crucial to the intelligibility of heterosexuality itself.

Solon's silence here, the intentional omission of queer desire, implies his realization of the need to define himself against an abject queer identity that does not fulfill vital cultural norms. Upon returning home to Mississippi from New Orleans after Solon's son tries to set him on fire but sets himself on fire instead, Solon imagines his own exploits in relationship to the biblical story of the prodigal son. Contemptuous of the prodigal son's ability to receive forgiveness, Solon imagines the biblical father as "some rich sissy's daddy" and the son as "that sleazy, lazy-ass rich boy" (63). In positioning the biblical son as a "sissy," Solon projects onto the prodigal son the queering potential of his own exploits that he renders in a hypothetical conversation with his own father: "Daddy, look, I done spent every cent you give me and been rolling queers in New Orleans. . . . I been fucking fatted calves and wearing they clothes and spending they money on food and drink a swine wouldn't never eat, ever since I seen you last" (63). Solon merges the celebratory spoil of the fatted calf in the biblical story with the wealthy gay men he robs for money, clothes, and sex, a move that simultaneously conflates homosexuality with bestiality. Solon's admission to sleeping with men, of "fucking fatted calves" whose clothes he later wears, becomes a narrative that cannot be spoken. Solon thinks to himself, "I wonder what kind of reception I would of got if I had come back home with a story like that. I never would have got that ridiculous story out of my mouth" (63). He cannot tell the story in part because the prospect of homosexuality places him not simply

outside the bounds of paternal forgiveness but outside the very bounds of cultural intelligibility itself. Solon questions not just the reception of such an admission but the very act of making it. Such a son could not be conceivable to a father let alone a son who could be accepted back into the familial fold.

This threat of emasculation as the result of homosexuality looms large in the psyches of both Solon and Lord Montberclair, and in the scene in which Lord Montberclair asks Solon to kill Bobo for him, Nordan exposes the way this threatened masculinity filters into their motivations of racial violence. In the hotel where Solon has been sleeping, Lord Montberclair begins to tell Solon of Lady Montberclair's adulterous past and of her affair with Hoyty-Toyty McCarty, the organist at the Episcopal Church. Ironically, Lord Montberclair reveals this information about Hoyty-Toyty right before he asks Solon to kill Bobo:

> What really galled the living shit out of Poindexter Montberclair was that the boy who was fucking his wife was a known homosexual. Biggest goddamn queer Arrow Catcher, Mississippi, ever produced, and it had produced a few. . . . The boy's name was Hoyty-Toyty McCarty, that's what they called him, Poindexter didn't know his real name, puny little cocksucker with pale skin and pale hair and known to have a dick like a goddamn Mexican donkey. Just nobody knew he was using it on married women. Or maybe everybody did. Maybe everybody in Arrow Catcher knew expect Poindexter. (113)

Poindexter's confusing logic, calling Hoyty-Toyty a homosexual despite the fact that he sleeps with women, reveals more about his own threatened masculinity than it does Hoyty-Toyty's sexuality. That Poindexter responds to the affair via homophobia makes sense given Kimmel's argument that "homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (131). The potential that everyone in Arrow Catcher except for Poindexter may

know of the affair only furthers his sense of being unmasked, and by focusing on the size of Hoyty-Toyty's penis, he, in a very literal way, highlights his fear over not measuring up. Like those anonymous queers in New Orleans, Hoyty-Toyty, whose real name readers never really learn, remains at the fringes of the text, never fully developed, existing only in the skewed perspective of the heterosexual imagination.

When Poindexter begins to tell Solon about Sally Anne's affair, Solon is in a state of semi-consciousness, a dream state, so readers never really know how much of Poindexter's story, especially as it relates to Hoyty-Toyty's homosexuality, is true and how much of it has been fabricated by Solon. Such ambiguity appears intentional, for it suggests how Poindexter's sense of threatened masculinity conjures up Solon's own fears of inadequacy. Initially, this confusion leads Solon to think that Poindexter wants him to kill Hoyty-Toyty instead of Bobo. Solon is mistaken, of course, for Poindexter is really asking him to kill Bobo. Racism and threatened masculinity become intricately intertwined as motivating factors of Poindexter and Solon's violence. That Poindexter wants Solon to kill Bobo, the black boy who wolf-whistles at his wife, rather than Hoyty-Toyty, the white man who has really been sleeping with her, highlights the way in which black men become the ultimate scapegoats of white male violence.

These absented and abject queer bodies, specifically those bleeding gay men who Solon marks for death in New Orleans, prefigure the absented body of Bobo, who, as Donnie McMahand points out, in all but a "few passages *disappears* from the text. . . . Solon's gaze has already absented him, has already marked him as deceased" (209). Only against this realm of the abject, of non-being, can men like Solon define and maintain the privileged norms of whiteness and heterosexuality. Critic Harriet Pollack argues that

"Bobo's black body changes place with bodies of damaged white children," noting how Solon's son, Glenn, lies dying, ravaged by a fire intended to consume Solon but one that, ironically, burns Glenn up in the process (194). Pollack further explains that such an "assault on cultural division is not made through trite generalization about how we are all victims in a racist culture. Instead, by means of the novel's shape-shifting habit, we see that behaviors meant to elevate and privilege the white male produce both the mutilation and death of a black child and of the white son" (194). These mangled queer bodies in New Orleans connect the badly burned body of the son with that of Bobo and further exemplify the collateral damage of the white man's quest for supremacy, one dependent upon a constant reassertion of both heterosexuality and whiteness. In fidelity to the gaze of the perpetrator, the visions of these queer bodies and that of Bobo remain one dimensional, lacking in both emotional and psychological depth. As McMahand already points out, only after death, finally wrested from the nullifying gaze of the white male, does Bobo's body find a voice, a magical blues song that reverberates throughout the Mississippi Delta. These queer bodies remain ciphers, continually silenced, even in death, by a culture that refuses to see them as bodies worth knowing or understanding.

Only through such a direct, psychological exploration of the white man's gaze can Nordan expose the vital importance of the silences necessary for maintaining heterosexuality as the cultural norm, and heterosexuality, in this case, becomes a prerequisite for preserving white supremacy. For those white men like Solon who face a crisis in masculinity, southern culture becomes a constant negotiation of these silences, of knowing when and to whom to speak, and what and what not to say. Solon can openly admit to one of the white citizens that he and Lord Montberclair are "gone kill a nigger"

because of the unmitigated privilege it bestows on him as a white man, whereas his practice of rolling queers in the quarter remains less definitive in its ability to confirm his heterosexuality because it raises the prospect of queer desire (133).

Silence alone is not enough to establish cultural norms, for violence becomes the preferred way to conceal the fissures that are bound to occur in such a rigid and narrowly defined masculine identity. By revealing the connections between threatened masculinity, homophobia, and racial violence, Nordan demonstrates that deconstructing whiteness cannot be accomplished by questioning racial privilege alone. One must also be willing to expose the corrosive effects of maintaining a compulsory heterosexuality that artificially restricts the range of acceptable masculine behavior and compounds the need for white men to commit acts of racist violence.

In an effort to challenge the architecture of silence and shame that provides the foundation of such a debilitating masculinity, Nordan moves away from the interior perspective offered by Solon and suggests the potential for change in another father/son pairing, that of Runt Conroy and his son, Roy Dale. Runt Conroy serves as a counterpoint to Solon Gregg, for although he, like Solon, struggles with alcoholism and a failing marriage, he begins to question the legitimacy of violence in enforcing the social etiquette of racial segregation. Runt's decision to warn Bobo's kin of Solon's anger signals the beginning of his metamorphosis throughout the novel and marks the start of his shift away from the dominant mode of white masculinity. Runt's metamorphosis actually begins when one of the other men in the bar triggers his epiphany about his own isolation in the world:

> suddenly, when Gilbert said this to him about the graves in New Orleans, something ended for Runt, some innocence, or blindness, fell away from

> him, and Runt Conroy suddenly knew what he had not known before, that he was all alone in the world, that we all are, and because he had put off knowing this simple fact for so long, he was also as defenseless as a child against the random and irrelevant terrors of the solitude as well. (42)

Runt's belief that "he was all alone in the world," a refrain that surfaces in several of Nordan's texts, underscores an alienation further exacerbated by a segregated culture that makes authentic human connection increasingly difficult. Through Runt's decision to attempt a connection across the color line, Nordan affirms that such an awareness of one's inevitable isolation does not have to end in despair. As Huey Guagliardo explains about Nordan's fiction, "there is a sense in his texts that bridging the gap between the self and 'Other,' making a connection with another human being, offers the only redemption possible, the only way to defend oneself against alienation" (65-6). In the face of a cosmic loneliness that does not respect racial distinctions, Runt begins to question the depth and authenticity of his connection to these white men in the bar and to realize its illusory quality. In leaving him "defenseless as a child," this alienation momentarily allows Runt to empathize with Bobo, a child who undoubtedly has little protection from the terror that is about to befall him.

Positive change in race relations, Nordan suggests, lies within the realm of the personal, in the implicit imperative to "only connect," to recall E. M. Forster's phrase, but Nordan does not trivialize the lingering barriers preventing such a connection between whites and African Americans. Neither Runt's racism nor his investment in a damaging masculinity diminishes easily, and such a desire, as McMahand points out, can exist simultaneously with the pathological belief that actual black bodies need not be known or understood (208). Runt enters the Belgian Congo with the idea that he can just "holler up a nigger" (Nordan 44) and does not seem off put by speaking to a disembodied

black voice that answers his call, indicating how a culture of racial separatism conditions him “to [speak] with ease to disembodiments” (Nordan 46). While such an attempt at connection does not benefit Bobo since Runt never finds him or his relatives to warn, it forces Runt to view himself from the perspective of the Other, momentarily breaking the acceptance he enjoys in the insular, affirming community of white men at the bar. The disembodied voice views him, a white man, with suspicion, asking Runt, “You ain’t gone hurt him, is you” (47). In confronting the reality that to this voice he is indistinguishable from Solon, Runt begins to think more critically about why he should *not* want to be the same as these other white men.

Such an honest, straight-forward critique from an African American momentarily penetrates Runt’s psyche, forcing him to reexamine himself from an outsider’s perspective. The previously disembodied voice that viewed Runt with suspicion morphs into an interior voice of critique that provides him with clarity of vision unseen before this encounter: “Then a thought came to him like a voice. The voice said, *You are drinking yourself to death with violent men*” (48). The voice that emerges, one made possible by that earlier disembodied voice, offers him the much needed objectivity to see, finally, the problematic masculine identity epitomized by Solon, one he later identifies with another group of men who start drinking at the bar. Serving as a masculine ritual of initiation, a young man begins to hit other young boys over the head with an ax handle. These boys line up voluntarily, without question and continue to return to the line to receive another blow. While this scene, as Pollack notes, serves to temper Nordan’s suggestion that the white men/fathers of this community can change it also becomes a microcosm of how white men become initiated into a destructive code of silence (195).

In calling attention to how a community could fall silent in the aftermath of Bobo’s murder, Nordan offers this scene to account for how this larger, cultural silence emanates in part out of a silence produced within white male relationships. Obviously, the passage demonstrates the absurdity of using violence as a means of facilitating white male bonding. For these young men, just like Solon, violence becomes inextricably intertwined into their concept of masculine behavior. More important to this ritual, however, is the manner of silence that pervades it. The male volunteers do not question the rationale of why the man would want or need to hit them with the axe handle, nor do they speak of their pain once they are hit. The ritual naturalizes not simply violence but also the silence that should accompany it. Denying one’s own pain becomes synonymous with an adult masculinity, but such a denial, as Nordan reveals, cannot be selectively applied. In silencing their own pain, these men become incapable of empathizing with the pain of others. As Runt says about the young men’s inability to be moved by the violent death of Bobo, “Nobody might as well of died at all, no murderers might as well have got let off, as far as these boys were concerned” (261).

In another moment of absurdist violence, Nordan reveals the logical extension of such a conditioning on Solon, for although in the abduction scene when Bobo manages to shoot him three times, breaking his rib and splitting open his jaw, Solon registers no pain and indicates only surprise at Bobo’s actions. The first bullet “cut off the end of his tongue,” a physical silencing rendering visible that other, destructive silence Solon experiences (170). Readers may initially attribute such an absence of pain to the shock Solon may be experiencing, but Nordan remains careful to dispel such an analysis by repeating twice in the space of three short paragraphs that Solon “didn’t go into shock”

(172, 173). Preempting such a reading, Nordan later offers in the axe handle scene a different rationale for what Solon is experiencing. Like those other men at the bar Runt witnesses, Solon has been conditioned to ignore, suppress, and silence his own physical pain in response to violence to the point of becoming numb and therefore speechless, a condition that leaves Solon incapable of connecting violence to pain, including those moments when he inflicts them. Once Bobo escapes into the darkness, Solon expresses sympathy for his exposure to the cruel elements of the land, but he remains pathologically nonplussed by the pain he will cause Bobo by shooting him: "So Solon sho did hate for Bobo to be out there behind the truck, scared half out of his wits and cutting his feet on sharp gravel, just because he was taking him out to kill him. It was a shame, a crime and a shame" (170). For Solon, the crime is the unnecessary and unexpected discomfort as the result of a harsh geography, while the violence and murder he intends becomes inevitable and therefore banal. Rather than a genuine expression of empathy, Solon's ability to understand Bobo's suffering in this moment only underscores the irrational disconnect he experiences between his own perpetuation of violence and the pain it inflicts. Solon no more questions the inevitability (and normalcy) of this act of violence than the young men who fail to question the logic of being hit in the head with an axe handle.

In light of such engrained codes of masculinity, Nordan exposes the difficulty facing white men who want to extricate themselves from a lifetime of such conditioning. Forever "changed by local horror," Runt recognizes the danger in blindly perpetuating a system of behavior that allowed the murder of a young black boy, and he takes steps to distance himself from this system of white masculinity that Solon and these new men

represent (262). Days before his wife returns home, Runt asks his son, Roy Dale, if he would call him by his real name, Cyrus, "but nobody ever called him that, never had. He was the smallest of the children in his family, when he was a boy, and his daddy always called him 'the runt of the litter.' It stuck, wouldn't you just know it" (27). A diminutive phrase that suggests one's inadequacy as a man, the name Runt typifies the traditional logic of white masculinity. Based on a hierarchy of male power, the name connotes weakness and failure. Runt's desire to be called Cyrus, although a largely symbolic gesture, confirms his desire to break away from that system of masculinity and signals his quest for transformation and his desire to take pride in his own life.

Even such a small transformation as this change remains fraught with complications, a reality Nordan illuminates in the conversation Runt has with his son's arrow-catching coach, Coach Heard, in which Runt asks to be called Cyrus over nine times. Coach Heard, contrary to his name, does not hear, or rather he hears but cannot truly comprehend Cyrus's request. Through this conversation, Nordan reveals the difficulty in defying socially engrained behavior and further implies that if such small changes on the personal level prove complicated, significant alterations to the racial ethos of such a community will not be an easy or quick process. Breaking a culture of silence that perpetuates inequality depends upon listeners who are prepared and willing to act upon the knowledge they receive, but neither Cyrus nor the Coach seem willing to do so if it places them at odds with the expected conventions of white masculinity. In the same conversation, Cyrus and Runt discuss the recent acquittal of Solon and Dexter, and the Coach asks Cyrus, "'Would you have let them go, Runt? –If you had been on the jury?' Runt took a deep breath and let it out" (274). Cyrus's silence here is one of complicity,

indicating his continued investment in his own whiteness and perhaps a growing recognition of the courage required to defy racial conventions. Cyrus appears reluctant to overturn a system of race relations that continually privileges whites over blacks, but only when he proves to be equally dedicated to challenging whiteness as he is to changing the accepted codes of masculinity can he truly begin the work of altering the conditions that lead to Bobo's lynching.

In a nod to the difficulty of such a task given the historical circumstances, Nordan's text provides only glimpses of white men beginning to challenge both of these systems simultaneously. The most significant of these glimpses occurs when Smokey Viner, one of the white boys on Roy Dale's arrow catching team, chastises the other boys in the locker room for making jokes about the recently murdered Bobo. One of the boys jokes, "they give you a day off from school if you can find a dead nigger" (199), and another one says "that a nigger had tried to steal a gin fan and swim across the lake with it" (200). As Brannon Costello argues, "these stories about Bobo's death become a sort of cultural capital that the boys disseminate amongst the group to confirm their whiteness" (216). Smokey Viner disrupts this process, though, saying, "I'm for the nigger" (204), and he refuses to take part in the boys' joke making. "It ain't right," Smoky Viner continues: "Ya'll ought to be shamed of yourself, laughing about a boy got killed" (205). Even when one of the boys reminds Smokey Viner that "it was, a you know, white lady. A Colored boy and a white lady" (206), he remains firm about the inappropriateness of their behavior.

Focusing on Nordan's strategy for raising questions of culpability in Bobo's murder, Pollack calls attention to the boys' laughter as a sign of their complicity in

perpetuating a system of racial inequality. To add to both Costello's and Pollack's readings of this scene, both of which focus on race rather than gender, one must also address the threat of homosexuality and the silence it produces as another marker of complicity, for while this moment in the locker room seems most obviously about challenging racism, it also reveals an important truth about men and why they so often fall silent and fail to question inequality. Undoubtedly, as both of these previous readings suggest, some men do not question racial inequality because they implicitly endorse it. Other men, however, do not challenge it because they are afraid of their masculinity being questioned. The threat of emasculation via the perception of homosexuality resurfaces in this scene, and participation in acts of racism solidifies not simply a white identity in crisis but a heterosexual one as well. Kimmel suggests that the "fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood" and often leads to silence. He further explains that "our fears are the sources of our silences, and men's silence is what keeps the system running" (qtd. in Ferber 138-9). Roy Dale's silence, as he later recognizes, implicates him in the perpetuation of a racist system that allowed and condoned Bobo's murder.

That this scene occurs in the locker room, a space often associated with heightened expressions of male bravado, exacerbates the anxiety over fulfilling vital cultural norms of heterosexual masculinity. Nordan exposes this anxiety through Roy Dale, who takes great pride in being an archer for the school's arrow catching team. Before changing clothes for practice, Roy Dale "touched each [arrow] with a secret intimacy, tenderness, and then rattled them against the boards of the bow rack in a manly, careless way, just in case anybody got the wrong idea" (201). On one level, tenderly

valuing the aesthetic quality of the arrows above the action and potential violence they connote becomes coded as feminine, as Roy Dale readily understands by his attempt to compensate for such femininity by rattling them in a "manly, careless way." Given the phallic connotations of the arrow and the intimate touching Roy Dale understands must remain a secret, the "wrong idea" he dreads becomes the attachment of homosexuality to such an act.

Positioning Bobo as the butt of the joke prevents Roy Dale from becoming one because of his less than masculine performance and appearance. Despite knowing that he should "take a shower after practice each day, like the other boys," Roy Dale does not because he was "ashamed of the way he looked when he was naked. He had a bad hernia, and one of his balls hung down real low" (202). Feeling separated physically from the rest of the boys, Roy Dale participates in the joke making, which serves a dual purpose: it reaffirms his privileged position as white, and it solidifies his position with the *male* community. Smokey Viner's words of dissension create a fissure in both of these processes, and for a brief period of time, they give Roy Dale the courage to form a bond based not on his whiteness or his masculinity but on shared vulnerability. Turning "to Phillip, the bucktoothed boy who was the team's manager," Roy Dale says, "we ought to sign a blood oath together, a pact, you know, like Indians or pirates, we ought to promise one another . . . that wherever we end up in life, right here or far away . . . that you'll get some braces to straighten out them buckteeth and I'll get my ball shortened, okay, you . . . want to be partners?" (202).

Focusing on the affirmation of whiteness, Costello reads Roy Dale's actions as emerging out of desperation, suggesting that "Roy Dale's desperate need to forge a

connection with another boy indicates how distressing he finds Smoky's interruption of the reproduction of whiteness and how much he has invested in the carefully maintained homeostasis of his teammates" (217). His argument, however, overlooks the content of Roy Dale's pact with Phillip, for it arises not out of whiteness, competition, or hierarchy but out of an admission of vulnerability, which completely counters the accepted codes of masculinity. Smoky Viner's decision to break rank with the other boys emboldens rather than distresses Roy Dale, and immediately after Smoky shames the boys' laughter, Roy Dale thinks to himself, "Yeah, I better take me a shower today, I think I might better start taking me a shower most every day from now on" (205). If such an act exists as only a way to reaffirm whiteness, then why does Roy Dale begin to question his own complicity in the joke telling? Roy Dale wonders "why he hadn't known enough to say what crazy Smoky Viner said. [He] even had a daddy that warned him, and he still didn't know enough" (206). What Roy Dale does know is that his shame over his body and his insecurity over not embodying the masculine ideal lead him to participate in acts of racism. Overcoming this shame and gaining confidence becomes a necessary step in resisting racism, of not letting his insecurity over his masculinity manifest in the scapegoating of others. His decision to take a shower, to be confident in being seen naked in the company of men, signals a first step in this direction.

Although those white men like Cyrus and Roy Dale experience positive change as a result of Bobo's death, they are only just beginning to question their own complicity as white men in a thoroughly racist and violent culture. Though their work is far from over, Cyrus, Roy Dale, and Smoky Viner demonstrate that any attempt to deconstruct whiteness remains incomplete without an equal commitment to question the accepted

expectations of heterosexual masculinity. Seeing as "the construction of whiteness requires the construction and maintenance of racial and gender boundaries" (Feber 142), these men must also question a system of masculinity that has woven violence into its conception of manhood. In short, they must re-define what it means to be a white man in their culture. Nordan's novel insists that the Solon Greggs of the world do not represent the totality of southern white men. Cyrus, Roy Dale, and Smoky Viner represent the possibility of creating alternative identities, demonstrating that change is not only possible but absolutely necessary.

In *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Nordan returns to this theme of transformation in the aftermath of trauma by investigating the communal response to the death of another child, Hydro Raney, a character who briefly appears in *Wolf Whistle*. After being robbed at gunpoint and raped by the sister of a pair of sibling outlaws, Hydro, a twenty-year-old man with hydrocephalus and a diminished mental capacity, shoots and kills them both. When no one believes him to be the sharpshooter, even after he tells his story, Hydro remains unable to process both what has happened to him and what he did in response. Unheard and misunderstood, Hydro drowns himself in Roebuck Lake, becoming, like Bobo in *Wolf Whistle*, an accusatory body of trauma, forcing the community to account for its role in his death. Although in *The Sharpshooter Blues* Nordan highlights once again the vulnerability of children in a violent, alienating world dominated by less-than-ideal paternal models, he shifts the novel's focus, away from the likes of those such as Solon Gregg and his son Glenn and onto those of Hydro and his father. Unlike Solon, Mr. Raney, who Tebbetts notes "is the best parent in *The Sharpshooter Blues*," appears as an unusually doting and protective father who regularly bakes his son peach pies (Hydro's

favorite), sings to him at night, and asks the postman to bring Hydro Wanted posters that stoke his imaginative exploits of pretending to be the men in the fliers and of dreaming that the women in them could be his mother who has died (691). And yet, Mr. Raney, like most men in Arrow Catcher, is no stranger to guns and to channeling his emotions, both positive and negative, into the thunderous clap of a pistol shot, evidenced by his habit of shooting into an old refrigerator he keeps in his house.

Though violence inundates the novel, particularly with its exploration of southern men's fascination with guns, it offers a broader canvas regarding their use, departing from the racial animus that often precipitated gun violence in *Wolf Whistle.* This move away from the interior spaces of Solon and those other violent, dangerous men like him opens up narrative possibilities for the exploration of the queer subject, one no longer limited by the antagonistic heterosexual gaze, and readers gain access, though briefly, to Leonard's private world, his thoughts, his fears, his shortcomings, and his loneliness. While critics such as Tebbetts and Guagliardo address Nordan's devotion to the themes of loneliness and alienation, they remain silent regarding his exploration of homosexuality in *The Sharpshooter Blues* and how its presence both furthers these themes and simultaneously pinpoints the unique difficulties facing gay men who seek authentic, healthy connections with other men in an insular and homophobic space designed to prevent such relationships from occurring. While the novel suggests that although many of the characters may experience the blues, their blues are not all the same, and their expression of them, like Leonard's, can go unnoticed by those not trained or willing to hear the individual nuances of their evocations.

Although Leonard Reel/Greer undergoes a name change since his appearance as the youthful Hoyty-Toyty McCarty in *Wolf Whistle*, the now adult man still struggling to accept his homosexuality is no doubt the same character, the musician who in both novels plays the organ at the Episcopal church, St. George by the Lake. Finally allowed a first name, and thus recognition as more than a stereotype in the heterosexual imagination, Leonard participates in the regular activities of communal life and seems no odder than Nordan's other cast of eccentric characters. Living alone in a small trailer on the outskirts of town, Leonard raises quails, supposedly for their meat, but he cannot bring himself to kill any of them, so his refrigerator overflows with hundreds of eggs from his productive covey. One may be tempted to read Leonard as just another example of Nordan's preoccupation with what Guagliardo terms "society's most marginalized individuals" and to place him within a universal narrative of human alienation (65). Identifying just such a narrative, Guagliardo claims that "for Lewis Nordan. . . loneliness is the ultimate affliction of the human spirit, and his works examine the inherent loneliness of the human condition, the chasm that separates one human being from another" (65). Leonard's loneliness though is not inherent but rather a product of his internalization of a systemic homophobia endorsed by the community in an effort to prevent the open expression of love between men. While Leonard's blues are no more important than those of the other characters, they arise not out of the plight of the "human condition" but out of a learned and therefore mutable prejudice, one that must be challenged and ultimately abandoned if those such as Leonard are to find meaningful, sustaining relationships with other like-minded men.

Early in the novel, Nordan demonstrates how Leonard's confessional, a communal event that regularly occurs at the William Tell grocery where Hydro works, enforces a system of compulsory heterosexuality and instills in him a sense of guilt and internalized homophobia. One particular Sunday, Preacher Roe travels to the store to hear Leonard "confess his sins to Almighty God," but the production takes on a titillating quality and exists as a form of entertainment for both Hydro and his friend Louis, along with the preacher and another young man named Morgan who serve as Leonard's audience (23). Leonard confesses to peeking at a truck driver while he lathers up in the shower, but such a tale, drawn out in detail for his listeners, fails to match their anticipatory excitement. Even the preacher seems disappointed at the meagerness of Leonard's account and "looked a little disgusted. He said, 'You mean to say all you did was peek at him?' He looked to Hydro like he would rather have been at the knife fight, if that's all he had to confess" (24). Initially, the preacher's disgust ostensibly reveals not a condemnation of homosexuality but a frustration over having to hear a milder, less exciting version of a story he has heard many times before from Leonard. The real disapproval over the nature of Leonard's actions occurs later, when he asks Preacher Roe to cut him off a piece of sugar cane that he proceeds to suck the juice out of, and the preacher jokingly remarks, "Don't let that sugarcane be reminding you of nothing Leonard" (31). Registering the condemnation of the joke that is its intent, Leonard tells the Preacher, "I ain't going to need to confess over this" (31). Though the confession remains open to all of Arrow Catchers' citizens, the only one actually heard remains the revelation by Leonard, even though Morgan has been in an ongoing affair with Dr. McNaughton's wife. That Leonard's confession becomes the singular expression of such

attrition positions homosexuality as the most stigmatized form of sexual deviance in the novel.

The confessional replaces violence in *Wolf Whistle* as a means of regulating the accepted conventions of sexual conduct and teaches not just Leonard, but all those who listen, what sexual acts are natural and therefore acceptable and those which are not. The community can tolerate Leonard because he expresses shame over his homosexual desires, and his self-loathing remorse over those acts serves to distance himself from the full embrace of an identity the community finds morally unacceptable. The confession positions homosexuality, not as an immutable identity, but as a choice determined by one's actions. The implicit function of Leonard's confession, as in the historical tradition of the religious confession, implies the potential for not merely changing his behavior, but arriving at a truthful discourse on sex. As Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, far from repressing any discussion of sex, society compelled people to discuss it continually through the act of confession. Sex, he notes, "was a privileged theme of confession," and rather than repress the discourse surrounding one's sexual desires and actions, the church encouraged individuals to divulge them in graphic detail, for then, it could create different categories of behavior in an ultimate effort to attribute moral judgments upon them (61). Confession, according to Foucault,

> is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. . . . The confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex. (61-2, 63)

In the context of Leonard's confession, "the true discourse on sex," prescribed by Preacher Roe who condones it, proves to be the aberrance of homosexuality, and the incessant need to confess inculcates in Leonard a repulsion of these deviant acts, such that after he has sex with men out at the Shell station, he usually "wanted to kill himself" (23). Even without the fear of violence, for no one seems to threaten him with harm, Leonard learns a powerful lesson in self-loathing that places his life at risk in a more immediate and consistent way than any form of external homophobic violence. As the history of gay men in southern literature reveals (and in real life), suicide poses a far more pressing threat to queer life than any outward form of violence.

The guilt Leonard experiences over these encounters ensures that his sexual liaisons with men will remain just that, temporary moments of pure physicality that do little toward offering him the companionship he so desperately seeks. The complete absence of Leonard's family no doubt exacerbates his loneliness, for if his father and mother are still alive, Nordan makes no mention of them in either novel. This absence of a paternal figure, even for a minor character such as Leonard, appears unusual given Nordan's penchant for exploring troubled father/son relationships in his fiction and his attribution of family members, even in passing, to almost every other minor character in the novel. Even Morgan, the white orphaned boy taken in and raised by an African American hoodoo woman, Aunt Lily, can lay claim to familial attachment, even if it is not a biological one. Over the course of the two novels, the successive changes to Leonard's surname, from McCarty, to Reel, and finally to Greer, whether intentional or not, depicts his dislocation from a sustaining familial context and points metaphorically to the unique challenges faced by gay men who in the absence of supportive family

members try to forge alternative communities with individuals who are accepting of their homosexuality.

Historically, one of the rights of passage of gay youth, particularly those growing up in homophobic spaces in the South, has been breaking away from their familial units in an effort to arrive at an acceptance of their homosexuality. As lesbian author Mag Segrest attests, "even though I loved my family and felt that love returned, I told myself in private conversations that I had to get away from home to be myself" (12). Paradoxically, then, this departure from the familial space creates a freedom for the exploration of the self, but it simultaneously leaves the gay son momentarily alienated from supportive individuals, forever seeking queer bonds that can provide him with a safe and nurturing community. Leonard's "cramped little trailer-house bedroom" on the outskirts of town functions as a symbol of this paradox of queer life, as it exists as both a space of freedom in which he can explore his homosexuality away from potentially disapproving family members but also as the stifling space of the closet, one that seals off Leonard's homosexuality from the rest of the town and delineates the limited spatial boundaries in which he can express his authentic self.

By living alone, Leonard has the freedom to bring men home from the Shell station where he usually cruises, an act unimaginable if he were to still live in his father's house, but in the "little Airstream" trailer "with a tiny window" (231) that lets in only a small amount of air, he is literally and metaphorically suffocating, "cramped for space" in a room no bigger than a large closet in an average-sized house. Leonard's body, "the great mass of himself" (230) that makes him feel like a "walrus" (231), appears ill-suited for these confined quarters, just as his sexual proclivities seem out of place, too alien, too

expansive, and ultimately beyond the bounds of acceptability in the insular world of Arrow Catcher. Comparing his human figure to that of a walrus, a creature unlikely to be found in the Mississippi Delta, externalizes the alienation Leonard experiences by being in a body that seems foreign and unwieldy despite his repeated efforts to confess for his sins of the flesh. Leonard's internalization over the perceived grotesqueness of his homosexuality manifests in his insecurity about his body, a belief he projects onto the trucker, Kevin, whom he asks to stay over the night before Hydro's funeral. As soon as morning comes, Leonard, "filled with remorse," wakes Kevin up who slept beside him during the night and tells him, "You've got to go" (231). When Kevin asks if he has committed some offense, Leonard, after prodding from Kevin, breaks down, telling him, "I feel like you're disgusted. I feel like you think I'm repulsive to look at" (233). Leonard's assumption rests on his belief that these truckers willingly sleep with him only because they are drunk and that in the sobering light of day, they will not offer him the same level of generosity.

Though homosexual, Leonard absorbs the prevailing heterosexual ethos that intimacy between men (physical or otherwise) must be facilitated by alcohol, and he begins to talk only after Kevin encourages him to express his feelings, a lesson Kevin, a recovering alcoholic, likely learns by attending "Don't Drink meetings," a euphemistic reference to the Alcoholics Anonymous gatherings Nordan attended himself once he fled the South to Pittsburgh and became sober, an experience he recounts in his memoir *Boy With A Loaded Gun* (221). Kevin's wisdom, "that it's best to talk about your feelings," counters the traditional stoicism and emotional reticence that cripples Nordan's male characters, rendering them incapable of authentically connecting with each other without

violence or alcohol. Only after drinking whiskey that tasted like coal oil can Mr. Raney share his grief over Hydro's death with Mr. Roy, the postman, the alcohol allowing Mr. Roy the freedom to hold the crying Raney in him arms and kiss him "on his unshaven cheek" (215). So, too, does Mr. Raney share legal, bonded whiskey with the undertaker, the Prince of Darkness, when they speak sincerely about their feelings of the recently deceased Hydro. Without alcohol, most of Nordan's men fall silent concerning their emotions. True, they can tell stories as they do in the all-male ritualized performances of the morning Monday Music meetings where the men gather at the diner and spin stories out of current local events, which on this occasion concerns Morgan who they initially believe shot the pair of outlaws, but this talk builds a different kind of intimacy, that between story teller and story listener, one that requires no personal emotional revelations, which ensures no man will have to be vulnerable in the presence of other men.

In an interview with Nordan, Thomas Ærvold Bjerre calls attention to this type of man in Nordan's work, suggesting that they are "silent ghosts that are incapable of filling their roles as fathers and husbands. They seem to have 'retired' from manhood," and he singles out Dr. McNaughton in *The Sharpshooter Blues* as a prime example (754). Absorbed by the television and aware but completely unwilling to stop his wife from having sex with her lover in the next room, Dr. McNaughton ignores his son's revelation that he was a witness to the shooting out at William Tell. When Dr. McNaughton, not a regular at the Monday Morning meetings, attempts to interject a personal observation about himself, telling the men, "I see now that I've pretty much wasted my life," he encounters a wall of silence, signaling the inappropriateness of his remark in this venue

and their unwillingness to engage in such a frank discussion with nothing stronger than coffee to drink (111). Finally, Leonard speaks, telling Dr. McNaughton that "generally confession is heard out at William Tell," a move that, perhaps rightly, suggests how unqualified they are to handle such a genuine revelation. The confessional meetings, though, offer no real therapeutic outlet, for as Nordan says of the audience members, "[t]hey want the dirt . . . They don't want to hear your feelings" ("Longing" 755).

Leonard's presence at the Monday Music meetings (and in the town itself) complicates Bjerre's earlier classification of manhood in Nordan's work, linked as it is to the subject positions of father and husband. The heterosexual underpinning of Bjerre's formation remains clear. Manhood becomes legible through the roles of father and husband, a move that positions masculinity, by default, as heterosexual, leaving those like Leonard in an impossible situation, forever incapable of fulfilling the cultural definitions of being a man. Internalizing this form of masculinity, Leonard develops an intense self-loathing that confines him to a perpetual cycle of acting on his same-sex desires followed by remorse and temporary abstention. The problem then with Leonard and for all the men in Nordan's work is not that they have "'retired from manhood" but that the culture itself has a limited and debilitating vision of what a man can be ("Longing" 754). After all, returning to this society of men and to the vision of manhood they represent does not offer a promising avenue for dealing with one's private problems, as Leonard's presence in the group confirms.

Though Mr. Raney appears to be expanding this cycle of initiation into male culture by teaching his son to be gentle and "to talk about how it felt to hear people make fun of his big head," he remains a product of a different era, conditioned by a destructive

pattern of channeling his otherwise unarticulated feelings through aggression. In an absurdly comic but equally troubling passage, Nordan explains Mr. Raney's habit of shooting a gun inside a house:

> there was nothing as satisfying as shooting a gun inside a house. It didn't have to involve a refrigerator. It relieved stress. It cemented relationships, strangers, or partners in marriage. . . . You wouldn't want to hurt anybody, but to fire a shot out your bedroom window, say, into a neighbor's garage, or in your own kitchen, into a large appliance, maybe, or just through the ceiling, when you were singing the blues, when you had lost your dear wife in childbirth and your only son had come out a waterhead, well, there was not a thing in the world to criticize about shooting off a pistol in that case, now was there. (62)

Though Nordan clearly constructs pathos for Mr. Raney, a man who, like Nordan, goes on to experience the unimaginable loss of a son to suicide, the suggestion that "there was not a thing in the world to criticize" about Raney's actions serves as an ironic invitation to the reader, a nod signaling a need for further investigation. Despite Raney's assumption that shooting a gun in the house "cemented . . . partners in marriage," the image of a refrigerator rendered inoperable by a series of holes offers a contrasting vision of such an act. Once a mechanism for facilitating life through the storage of food, the refrigerator becomes a receptacle of violence, shifting from a symbol of nurturance to one of destruction.

The matter-of-fact way in which Mr. Raney accepts such logic stems from his own initiation into gun ownership as a child. Inheriting a gun from a regular customer at the soda fountain where he worked, Mr. Raney receives a lesson from his mother not simply concerning proper gun etiquette but about what it means to be a boy. "Don't shoot it off in the house without asking first, honey," his mother declares (64). Such conditioning creates a culture of acceptance regarding men's recreational use of guns,

endorsing a pattern of behavior in which men substitute aggression for a genuine discussion of their feelings. Sociologist Thomas Scheff explains how early on society conditions boys into a state of "emotional silence," leaving them only the expression of anger as a way to cover other emotions society perceives as weaknesses within men:

> Boys learn early that showing vulnerable feelings (grief, fear, and shame) are seen as signs of weakness. First at home, then at school, they find that acting out anger, even if faked, is seen as strength. . . . At first merely to protect themselves, boys begin suppressing feelings that may be interpreted as signs of weakness.
>
> In Western cultures most boys learn, as first option, to hide their vulnerable feelings in emotionless talk, withdrawal, or silence. I will call these three responses (emotional) SILENCE. In situations where these options seem unavailable, males may cover their vulnerable feelings behind a display of hostility. That is, young boys learn in their families, and later, from their peers, to suppress emotions they actually feel by acting out one emotion, anger, whether they feel it or not. (24)

A product of such a culture, Mr. Raney, now an adult who experiences grief over the loss of his wife and fear over raising a disabled child on his own, masks these emotions he cannot articulate through a startling display of gun fire, a release of feelings that the community neither questions or criticizes but explicitly supports.

Over time, this repeated exposure to male hostility as a substitute for authentic emotional revelations diminishes men's capacity to hear and respond to the rare occasions when men do articulate their emotions outside displays of anger. When Hydro repeatedly tells his father that he shot the two "lovely children" out at William Tell, he refuses to believe him and attempts to attribute such a confession to a bad dream. Continually disbelieved by his father, Hydro begins crying "deep sobs, and lots of tears," but "Mr. Raney didn't know what to do, what to say" (20). Understandably, Mr. Raney does not want to believe his gentle son, now twenty years old, to be a murderer of children, and Hydro's diminished mental capacity likely causes much of his father's

incredulity. Most tellingly, his silence in the face of Hydro's tears reveals the damage that such a conditioning takes on Mr. Raney. Unprepared for such a display of emotion from another man (even his own son), Mr. Raney remains without guidance or precedence for how to interrogate further Hydro's feelings motivating such a display. After Hydro's suicide, Mr. Raney identifies this silence, his inability to hear and absorb what his son experienced, as the cause of his son's death. Mr. Raney tells Mr. Roy, "I done this to him. I'm the one killed that boy. . . . I didn't listen to him. He tried to tell me" (215). Though Mr. Raney's inability to treat Hydro's revelation seriously cannot completely account for his suicide, it, nonetheless, reveals the damage such a culture of silence has done to Mr. Raney and subsequently to Hydro.

Nordan offers the scene in Leonard's trailer as an antithesis to Mr. Raney's practice of shooting into his old refrigerator in his kitchen and the vision of masculinity it represents. This domestic scene enacts a series of ironic reversals that critique the prevailing ethos of dominant masculinity and offer a healthier alternative, one that substitutes nurturance for violence and physical intimacy for domination and exploitation. Kevin, the trucker who spends the night with Leonard and later encourages him to talk about his feelings, presents the first of these reversals. Tall, "broad-shouldered and muscular," Kevin defies the conventional expectations of the effeminate (and thus weak) gay man of the nineteen fifties, a difference comically exaggerated by the tattoos on the knuckles of both his hands (231). On the left hand knuckles "were the letters I-R-O-N" spelled out, and on the right hand knuckles, "S-T-E-E-L" appeared (231). Kevin's body, literally marked with the rhetoric of traditional masculinity, carries traces of his former self, one conditioned by violence and an aura of self-defeat. The tattoo on his left

forearm depicted "a crude dagger with black blood dripping from the point, and just above that the slogan BORN TO LOSE. On his other arm his name was misspelled, Kevine" (231). Representing the distortion of self that such a model imposes on Kevin, "Kevine" becomes a symbol of his life under this regime of heterosexual masculinity. An alcoholic, closeted homosexual, married to a woman and a father to two boys who "are bitter now," "Kevine" represents the damaged, self-loathing father that populates so much of Nordan's fiction (233).

Transformed and now sober, Kevin, no longer "Kevine," presents to Leonard a different model of masculinity, a belief in the possibility of real transformation, one that could guide Leonard away from the melancholic self-loathing that confines him to the cramped spaces of the trailer and the homophobic locale of rural Mississippi. Kevin urges Leonard to "reach out," a lesson he learns from his meetings at the "Don't Drink Club," a message that correlates sobriety with the capacity for emotional connection. Read through this lens of transformation, the tattoos on Kevin's knuckles, more than mere comedic relief, challenge the accepted belief that both homosexuality and talking about one's emotions make one less of a man. Such a direct reversal of expectations, that a man of self-proclaimed iron and steel would encourage another man to talk about his emotions (especially after sleeping with him), exposes the limitations of a masculine identity for which aggression and hostility become the only avenues for displaying strength. Through Kevin, Nordan affirms the strength developed through emotional availability, the lack of which leads to the brokenness of many of Nordan's other adult male characters.

The refrigerator in Leonard's trailer offers the second of these reversals, functioning in direct contrast to the one Mr. Raney repeatedly uses for target practice.

Filled with hundreds of eggs gathered from the covey of quails Leonard refuses to kill, the refrigerator becomes a symbol of fecundity as opposed to death, of nurturance rather than violence. It exists as a conduit, not for facilitating aggression, but for facilitating compassion, as Leonard later uses the eggs stored inside to make "the strangest omelet Kevin or anybody else in the world had ever tasted" (236). Rather than push Kevin away, as he customarily does to other men who stay over, Leonard invites him to linger, giving himself both the time and opportunity to develop a relationship with Kevin beyond the physical. Finally able to release his emotions, Leonard, unlike Mr. Raney, no longer needs alcohol or displays of hostility to cover feelings he does not believe he can admit otherwise. In the space of honest communication Kevin creates with Leonard, he can finally account for what he believes to be his participation in Hydro's death. Telling Kevin about the target practice that occurred out at William Tell before the robbery, Leonard confesses to shooting a cantaloupe off of Hydro's head and views his disregard for Hydro's life as a motivating agent in Hydro's decision to kill himself: "maybe because I was so careless, so disrespectful of his life he didn't see no need to respect it neither" (235).

Leonard's belief in his own worthlessness, directly tied to his self-hatred regarding his homosexuality, proves destructive, not simply to himself, but to a friend he probably did not think he had the capacity to hurt. In the act of picking up the gun and firing it indiscriminately, Leonard momentarily succumbs to the dominant practice for validating one's masculinity, but it can never truly make recompense for his marginal status. If, as Bjerre contends in an interview with Nordan, "Morgan, the sharpshooter, uses his gun to boost his inferior masculinity," so too does Leonard use the gun for the

same reason ("Longing" 756). In order to combat the problem, each must address the underlying issue behind his belief in his own "inferior masculinity," not by arriving at a more effective means of achieving such a masculinity, but by refusing to accept this model in the first place. An essential part of this resistance lies in the acceptance of one's own worth, not simply as a self-serving boost to one's ego, but, Nordan suggests, as a prerequisite to personal accountability. Kevin initiates such a process in Leonard, telling him he chose to sleep with him last night because he found him "beautiful. Because he seen something spiritual" in him (235).

Such validation of Leonard's worth leads directly to the third reversal this scene presents, one that offers the novel's most positive depiction of sexual intimacy, for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Commenting on the often destructive pattern of young boys' initiation into adulthood in Nordan's fiction, Bjerre contends that such "initiations are often highly traumatic for the boys since a combination of sex and death is often the catalyst. . . . the pattern is always the same: failing fathers and predatory women leave in their wake dead or ruined boys who become emotionally crippled by their encounters" (736). Focusing on sexual initiation within *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Bjerre points to Hydro's rape at the destructive hands of Cheryl as an exemplar of such a pattern, but the adulterous affair the nineteen year old Morgan has with the much older Mrs. McNaughton also fits this pattern, since Morgan becomes emotionally damaged after being abandoned again by another maternal figure. Leading to emotional healing rather than emotional devastation, the sexual intimacy Leonard creates with Kevin defies this pattern of sexual initiation Bjerre identifies in the novel.

While Leonard's encounter with Kevin does not serve as Leonard's initiation into adulthood, it marks a significant turning point in his development toward psychic health. It ushers him into a more mature, honest, and life-affirming relationship with another man. When Leonard and Kevin make love a second time in the morning, "they like to kicked out all the windows," suggesting that their behavior threatens to push beyond the confines placed on it previously by Leonard and the community at large (237). That Nordan offers the novel's most positive depiction of sexual intimacy in a male, same-sex relationship underscores the recuperative vision he attributes to the abandonment of a destructive, heterosexual masculinity in which aggression, dominance, and violence become the predominant modes of interaction with another person. This homosexual encounter offers a counterpoint to the ones Nordan references in *Wolf Whistle* in which the violent, melancholic Solon Gregg receives oral sex from gay men in New Orleans, after which he robs and possibly kills them. As such, *The Sharpshooter Blues* repositions the gay subject, rescuing him from anonymity at the fringes of the text and the realm of the abject and placing him in a position of agency, which allows him the potential for transformation given to several of the heterosexual male characters in the novel. In doing so, the novel revises the narrative arc of the queer character that culminates in suicide, one often precipitated by the revelation of same-sex desire, as in Tennessee Williams's *A Street Car Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Careful not to descend into anachronism here, Nordan suggests that while Leonard may have initiated the process of accepting his homosexuality, the community will not participate in this private transformation. Rather than the remorse Leonard normally confesses regarding his sexual encounters, he can publically announce his new-

found love only in code, using the subversive potential of the blues to cloak his otherwise taboo emotions. At Hydro's funeral that Kevin agrees to attend, Leonard plays an instrumental version of the blues song "I Just Want to Make Love to You," which Dr. McNaughton and his son Louis hear before entering the church. Written by Willie Dixon and originally performed in 1954 by blues artist Muddy Waters, the song tells of an unconventional heterosexual relationship in which the man does not want his lover to perform the traditional roles of domestic servitude:

> I don't want you to cook my bread
> I don't want you to make my bed
> I don't want you because I'm sad and blue
> I just want to make love to you. (Dixon)

While Dr. McNaughton and no doubt other members of the audience recognize the song, through the suppression of the lyrics and the heterosexual paradigm it evokes, Leonard offers a queer version, one that shrouds his desire for Kevin in invisibility, momentarily allowing him to communicate directly with his lover without public recognition. In turning to the blues to reveal emotions otherwise untenable in southern culture, Leonard mirrors the African American blues men of *Wolf Whistle* who turn to its coded form to speak openly in the presence of white characters about the impending threat of retaliation against Bobo who recently broke the South's sexual taboo against cross-racial contact by whistling at a white woman. Commenting on the blues men's performance, McMahand explains how "invisibility here grants a shield, and the blues men take cover, permitting themselves and the music a disguised language of high intelligence that is indecipherable to its audience of oppressors" (205). Leonard's communication with Kevin remains similarly shielded, his message unknown to the unwitting participants of Hydro's funeral.

Though the histories of retaliation against African Americans and queers in southern culture are not the same and should not be conflated, Nordan borrows the blues trope, positing it as an art form that offers marginalized members, even gay men, a voice to speak the unspeakable. That Leonard, no longer racked with a self-hating remorse, cannot openly confess his loves demonstrates the price the community expects for its acceptance of him (who it only seems to tolerate because he remains so miserable after his same-sex encounters). As Michel Foucault once stated in a gay French publication *Mec*, "people can tolerate two homosexuals they see leaving together, but if the next day they're smiling, holding hands, and tenderly embracing one another, then they can't be forgiven. It is not the departure for pleasure that is intolerable, it is waking up happy" (qtd. in Bersani 11). So ends Leonard's appearance in the novel, allowed to address, but only through disguise, his happiness over finding a lover with whom he wants to continue a relationship.

Doubt remains as to whether or not Leonard will be able to pursue such a life in an insular and oppressive town like Arrow Catcher, Mississippi. Perhaps his greatest hope for continued happiness lies, as Kevin suggests, in leaving Mississippi. In the conclusion to their morning conversation in the trailer, Kevin asks Leonard, "'Did you ever think about leaving Miss'ippi? Living somewheres else for a while?' Leonard said, 'I don't hardly think about nothing else'" (236). In the anticipatory expectation of a better life, Leonard rejects the suicidal impulse that often ends the lives of queer characters in mid-to-late twentieth century southern fiction. By keeping Leonard alive at the novel's end, Nordan points the way toward a more positive future for southern gay men, one he inevitably links to the expansion of a damaging and, at times, fatal masculinity. This

novel, unlike *Wolf Whistle*, creates space in which both his heterosexual and homosexual male characters can rethink the destructive lessons of masculinity that southern culture teaches them, and by doing so, they can arrive at better, more productive ways of being men, a goal that promises to be helpful, not just to themselves, but to the community as a whole.

Chapter 3

Jim Grimsley and Survival Fiction: Fathers, Sons, and the Gay *Bildungsroman*

The literature written by gay men, particularly that of the *Bildungsroman* genre, bears witness to the often destructive effects of the father and son relationship on gay men. Recapitulating what many contemporary psychologists, such as Richard Isay, theorize about the relationship between parents and the gay son, gay novelist Jim Grimsley argues that for many gay people, their families, rather than being sources of aid, are, in fact, detrimental factors in the healthy development of the child's sexual identity. Gay southerners, as Grimsley contends, "have this much in common with gay people everywhere, that for us our families are our first battleground. We must survive our families in order to become ourselves, to realize that we are gay, even though our families never want us to be gay" ("Myth and Reality" 232). Southern families, according to Grimsley, are not incubators of healthy development for gay children, and it is this homophobia of the parents or aversion to having a gay child that creates feelings of both rejection and inferiority in the child. Grimsley's fathers, however, are not simply inadequate because of their heterosexual bias. Their evocation of racism, sexism, and homophobia as legitimate attitudes in the construction of a hyper-masculine identity makes them unsuitable models for any son, regardless of sexuality. In these extreme cases, survival via the eventual escape from the familial unit, as Grimsley signals in this

nonfiction piece, becomes an important and life sustaining trope in his fiction, particularly in his novels *Winterbirds, Dream Boy,* and *Boulevard.*

In these three novels, Grimsley charts the stages of constructing a southern, white, gay identity, often formulated amid the oppression of a tyrannical father figure whose vision of violent masculinity revolves around his ability to maintain dominance at the cost of those closest to him. In both *Winterbirds* and *Dream Boy,* Grimsley positions the father as a prohibitive figure, one who is both the source of trauma and an impediment to his son's sexual development. Not surprisingly, in *Boulevard*, in which the father is completely absent, the young gay protagonist has the fewest problems coming to terms with his sexual identity, but only after he escapes his existing family and flees to the urban space of 1970s New Orleans. Far from Nicolosi's ideal heterosexual paternal models I discussed in the introduction, Grimsley's fathers are often racist, violent, and sexually abusive, all of which further complicate the gay sons' ability not just to form a healthy relationship with their fathers but also to develop a healthy masculine identity. In both *Winterbirds* and *Dream Boy,* the fathers are so destructive, not just to their gay sons but also to the entire familial unit, that life becomes a matter of sheer survival, and escape becomes one of the most promising avenues of achieving it. Undoubtedly, the motif of escape runs throughout much of Grimsley's fiction, for the gay son's survival is conditioned upon his ability to free himself not simply from a space that offers him little possibility to explore his homosexuality openly, but also the destructive reach of his father who poses the single greatest threat to the gay son's development.

By all accounts, the young, gay male protagonists in Grimsley's fiction should not survive. The son in *Winterbirds* is not only a hemophiliac, but also a son to an alcoholic

father who routinely terrorizes the family with his explosive anger. The son in *Dream Boy* suffers repeated sexual abuse by his father and a violent gay bashing that leaves his skull cracked, and the gay teenager in *Boulevard* barely escapes a sado-masochistic encounter that turns brutally savage. However, Grimsley's fiction, although rife with physical violence and sexual abuse, insists upon the gay son's survival, a process Grimsley repeatedly links to the redemptive force of the imagination. In Grimsley's novel *Winterbirds*, he posits the imagination as a life-sustaining drive, as it becomes instrumental for the gay son who must use it to "dream" of an alternative father who inevitably ends up sustaining him in an otherwise horrific situation.

Additionally, in *Dream Boy* the imaginative dream world, which Grimsley links to the green world of the forest, becomes a recuperative space that pushes beyond the limits of realism in order to extend the possibilities of gay male lives. Ending with the imperative drive for the two gay lovers to leave the homophobic and deadly space of the father's domain, the novel looks forward to the opening of *Boulevard* in which the young gay protagonist leaves rural Alabama to further explore his homosexual identity. With no father to contend with in *Boulevard*, the gay son can begin the complicated work of reimagining himself and his masculinity apart from the destructive model of these earlier images of the father found in Grimsley's previous novels. However, even as the city offers an existing gay community that allows Newell to explore openly his homosexuality, it also exposes him to issues of racial inequality that force him to acknowledge how racial trauma informs and inevitably complicates the notion of the city as a utopian space of freedom.

The degree to which much of Grimsley's fiction insists on the potential for survival signals a decided break with the ethos of earlier, mid-century southern fiction featuring gay men and their development. Tennessee Williams' oeuvre is the most noticeable example of this genre of literature that paints a bleaker picture of gay male development, but it is one that is arguably consistent with the time period in which he was writing. Today, it may seem obvious and perhaps reductive to suggest that Williams' gay characters seem stymied in their development, but his plays *A Streetcar Named Desire, Suddenly Last Summer,* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are particularly tragic regarding the potentiality of gay male life. The fates of his queer characters (suicide, cannibalism, and heterosexual marriage, respectively) offer little hope in the way of achieving a desirable outcome to the development of gay men. Of course, the demands of art should never be prescriptive in such a way as to require an artist to write an obligatory happy ending. The point of comparison, then, is not to suggest that Williams' plays are remiss or politically retrogressive because they do not adhere to a more healthy representation of gay male development. It should, however, illuminate the differences in both the authors' aesthetic visions and the ethos of permissibility surrounding homosexuality in the culture in which they were/are writing.

If Williams' representation of gay male life is remarkably tragic, however, it is no doubt in part a result of the social climate regarding the acceptability of homosexuality and the demands of "realism" in fiction. For Williams to write a "happy" and relatively unproblematic account of a gay male successfully coming to terms with his homosexuality during a time in which homosexual acts were still illegal would have indeed stretched the limits of believability in his drama for the readers of his time. Thus,

while representations of queer desire often abound in fiction of the Southern Renaissance, as Gary Richards cogently argues in his book *Lovers and Beloveds*, the potential of gay male life remained circumscribed, limited, and stymied in a region that could not at the time embrace homosexuality as a legitimate and healthy alternative to normative heterosexuality. Consequently, the flight from the homophobic and often deadly space of the rural South has become a common trope in queer life, a historical reality often mirrored in gay fiction. So too in historical and literary criticism of gay fiction, critics often connect the trajectory of gay identity along a rigid rural/urban divide in which the city exists as the utopic space for gay life and the rural space as the oppressive and homophobic place that gay men must escape if they are to find true happiness. As a historian of queer southern life, John Howard notes that "the history of gay people has often mirrored the history of the city. As currently crafted, the predominant theoretical model of American lesbian and gay historiography scripts gay identity and culture formation as linked to capitalist industrialization and urbanization" (12). Howard's book, *Men Like That,* about the history of queer life in Mississippi, adeptly demonstrates that while some truth exists in this narrative, it too often eclipses the history of the lives of those gay men who arrive at an understanding of their same-sex desire all the while choosing to live and thrive in rural spaces.

While Grimsley's novel *Boulevard* undoubtedly traffics in this trope of escaping to the city to explore one's sexual identity, his fiction complicates a simplistic rural / urban binary in which the city exits as the more utopic space for the exploration of homosexuality. Seeing that the problem is not exclusively the rural space itself but the familial unit, the escape Grimsley's characters seek is not always one achieved by the

flight to an urban space. Even though the city offers Grimsley's gay characters a more established gay community, he often depicts rural environments, such as the forest, as positive, nurturing spaces, ones that activate the gay son's imagination and allow for the possibility of alternative families. Whether the space is rural or urban, the notion of seeking an alternative to the destructive model of the violent, heterosexual father plays a consistent and substantial role in Grimsley's gay southern consciousness. Even if the alternative to the gay son's existing family does not ultimately end up being as utopian as first expected, it is the idea, the optimistic search for a like-minded and loving community that often provides the life-sustaining drive for the gay son to survive his formative years.

In *Winterbirds,* Grimsley's first published novel, the homosexuality of Danny, the protagonist, remains coded, and the narrative revolves around his failed attempt to identify with his father, Bobjay, who sees his son's intimacy with his mother as a threat to his masculine agency. In the novel the father, an alcoholic, aggressive tyrant, becomes a source of trauma, and it is the father's destructive vision of violent masculinity that poses the greatest threat to the normative development of his son. Grimsley bases this fictional depiction of Bobjay on his real-life father and the events of his own childhood growing up in rural North Carolina, which he details in his promotional pamphlet "True Fiction: An Essay." In characterizing his own father, Grimsley contends that "he was a good old boy in the classic sense, a white man from a poor farm family . . . He had the capacity to drink buckets of whiskey but could sober up when the occasion required" (*True* 2).

This tendency for authors to use their real-life fathers, who are alcoholic (and often violent) "good old boys," as the raw material for their narratives, both fictional and autobiographical, has become increasingly common among contemporary southern writers, including Dorothy Allison, Rick Bragg, and Lewis Nordan. Recasting the "good old boy" as a pejorative, these authors depict the father not as an idealized version of southern manhood but as the agent of familial destruction, one who turns family life into a nightmarish hell. Similar to how Grimsley depicts the father in *Winterbirds*, Bragg, in his memoir *All Over But the Shoutin',* portrays his father as an alcoholic tyrant, one who "would return from God knows where every now and then, but only to terrorize [them], to drink and rage and, finally, sleep like he was dead" (66). Likewise, in Allison's semi-autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, she bears witness to the destructive effects of the rage-filled and violent father, Daddy Glen, who beats and then sexually molests the vulnerable Bone, the novel's nascent lesbian protagonist. She remains surrounded by dangerous men, for the male relatives on her mother's side are known throughout Greenville County, South Carolina, as violent alcoholics who "believe they got a right to stay drunk from sunset on Friday to dawn on Monday morning" (127). Often charting the father's destruction from the perspective of the most vulnerable members of the family, the children, these stories become survival tales, trauma narratives written out of a cathartic impulse achieved primarily by speaking truth to the inherent dangers of the "good old boy" mentality.

Revealing the consequences of this "good old boy" network, Grimsley depicts, in his personal essay, a rural South still very much controlled, policed, and organized by heterosexual white men whose personal connections and biases work to keep the status

quo of white, heterosexual, male dominance intact. The deputy of the town is friends with Grimsley's father, and his attitude toward domestic abuse is not only patronizing but clearly influenced by his belief in male supremacy. As Grimsley explains, "while the deputy would have arrested Daddy outright for any real crime, a man having to set his wife straight within the confines of his own house was not a breach of law. It was unspoken but commonly agreed that what a man did in his own house was his business" (*True* 2). Such a blatant justification of domestic abuse under the guise of the man's right to "set his wife straight" produces a climate in which even the veracity of the wife's narrative becomes questioned by white men who are unwilling to see the husband as the violent man he is. The deputy sheriff, for example, does not believe the mother when she claims that her husband tried to set the house on fire with the family in it. He refuses to believe it because although "a man might have to knock his wife around a little . . . he would never kill his kids" (*True 3).* Grounded in misogyny, the sheriff's ideology creates a seemingly idiosyncratic view of violence. On the one hand, violence becomes not just condoned but instrumental in regulating the power structure of the domestic sphere. It can, however, be destructive, but only when its use seems gratuitous. Children have little power to upend the authority of the father, and thus to kill them would seem unnecessary, outside the bounds of the legitimate uses of violence. Killing the children would also undermine the narrative of the father as protector, destroying the perception of his masculinity defined by his ability to provide for and protect his children.

According to the logic Grimsley sketches out in his essay, violence becomes instrumental in the construction of southern white masculinity. As Grimsley's novel makes clear, the father, Bobjay, must continually reassert his masculine identity through

real and threatened acts of violence as a way to reaffirm both his sexual and racial dominance. However, far from being a constitutive force that solidifies one's manhood, violence, as Grimsley demonstrates, becomes a force of alienation and destruction, rendering compassionate and sustaining familial relationships impossible. Danny's fantasy about a father/son pairing based on paternal nurturance and mutual love signals his effort to imagine an alternative to the destructive effects of violence in his actual relationship with his father.

Danny's fantasy life is compelled by a culture inundated with violence, one in which nurturing and compassion become coded as weakness. As the opening of Grimsley's novel attests, violence, in the form of hunting, has become a ritualized event in the development of his brothers' masculine identities. Beginning with a scene in which Danny's brothers are shooting birds on a river bank, the novel carefully draws a distinction between Danny, who is not participating in the hunting, and his brothers, who "lie hidden in the weeds with their shared gun, waiting to burst open bird skulls with their copper BBs. At every shot [Danny] can hear [his] brothers laughing" (1). Rejecting this form of male bonding between his brothers, Danny dreads "going to the river while [his] brothers are there" (1). Far from being a site of violence and death as it is for his brothers, the river exists for Danny as a site of transformation and rebirth, suggesting his desire to replace the violence of his brother's masculine identities with more positive expressions of compassion and empathy. The river is the place where Danny goes to dream of the River Man, an alternative father figure who provides Danny with the nurturance he does not receive from his own father. Such a rejection of violence, however, places Danny in a devalued position, as the chapter title "Danny the Lesser"

clearly signals. Both his homosexuality and his refusal of violence make him less than a man according to the twisted logic of his father's heterosexual masculinity. This inferiority reveals a particular flaw in the paradigm of the gay son being able to model the masculine identity of his father, for in this system, homosexuality becomes configured as inherently feminine, and thus unalterably inferior.

The model of masculinity his father exemplifies centers not upon mutual love and respect but upon his ability to control not only himself, but those, both wife and children, whom he considers his property. The need to dominate, to use violence as a way of enforcing his position of authority among his family, stems, in part, from his anxieties regarding his subordinate position as a poor, uneducated farm laborer. Bobjay ekes out an existence as a hired laborer on a farm in rural North Carolina in a tenuous position of subordination to the farm owner. Unable to afford his own land, Bobjay continually moves his family from one rental house to another. While working on the farm, Bobjay's arm becomes irreparably mangled in the corn harvester, which necessitates its amputation. While the loss of the father's arm becomes a literal cause of the father's inability to provide financially for his family, it also becomes a physical manifestation of his wounded masculinity, an outward symbol of both his diminished value and his perceived fear that he is less than a man. Such a loss leads the father to take compensatory measures to counteract this continual marker of his diminished masculinity.

When Bobjay loses his arm after the accident, it upturns the power hierarchy of his relationship with his wife, forcing her to sell her wedding ring in order to pay rent at a new house. In doing so, the wife, Ellen, trades the symbol of their unity and becomes,

momentarily, the financial superior to her husband who has been relegated to a position of subordination. Not surprisingly, Bobjay responds with a fierce need to reassert his dominance and masculine authority. Further emasculated by the landlord's generous offer to fix problems around the house, which he could probably not fix himself, Bobjay grows suspicious and insecure about Mr. Renjenkins' continual presence around his wife. Throughout the novel, all adult men present a challenge to Bobjay's masculinity, and their presence around his wife inevitably leads to an argument and then an acting out, usually of violence, to reassert his dominance. In the episode with Mr. Renjenkins, Ellen tells her husband that as "fat as Mr. Renjenkins was, Papa might not be able to stop him either. She meant nothing by it. But Papa looked at his arm. Quietly he said, 'I can sure before God protect what belongs to me'" (36). Bobjay's glance at his arm underscores the source of his insecurity, but it is his comment that proves to be most revealing. His admonition of protection, framing his wife and children as property, is ironic, given the fact that he exits not as the heroic family protector but the actual agent of destruction. Bobjay's comment reveals the true source of his drive, for the threat is never really about protecting his wife's integrity but about his desire to protect himself from the threat of emasculation. His ability to protect what *belongs* to him becomes a sign of his status as man.

Repeatedly, what proves to be most destructive is Bobjay's concept of violence as a necessary and constitutive element of his masculinity, for in his desire to model masculinity as dominance, he ends up harming both his wife and his children. In this same scene with Bobjay and his wife arguing about Mr. Renjenkins, he leaves the house with a knife, presumably to teach Mr. Renjenkins a lesson, but as he leaves, his wife

seizes upon his absence as an opportunity for escape. As she and the children flee to the car, which her husband has purposely disabled, the scene turns into one of terror as the husband, knife in hand, now taunts the wife and children who have become trapped inside. Fleeing the car whose windshield Bobjay smashes with the butt of the knife, Danny, a hemophiliac, trips and nearly bites his tongue in two. Danny almost dies from the wound, and only after several days in the hospital does his blood begin to clot. Time and again, the father's violent episodes lead, either directly or indirectly, to the physical harm of Danny, and unable to escape his father physically, Danny turns to the only option he has left: his imagination.

Unable to achieve the kind of connection he desires with his father, Danny retreats into the realm of fantasy in order to envision what remains elusive in his real life. Danny's fantasy life, however, becomes not just an escape from reality but a way of negotiating lived experience. In Abdul R. JanMohamed's reading of Lacan and Zizek regarding the role of fantasy, he argues that

> far from simply being an escape from reality, fantasies are instrumental in the subject's development of a consciousness that sustains him through that reality; fantasies provide the space wherein one can maintain contact with the real of one's desires (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts,* 42-67; Zizek, 44-48). To the extent that fantasy provides a space into which one can retreat from the daily confrontation with death and in which one can rehearse one's desires, goals, etc., it is fundamentally a space wherein one's potentiality can be stored, explored, and nurtured. (169)

Thus for Danny, his fantasy life becomes a way of maintaining "contact with the real of [his] desires," which allows him to achieve the paternal connection for which he is longing and to express his burgeoning homosexuality, which he cannot fully explore in the conscious register.

The river exists as a conduit through which he can tap into his fantasy life. Momentarily fleeing the battleground his family has become, Danny configures the river as a site of peace, which Grimsley signals by having Danny softly sing the hymn "Shall We Gather at the River" as he is approaching the site. The hymn casts the river as a utopic space about which the faithful will gather after the toils of their earthly life. Contrasting his brother's vision of the river as a site of un-regenerative death, the hymn Danny recalls clearly frames the river as the long-wished for site of renewed life:

> Soon we'll reach the shining river,
> soon our pilgrimage will cease;
> soon our happy hearts will quiver
> with the melody of peace. (*Baptist Hymnal* 481)

In the rhetoric of the hymn, peace is not simply death but the possibility of eternal life, symbolized by the river that, as the song goes, "flows by the throne of God." The song embodies Danny's desire for transformation and an alternative community, for the river is a place where he goes to "shut things away . . . shut away Mama Papa Amy Kay Allen Duck Grove [to] shut them away" (9). Only in this space, away from the destruction of his father, can he envision the paternal connection he desires:

> You Dream the River Man again: River Man comes out of the water to your honeysuckle mattress on the bank. He is as an oak tree and strong as a bear, tall and brown-skinned with shaggy black hair. He lives in the water or in the forest where you have wandered. He calls you his son. You know no one else in the world, only him. You have no other home, only his home. You see in his eyes every minute how he cares for you. (10)

In the transformative vision of his fantasy, Danny reconfigures the damaging aspects of his father's masculinity; the River Man is compassionate rather than violent, nurturing rather than destructive, confident rather than insecure. In the River Man, Danny experiences both the protection and bonding moments he lacks from the relationship with

his actual father. With River Man, he goes "paddling a canoe downriver . . . [and] walking with [him] through the ruins of a forgotten city" (10). Importantly, the city, so often imaged as the desired site of sexual freedom, remains abandoned, depopulated and thus free from the suggestion of any additional familial or personal connections that may complicate or intrude upon the father-son relationship.

Distancing himself from his family also becomes an avenue for him to explore his sexuality, which he must otherwise suppress, particularly in the presence of his father. Grimsley confirms Danny's homosexuality in an essay, claiming that "Danny will grow up to be queer like I did" (*True* 6), but in the novel, his sexuality operates exclusively in the latent register, surfacing only in the coded language of his dreams. Danny's anxiety surrounding his sexuality manifests itself in a dream, which evokes both the excitement of acknowledging his homosexuality and the fear of the father's disapproval. In one particular dream, Danny imagines that he is in the forest about to step out into the openness of a sun-filled clearing:

> You must go into that light from this darkness, this protection. . . . You must no longer travel hidden, you must enter this clearing to learn how this light feels on the skin. But the thought of standing naked beneath that nakedness has made your throat go dry. You step into the light, parting the leaves and branches with your hand. Your shadow shrinks beneath you. The sunlight is a new thing to your skin, a tingling that is fresh and filling--- you smile, you run forward through the high grass, your too-quick heartbeat all that shows of your fear. (12-13)

Grimsley's language, using the tropes of darkness and light, concealment and exposure, evokes the rhetoric of the closet and the fear but also excitement that accompanies the moment of public outing for the homosexual. Grimsley's use of the "nakedness" metaphor to signal the revealing of Danny's authentic, unadorned self, further suggests the sexual nature of the exposure, for it registers not just his fear of being seen as he

really is, outside the "cover" of the dark forest, but also the joy that comes with being able to enjoy openly his body, his nakedness, apart from the shame homosexuals so often internalize about it. Thus, Danny's realization that "he must no longer travel hidden" reveals his understanding that he must at some point acknowledge the truth of his sexuality, but stepping into the light and subsequently out of his father's shadow and control signals a new physical vulnerability to the father's violence.

In Danny's dream, the father becomes reconfigured as a predatory lion whose natural aggressiveness can never be fully extricated from his attempt at play. Right at the moment in Danny's dream when he is fully enjoying the sunlit clearing, he notices a "bright lion" coming toward him "loping large-thighed across the grass, almost playful" (13):

> You bury your hands in his mane.
> The wide mouth yawns.
> The vast paw lifts, a playful tap.
> You gasp at the tearing, lean away still gripping the mane, you shudder and step away slowly, heart exploding in bursts of heat—the lion eager, pressing toward you, warm red tongue on your hands. (13)

The lion's presence at the exact moment Danny is reveling in his "nakedness" underscores his perception of the father not just as a prohibitive force but a potentially lethal adversary, particularly with regard to the open expression of his sexuality.

Danny's dream of being wounded by this natural predator takes on real-life significance when his father becomes the predatory "lion" in the fight that serves as the novel's narrative climax. After a day of heavy drinking, Bobjay starts an argument with his wife, which quickly escalates into a full-fledged fight. So insecure is Bobjay with his masculinity that any perceived threat to his authority, in this case the wife's attempt to talk back, must be met with violence. Bobjay's rhetoric in the fight reverberates with the

language of patriarchal dominance: "You still think you're going to strut around like the queen of the world and look down your nose at me and tell me what to do? No, bitch. . . . I want you to act like you're the goddamn man around here one more goddamn time so I can teach you what's what! . . . It's about time you learned a lesson. In this house you do what I tell you!" (124-5). Resorting to violence as a way to ensure his wife's subordination, Bobjay begins to chase his wife through the house: "Amy rushes to open the bedroom door. Mama dashes through it, turning to see where he is with the look of something hunted" (126). Grimsley's use of hunting imagery clearly positions the father as a predatory force bent on reasserting a traditional gender hierarchy. Both the fight and Danny's dream contain obvious parallels that effectively link sexism and homophobia as constitutive elements of the father's masculine identity. Whereas in the fight the mother's gender insubordination draws the ire of her predator husband, in the dream Danny's gender insubordination, his enjoyment of his own (homo)sexuality, draws the attention of the lion whose use of violence serves to reintroduce the elements of fear and dominance. In both episodes, the alpha male, the father/lion, exists as a policing force and an inflictor of wounds, prohibitive and potentially lethal in his desire to maintain dominance.

In the real-life fight the mother becomes the prey, but as in most of their fights, Danny ends up being part of the collateral damage of his father's angry tirades. After chasing his wife until she flees underneath the house, Bobjay finds Danny standing out in the yard and attempts to hold him with his good arm: "When he reaches for you he smiles. The good hand descends onto your shoulder. As he lifts you, a pain flashes through your arm. . . . He gathers you so close you squirm to get away" (136). Similar to Danny's dream in which the lion's interaction initially appears innocuously playful, the

father's embrace, complete with a smile, begins as a harmless expression of his paternal affection. In the aftermath of the fight, however, the father's hug becomes a suffocating embrace, just as in the dream the "playful" tap of the lion's paw is really a tearing of Danny's thigh. Even in the father's attempt to hold his son, he still ends up hurting the easily bruised Danny, which becomes a pivotal moment for understanding the father's delusion of protection. The father's violence nullifies any positive effects of paternal comfort, a truth that dispels the propagandist myth of violence as instrumental in the regulation/protection of the family. Escaping from the father's model of masculinity as power, Danny retreats to the recuperative vision of the River Man who offers him both compassion and tenderness. In Danny's dream after the attack of the lion, he awakens in the cave of River Man who expresses concern over Danny's wounded leg: "He watches you and smiles. Touching your forehead, he says, You're still cold. –I'll be all right now. –You need better than that, he says, and rises up tall and dark, a warm shadow, lifting the fur and sliding beside you" (16). Far from the terrifying embrace of his real father, the embrace of River Man can bring both comfort and the much-needed feeling of being loved.

Grimsley clearly identifies the danger of not resisting and reformulating this destructive image of the father by suggesting that for the mother, Ellen, this image of masculinity as violence is a recapitulation of her own father who similarly abused her mother. By evoking a cycle of white male violence that harkens back to the deployment of it during the antebellum south, Grimsley connects the logic of patriarchal control with the maintenance of white supremacy. During the horrific fight in which Ellen spends hours trapped underneath her own house, she recalls the image of her mother who had

been similarly traumatized by her husband. She sees her mother cowering in the face of her father who wraps a whip around her legs and pulls her to the ground:

> He uncoils the ugly brown leather rope as her Mama begins to plead with him to stop, please stop, against the glitter in her Daddy's eyes as he makes the long whip wiggle in the dirt. When she runs he winds it round her legs and pulls her down. The whip is his power, and later your Mama would bathe the scars it cut into her Mama's flesh. (133)

The use of the whip as a symbol of power echoes a legacy of white male supremacy in which violence and the threat of it became instrumental in ensuring control of black bodies. If white men during slavery resorted to the whip to regulate labor production, Grimsley suggests that such violence has been adapted, used, and employed by future generations of white men albeit under very different historical circumstances. Danny's father speculates that his father-in-law used the bullwhip "'to get the old sow moving . . . [; it] took a little whipping to make her fat ass do what she was supposed to do'" (132). The point is not the reductive conflation of gender and racial oppression, but the idea that violence becomes crucial in maintaining both gender and racial hierarchies that place white men above all others. In this light, the conscious recognition and rejection of this model of violent masculinity becomes a necessary step in preventing a cycle of abuse and destruction.

In Grimsley's novel, then, the family becomes the stage upon which one generation of white fathers act out the role of white men for the next generation of sons, a move that turns the familial house into a literal death-trap for both the wife and children. Houses in both *Winterbirds* and *Dream Boy* exist as cultural spaces of violence controlled by an abusive, alcoholic father. Whereas in *Winterbirds,* the mother finds refuge outside, underneath the house, the gay son in *Dream Boy* must flee the incestuous space of his

bedroom to find safety in the field and woods beyond the house. Continuing the violent father image he constructs in *Winterbirds,* Grimsley depicts Nathan's father in *Dream Boy* as a terrorizing sexual predator whose abuse clearly haunts the son, a trauma which inevitably complicates his ability to forge a sexual relationship with Roy, a friend who lives next door to the house where his family has moved. If in *Winterbirds* houses become repositories of the individual memories of the father's violence, in *Dream Boy* Grimsley expands this notion of trauma through the inclusion of a fading plantation house, which evokes a cultural legacy of violence perpetrated by white men. *Dream Boy* depicts a South haunted by a culture of violence, often perpetuated by white men bent on maintaining dominance, a supremacy maintained through paternalistic institutions.

Grimsley brackets the novel with depictions of the Christian church house, punctuated by images of two other houses, the farmhouse and the plantation, all spaces, which he aligns with the authority of the father. Connecting the paternalism of the plantation with that of the modern day white Christian church, Grimsley locates the origins of trauma within a nexus of power designed to conceal the abuses of the father under the guise of benevolent concern. In contrast to these spaces controlled by an authoritarian and ultimately abusive father, Grimsley projects an image of the forest, depicting trees as markers of past violence but also collectively as a recuperative space, a doubled image that evokes the novel's tenuous position between tragedy and romance. Similar to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* in which the green space, the forest, becomes a corrective space outside the law of the father, Grimsley's novel positions the forest as recuperative precisely because it allows for the subversion of death, either symbolic or real, signaled by the internal spaces of the bedroom and the

plantation house. However, unlike Shakespeare's drama that ends with a reassertion of patriarchal order by the return to the father's realm, Grimsley's novel posits a queer character who refuses to return to the father's house and thus submit to the compulsory resolution of heterosexual marriage. In doing so, Grimsley implies in this particular case not just that queer love cannot flourish within the realm of the father, but that no life actually exists for the queer son living under the auspices of the father's control.

While Grimsley's novel is by no means a retelling of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Dream Boy* signifies on Shakespeare's idea of the "dream" world, the forest in this case, as a place in which Nathan can explore the desires he must suppress when he is in the realm of his father. Of course, this notion of the green world being linked to the dream world is not exclusive to Shakespeare, for this archetype runs throughout much of Western literature. As Northrop Frye explains, "the green world has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires. This dream world collides with the stumbling and blinded follies of the world of experience . . . and yet proves strong enough to impose the form of desire on it" (183-4). In the symbolic world of Grimsley's novel, the father's realm becomes linked to religious law, violence, and ultimately death, whereas the forest becomes linked to fecundity, homosexual desire, and life. The progressive movement from the father's realm to the forest parallels Nathan's burgeoning sexual consciousness, for the further away from the father's house Nathan travels, the more he is able to act upon his sexual desires. The dream boy signified by the title is both the queer identified boy Nathan can become apart from the father's law and the romantic partner, Roy, who is forever changed by their

moments in the "dream" world and is thus able and willing to reciprocate Nathan's love and leave the father's realm to join him in the woods.

Opening in the Baptist church of Potters Lake, the small North Carolina community where Nathan and his family have just moved, *Dream Boy* begins with an image of a spiritual "father" who refuses to imagine the possibility of queer desire. Delivering a sermon about the Last Supper during which the disciple John rests his head on the shoulder of Jesus, the pastor will not offer a conclusive interpretation of these events: "the preacher says we do not know why the Scriptures point to the disciple, we do not know why it is mentioned particularly that Jesus loved John at this moment of the Gospels" (1). The indeterminacy of the preacher's message serves as a litmus test for reading Nathan, his father, and his mother, for each one arrives at a different association to the text. The father sees a vision of God and thinks "about salvation and hellfire and the taste of whiskey" (1). The father's increasing guilt over the sexual molestation of his son leads him to see religion primarily as a set of laws that enact either reward or punishment. The mother thinks "about the body of Christ" and views the church as a much needed sanctuary apart from the hell of her home life, in which she attempts to disappear in an effort to efface the knowledge of her husband's incestuous desires. Nathan, however, "reads" the scripture not through the lens of the spirit, but through the lens of the flesh, for he transposes the body of Christ with the "body of the son of the farmer who owns the house [his] parent's rented three weeks ago" (1-2). Nathan's focus on the physical body, infused with the suggestion of queer desire, defies what critic Diane Enns calls the "masculinist tradition that has institutionalized contempt for the flesh and its desires" (271). The scene in the church serves as a microcosm of the novel in which

the worldview of "the father" must be translated, modified, or ultimately rejected for it to be useful to the queer son.

Reading the novel as a gay and a gothic gospel, critic Ed Madden cogently argues "that by reimagining the story of homophobic violence through the tropes of the gospel, Grimsley suggests that the language of the scripture, more often than not used to condemn same-sex sexuality, may be reclaimed for its counter-discursive possibilities" (112). As a gospel, Madden explains, the novel "is a story in which a character rises from the dead after being sacrificed for the good of the social order," and by focusing on this return of the resurrected, "the novel attempts to reinscribe a positive homoeroticism within Southern homophobia and, within the language and symbolism of Christian traditions" (112). While Grimsley's novel undoubtedly traffics in the redemptive tropes of the New Testament in which the son's (Christ's) death and resurrection offer hope and new life, it also draws upon a larger American Romantic tradition that shifts focus away from patriarchal religious institutions and places it on the celebration of nature and the natural environment. In a subversion of religious law, issued from the mouth of Nathan's scripture reading father, the novel offers a hymn to nature and natural spaces as fulfilling avenues of queer liberation, a note that contains echoes of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. In doing so, the novel captures the ethos of Whitman's text in its refusal to separate the body from the spirit and subsequently to see the body as inferior or unworthy of praise and fulfillment.

Like Whitman's "Song of Myself" before it, Grimsley's novel revises a Christian tradition that often attaches silence or even shame to the body as a sexual object. Infused with a decidedly erotic sensibility and bold in its declaration to "sing" the self,

Whitman's "Song of Myself" celebrates the physical body in all its splendor: "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest" (3; line 57-8). To this celebration of the self, Whitman layers the complex metaphor of the grass, suggesting in one part that it is "the beautiful uncut hair of graves," a secular metaphor evoking similar themes of death, burial, and rebirth contained in the religious story of Christ's death, burial and resurrection (6; 110). As Whitman's metaphor suggests, "the smallest sprout shows there really is no death" (6; 126). Framing issues of spirituality in a secular paradigm, Whitman seeks a harmonious balance between the body and soul:

> I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
> And you must not be abased to the other.
> Loaf with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
> --
> I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
> How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon
> me,
> And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
> bare-stript heart,
> And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.
> (5; 82-4, 87-9)

The juxtaposition of Whitman's initial maxim about remembering the soul without debasing the body with an ambiguously gendered scene of romantic attraction creates a space for sexual expression and desire in Whitman's spiritual worldview.

As an echo of Whitman's scene in which two lovers embrace in the summer grass, Grimsley offers an unambiguous queer revision in which Nathan and Roy's romantic embrace in the grass becomes an avenue for them to "sing" and "celebrate" themselves and their non-normative expressions of love. The forest, as Nathan claims, "is something other than a neighbor now; it becomes a new world," and this new world

stands in opposition to the one controlled by the father and religious law (40). When Nathan and Roy move from the space of the bedroom to the space of the forest, they undergo a transformation of spirit, a form of liberation accomplished by distancing themselves from the father's house and by tapping into their sexual desire. While in the forest, Nathan and Roy travel to an old burial mound where "only green grass grows . . . as if all other kinds of plants have been magically forbidden" (41). On the grass-covered mound, an echo of Whitman's description of the grass as "the uncut hair of graves," the two boys take off their shirts and act out a scene similar to the one Whitman describes in "Song of Myself":

> Their two fleshes are bright together, the two boys, warm like the colors of late sky. . . . Roy settles on the ground, spreading out his shirt, and Nathan does the same. Soon they are layered against each other. . . . Roy is murmuring in Nathan's ear, a hymn from church, "There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God." Nathan sings too, kissing Roy's soft throat, his collarbone, the underside of his chin. . . . Roy arches his body toward Nathan, a curve of yearning. He lies bare in the grass with a look on his face as if Nathan is making him sing through every cell. (42)

Effectively linking a song of traditional Christianity with the erotically charged song of the body manifested by the consummation of homosexual desire, Grimsley, like Whitman, offers a corrective balance between expressions of the spirit and those of the body. Positioning homosexual desire as not just compatible with but integral to the boys' expression of spirituality, Grimsley offers an alternative paradigm to organized Christianity and the religious law of the father.

In contrast to the world of the forest and the spiritual/erotic possibilities it offers, Grimsley depicts the father's house as a deadening (and haunted) space for Nathan. In the house, Nathan must not only suppress the memories of his sexual abuse by the hands of his father, but he must also "escape" the destructive spiritual world-view his father

selectively constructs. Grimsley positions Nathan's sexually abusive father as the corrupt and hypocritical spiritual patriarch, the mouthpiece for biblical law, by having him sit at the head of the dining table and read from the first chapter of Romans, a New Testament passage often cited by those opponents of homosexuality as a biblical denunciation of male-male desire. While "they are a family during certain mealtimes and during church," the scene becomes a brutal parody of the father-dominated, nuclear family, for the father is guilty of the very transgression outlined in the scripture he reads: "'Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves; who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen'" (qtd. in Grimsley 48). Far from instilling security and comfort within Nathan, these moments of "family" life resonate with memories of the father's sexual abuse: "the repetition echoes darkly through the country of Nathan's memory, through all the dangerous territories in which his thought may no longer move freely" (46). They remind Nathan not of the morally upright and physically intact father of his early youth "who could look Nathan in the eye when they talked," but of the alcoholic, physically wrecked, and guilt-burdened father who is literally rotting from the inside (47). Providing anything but spiritual comfort, this scripture reading forces Nathan to escape via his imagination, for "in his mind he is far away, in the woods with Roy, stepping through golden sunlight" (47). Effectively replacing the traumatic memories of the father with the liberating ones Nathan forges with Roy in the woods, Nathan positions the forest as a recuperative space.

Confounding the traditional positioning of rural space as being antithetical to gay sexual awakening, Grimsley codes the woods and natural spaces as sites of regeneration.

Just as Danny in *Winterbirds* configures the river as a spiritual site of peace and redemption, so too does Nathan in *Dream Boy* configure the forest as a spiritual place of healing. For Nathan, the woods become a refuge, a protection from his predator father who "ogles Nathan up and down [. . . while] his eyes, red-rimmed, fill with longing" (104), and this idea of refuge, of peace, instilled by the freedom of the forest, causes Nathan to view it as an alternative space of worship. Entering into the forest at the start of a weekend camping trip with Roy and two of his friends (Randy and Burke), Nathan begins to view the space in spiritual terms: "It is a kind of church, requiring reverence. This revelation comes to Nathan as he is gazing from side to side, guarding the delight and freedom of the moment as if they must be protected carefully in order to preserve them. . . . They are swimming through golden light, traveling through a green- and gold-leafed choir" (112). This spiritual revelation, emanating as it does from Nathan's internal sense of delight and freedom, offers an alternative paradigm to the one enacted by the scriptural readings of Nathan's father. As opposed to the father who views religion as the adherence to a set of biblical laws, many of which denounce the desires of the flesh, Nathan views in spiritual terms the space that allows his body the greatest freedom. Echoing again Whitman's ethos, Nathan suggests that the body cannot be abased to the soul. Acknowledging the freedom symbolized in the "golden light," Grimsley depicts the forest as a place where "the shadow of Dad vanishes," allowing Nathan the opportunity to construct a spiritual world view that is not at odds with his sexual identity (111). Central to this construction is Nathan's ability to step out of the father's shadow, to arrive at an understanding of himself and his sexuality apart from the abuse he suffers.

Further signaling the forest as a place of spiritual healing derived from the recuperative consummation of homosexual desire, Grimsley evokes a baptismal scene in which rain washes over the tent where Nathan and Roy are making love. While in the tent, Roy begins to discuss Nathan's father, clearly wanting to understand what has happened between them to cause Nathan to flee his father's house. Revealing only that he does not want to return, Nathan cannot bring himself to discuss the details of his abuse. As the two begin to make love, the "rain washes, the white sound cleanses, the woodland expands" (122). Suggesting that this formulation of homosexual desire serves to cleanse Nathan of the father's distorted vision of love, Grimsley again fuses the erotic with the spiritual in an effort to expand a rigidly conceived Christianity that would condemn all acts of same-sex desire. Rather than instill shame, guilt, and fear as the father's abuse of Nathan does, this redemptive moment with Roy allows Nathan to experience peace and fulfillment. As such, Grimsley's forest, even with its burial mound and ever present suggestion of death, becomes the sight of renewal, expansion, and fecundity. Just as the woodland expands, so too does Nathan expand and grow in his understanding of himself as a sexualized being. While the baptismal scene does not erase completely the memories of Nathan's father's abuse, it clearly offers him a different model on which to experience his sexual self. The father's twisted vision of protection and love becomes replaced by Roy who "anchors [Nathan] in the present, strips away shadows of the past" (126).

The process of negotiating a past history of sexual trauma that threatens to overshadow the intimacy and unity Nathan and Roy construct in the present moment of the forest, however, becomes a tenuous endeavor, specifically in a landscape that becomes increasingly connected to a history of violence and trauma. Casting an aura of

violence around their destination, the decaying Kennicutt plantation, Roy recites a legend about the last surviving male Kennicutt and a slave who beheads him, leaving the plantation owner to wander forever in search of his missing head. As the boys move inexorably toward the decaying plantation on Poke's road, one that connects the house with the former campsite, the novel moves beyond the private traumas of Nathan's psyche and into a broader cultural past that seemingly reignites Nathan's memory. While on the road Nathan registers "an eerie familiarity . . . as if he already knows the place" (128-9), and again, upon first seeing the plantation in the moonlight, "Nathan's immediate impression is that he knows the place" (154). Later, once Nathan actually enters the rooms of the plantation house, he tells Roy that he feels "like [he'll] never leave" (160). Nathan's connection to this location as a space of historical trauma, however, appears muddled, for these moments exist primarily as presentiments of Nathan's own sadistic rape, bludgeoning, and ultimate "murder" by Burke in the plantation attic. Marked as he is by the father's abuse, Nathan, like many victims of repeated sexual violence, internalizes feelings of guilt, blame, and self-loathing, which for Nathan create a sense of rationalization and inevitability surrounding the abuse. During Burke's rape of Nathan, Nathan thinks that, "it is as if he deserves it, as if both he and Burke understand that he is made for this use. There is a hole in Nathan, and Burke can see it; Dad opened a hole in Nathan, and now anyone can use it" (172). If, as Madden argues, Nathan functions as a kind of homosexual scapegoat, "sacrificed for the good of the social order" (112), his belief that "he is made for this use" (Grimsley 172), although a troubling sign of the psychic damage of his victimization, suggests a kind of beleaguered resignation to the inevitability of his abuse (112). Thus, Grimsley configures

Nathan as a body of social death, one whose difference becomes marked by absence, the hole, that "wound that does not close" (172). As such, Nathan's trek on Poke's road, his own *via dolorosa*, becomes infused with a kind of foreknowledge of his own impending martyrdom, and it will be on this road that the resurrected Nathan encounters the ghostly presence of Burke whose image "will always linger" (184).

Nathan then is both there and not there, dead but alive, in the same world as Burke, Randy, and Roy but not from it, a series of paradoxes that epitomize the kind of marginalization and social death Nathan experiences in a heterosexual, masculine social order. As Nathan recalls on the inception of his camping trip, "he comes from another world than the one in which these boys live. He sometimes inhabits the same world as Roy, but right now it's hard to tell" (70). Within this context of social death, of the condition of being there and not there, Nathan's intimacy with the plantation slaves and other member(s) of the plantation household becomes legible. Out of the boys, only Nathan enters into the plantation slave cemetery, but he remains troubled by the lack of gravestones, as if the slaves are both there and not there, a kind of historical erasure Nathan momentarily rejects by thinking that evidence of their lives may "lie here, unseen, beneath the grass" (139). His initial desire to read their names and thus to see them as more than ciphers signals a refusal to accept the marginalized status assigned to them by a racist, patriarchal system, one which simultaneously viewed them as "family" (thus the burial in a plot next to the plantation house) but also as "non-beings" (thus the failure to grant them human status by commemorating their names on gravestones). Once in the plantation house, Nathan again seems intimately connected to the suggested presence of another member of the planation household who may have been a victim of violence. In

an otherwise empty room, the boys find a blood-stained chair and a bloody hand print on the wall, prompting Nathan to remark that "this is the room where the slave cut the master's head off," but Grimsley implies that the chair, similar in shape and style to one that would sit in front of a vanity table, belonged to a woman (151). Confronted again with a victim who seems there but not there, Nathan begins "seeing the room a different way," an act which results in him moving the chair over to the fireplace because to him it "looks better there" (152). Perhaps Nathan begins to see the chair's owner as more than just a victim of trauma, to think of the victim not as just blood stains (suggesting another kind of "wound that does not close") but a real person, one who would have appreciated the warmth of a seat by the fireplace.

Ultimately, though, Grimsley's move to connect the trauma of Nathan's past with the one evoked by the plantation house and to demonstrate Nathan's intimacy with these other victims is not so much designed to connect different groups of victims but to highlight the marginalizing effects of a white, masculine social order that values heterosexual white men above all others. Choosing to read Grimsley's strategy as one that suggests a correlation between racial and sexual minorities, Madden calls such a move "politically problematic and potentially offensive" (121). Madden's characterization of Grimsley's tactic, however, seems to miss the mark, focusing as it does on the tenuous historical link that southern culture has often produced between sexual and racial difference. Though Madden cogently argues that Grimsley "seems to connect, however problematically, Nathan's individual history of violence, abuse, and silence to a larger cultural system of violence and oppression," he positions the victims as Grimsley's focal point of connection (121). The similarity Grimsley evokes in the

plantation house section, however, is not foremost the one between victims, but one between the perpetrators of violence. The cumulative effect of this section is its evocation of a continuum of oppression in which violence becomes the avenue to ensuring male dominance. Such a linkage should not be read as an attempt to equalize all forms of oppression or to suggest that heterosexual white men can be the only cause of such violence. However, Grimsley does imply that for minorities, those like Nathan, it would indeed be dangerous not to learn from other historical acts of oppression and to see the danger posed by a certain model of southern white masculinity.

Just as the whip in *Winterbirds* echoes a legacy of power relations in which violence becomes instrumental in ensuring white male dominance, Grimsley's plantation house echoes an era of oppression epitomized by the continued presence of the plantation owner who symbolically refuses to die. Like in Nathan's own life, the *father,* the white patriarch, is the one who continues to haunt the house. Integral to this idea of continued life of the patriarch is the implication that aspects of the plantation owner's masculine identity have been repeated, modified, and perpetuated in subsequent generations of southern white men, a point Grimsley expresses through the presence of ambiguous and shadowy male figure(s) who appear in the plantation house. As the boys first venture into the house, they encounter a shadow, "a broad-shouldered man standing perfectly still," who watches them momentarily and then flees further into the darkness. The re-emergence of this shadowy figure becomes a crucial one in the section, for his identity for Nathan seems indeterminate, alternately evoking the plantation owner, Nathan's dad, Pastor John Roberts, Roy, and finally Burke. Entering into "the deepest part of the shadow" in one room of the plantation, Nathan again encounters the ambiguous male

figure: “Someone stands there with his legs spread apart. He is sturdy, square-shouldered, like Nathan’s Dad when he was younger, like Preacher John Roberts. Like Roy. He is familiar. He makes no sound. He is another blankness of the house, a ghost who could be anyone, living or dead” (161).

Such ambiguation of the male figure here operates on multiple levels. From a psychological perspective, this ambiguation appears to be, for Nathan, a result of a history of continual sexual abuse. The father imprints a model of abuse on Nathan such that any display of masculine dominance becomes inextricably linked to the threat of violence. To varying degrees, then, each of the men in the list embodies a form of masculinity in which the expression of dominance becomes a defining component, and thus each one exists as a potential threat to Nathan. This ambiguation, however, simultaneously suggests a kind of historical continuity of patriarchal structures, as if the plantation owner is a type of original “patriarch” whose supremacy continues despite changing historical paradigms. Thus, Grimsley appears to emphasize not so much the similarity between victims, but those white men who have embraced the hierarchical structures of the plantation model and modified it to fit a shifting historical landscape. In this regard, homosexuals, such as Nathan, become only the most recent Other needed to substantiate white (heterosexual) dominance.

In this light, even Roy, Nathan’s lover, figures as a potential replication of the father, seeing as he has yet to relinquish a form of traditional masculinity that ensures he receives the privileged status bestowed upon heterosexual white men in the south. Being broad-shouldered, a baseball star, and a boyfriend to a local girl in the community, Roy projects the image of the alpha male, existing as the leader to the group of boys who

embark on this weekend camping trip. Even in Roy and Nathan's sexual encounters, Roy retains the position of dominance, acting as the penetrator during moments of intercourse, and despite Nathan performing fellatio on Roy multiple times, Roy refuses to do so to Nathan, a fact that causes Nathan "to learn that he himself is somehow different from Roy, governed by other laws" (55). While critic David Jarraway seizes upon this ambiguity surrounding Roy's sexuality as proof that Roy is "'adolescent' much before [he is] gay" (91), his desire to read this supposed "ambiguation of character" as a constructive (and thus positive) function of Grimsley's American Gothicism grossly ignores the impact of homophobia and the pressures of heteronormativity that Roy experiences in a less than accepting Southern culture (92). Omitting that this "difference" of which Nathan speaks carries real and often life-threatening consequences in a southern culture that does not want its sons growing up to be gay, Jarraway's reading fails to consider that Roy's attitude could exist as a form of repression, an unconscious denial to resist the label of being gay and thus avoid losing the real advantages southern culture affords to those who are heterosexual.

Due to the stigma of homosexuality, the lack of positive gay role models, and the vulnerability to harassment that such a label would engender, many young men initially resist self-identifying as gay. While such resistance may look on the surface as ambiguity, it often occurs as a stage of development in homosexual men, a truth reflected in the real-life narratives of gay men who grew up in the south. As an adolescent male living in North Carolina, Kevin Jennings engaged in a similar pattern of same-sex encounters as that of the fictionalized Roy and Nathan. Like Roy, Jennings's first homosexual encounter consisted of another boy, Mike, performing fellatio on him, a

pattern that remained consistent through the duration of their sexual relationship. Reflecting years later on this experience, Jennings, now openly homosexual, reads this ambiguity as a form of denial: "Sexually speaking, it was always a one-way street, a street only Mike traveled down, which allowed me to imagine on some level that *I* wasn't gay, only Mike was" (92). Like for Jennings, for Roy this form of self-delusion, the desire to not be gay, exits, in part, as an inability to reject the model of the heterosexual father. What Jarraway reads as Roy's ambiguity then is more accurately a sign of the psychological damage of living in a heterosexist culture, one in which the privileging of a heterosexual model of development exists as a barrier to the formation of a homosexual identity. Consequently, like Nathan's life, Roy's life becomes a fractured one, inevitably split between the heterosexual world of the father and the world of homosexual embraces he and Nathan momentarily share in the forest.

The plantation house, pervaded as it is with replications of the father, becomes the site of confrontation, one in which these two worlds crash together, a collision that inevitably results in a further fracturing of self for Nathan whose sadistic rape in the plantation house serves as a reiteration of the father's sexual abuse. As a victim of repeated sexual trauma currently engaged in a sexual relationship with a teenager who is reminiscent of a younger version of his father, Nathan lives on a tipping point, forever balancing the knowledge "that what pleases him with Roy terrifies him with his father" (101). For Nathan, the promise of sexual fulfillment becomes problematically intertwined with the potentiality for abuse such that sexual encounters carry a kind of loaded ambiguity. They could just as easily end in abuse as they could fulfillment. Grimsley signals this ambiguity with the shifting connotations he attributes to images of darkness

and more specifically the plantation shadow the boys encounter before actually going inside the house. This darkness represents both safety, the veritable cover of night, in which he and Roy can peacefully enjoy tender moments of closeness without the fear of being discovered, and the threat of death, of the self being consumed, forever submerged in the shadow of the father's abuse. Guided initially by the positive connotation of the shadow, Nathan seems intent on entering it: "Nathan steps toward the shadow. It is safe, in the darkness, to pause near Roy, to inhale his familiar smells. They are close, for a moment, in the overgrown yard; they are almost touching, and no one can see" (141). Invisibility, in this case, represents a kind of freedom, a momentary reprieve from a heterosexual gaze that threatens to unmask them, to reveal the true nature of their attraction and thus expose them to potential retaliatory violence.

Though not completely transparent to Nathan, the plantation shadow also serves as a portent of Nathan's inability to escape from the shadow of his father's abuse. In the shadow of the plantation, the symbol of a system governed by a hierarchical structure that ensures heterosexual, white male dominance and one that employs violence to ensure the stability of this structure, Nathan "vanishes into the blackest shadow of his life" (141). In contrast to Nathan's earlier association of the darkness as the place where "no one can see," the darkness becomes a space where there are "many eyes . . . watching from the black space around him" (141), giving Nathan the sensation "that he will never leave this darkness" (141). Just as Nathan's presentiment on Poke's road forecasts a ghostly encounter with Burke after Nathan's brutal rape, Nathan's feeling of never leaving the darkness similarly forecasts his eventual "murder" in the plantation attic. Nathan does, in

fact, leave the plantation, but only by a mystical resurrection in which he, fully embodied, leaves the house, inspired by Roy's love and the possibility of reunification.

This desire of Nathan's to re-enter the father's house with Roy, to revisit a space evocative of his original sexual trauma, exists, in part, as an unconscious and potentially problematic attempt to rewrite the narrative of his abuse, from a story of sexual exploitation to a story of sexual fulfillment. Far from a psychological anomaly, Nathan's desire is common among gay victims of sexual trauma. Writing about the stages of recovery of gay men who have suffered sexual abuse as children, psychologist Lawrence G. Rosenberg explains this attempt at psychological mastery on the part of abuse victims:

> It is not unusual for a trauma survivor to select a partner whose personality or behavior contains elements of his earlier traumatic association with an abusive and/or non-protective person. This selection often occurs outside of the survivor's awareness. . . . Part of the pull of this repetition is the individual's attempt to achieve psychological mastery over the original trauma by trying to recreate its elements and bring about a different outcome. (45)

Early in the novel, Grimsley clearly suggests how Roy's behavior conjures up memories of the father. Upon entering a friendship with Roy, Nathan agrees to study with him after supper one night, but it is an "agreement [that] makes Nathan happy and afraid at the same time" (11). As Grimsley further explains, "an image of the father gives the fear. The image comes to Nathan from dangerous places, from territories of memory that Nathan rarely visits. The memory is his father standing in a doorway, in the house in Rose Hill, and it reminds him of Roy because of the look in his father's eye" (11). That Roy and his father embody the same look of sexual longing reiterates the ambiguity surrounding Nathan's relationship with Roy, a man who carries the promise of sexual fulfillment but who also reawakens the fear of Nathan's own sexual victimization. Likewise, Nathan

enters into the plantation with this same mix of happiness and fear, unconsciously desiring to reformulate with Roy the outcome suggested by the memory of "his father standing in a doorway" (11). Consequently, in yet another house haunted by the figure of the father, Nathan experiences a moment evocative of his original trauma, for in an interior room of the plantation house where he and Roy have traveled alone, Nathan encounters again "[a] figure in the door. A vaguer shadow. Someone stands there with his legs spread apart. He is sturdy, square-shouldered, like Nathan's Dad when he was younger, like Preacher John Roberts. Like Roy. He is familiar" (161).

Far from achieving psychological mastery over the event, however, Nathan experiences a dissociative moment, a kind of psychological fragmentation indicative of a victim of sexual trauma whose external environment presents him with similar stimuli to the original trauma that become too much for his conscious mind to process:

> The moment broadens in some way, and divides. The sensation is explicit. There are two of Nathan, moving in different directions, and time is no longer a line but a knot, a maze, through which he must pick his way. The figure both remains in the doorway and walks away from it, and Nathan follows in each direction. The figure moves away, and Nathan follows, in the dark corridor, up the stairs, through walls, through ceilings and roofs, upward into air, into heaven and night sky.
>
> But the figure also remains in the doorway and in the haze moves vaguely, like something out of a dream, so that it might be Dad taking off his clothes there or it might be the preacher opening the Bible behind the pulpit on Sunday Morning. (161)

Nathan's reaction to this re-invoked image of the shadowy male figure exhibits classic symptoms of depersonalization (feeling detached from the self) and derealization (feeling as if the external environment is unreal), both of which are characteristic of someone who has experienced repeated sexual abuse. In discussing the occurrence of depersonalization in gay victims of sexual trauma, psychologist James Cassese explains that "fragmentation

is the psychological consequence of most traumas. In order to psychologically survive the traumatic event, the victim dissociates during and shortly after the event. The mind/body connection is severed by the sexual trauma, dissociation allowing the mind to withdraw in order to preserve sanity" (130). Nathan's dissociation, this divided sense of self, momentarily allows him the ability to contain contradictory impulses triggered by the presence of the "shadowy male figure" who could be either Dad or Roy. As Cassese further explains, "a psychological split serves to provide a framework within which the fragments can fit together without complete integration. Splitting ironically makes order from chaos by classifying things as "all good" or "all bad," without shades of grey. The anxiety of ambiguity is countered with a concrete all-or-none categorization" (131). The concurrent splitting of both Nathan and the male figure into two distinct figures allows him the ability to make "order from chaos" by separating memories of Roy, which become "all good," from memories of the father, which become "all bad." Subsequently, Nathan can follow Roy "into heaven and night sky" while simultaneously seeing the father who "also remains in the doorway" (161). In such a splitting, Nathan, too, is able to compartmentalize the damaged part of himself, the one who suffers the unclosed wound of the father's abuse, away from the sexually gratified part of himself, the one who achieves sexual pleasure with Roy.

Nathan's moment of dissociative splitting, however, is only a temporary coping device, one that remains a potent example of his inability to achieve psychic health in a space haunted by suggestions of the father's abuse. As Cassese ultimately concludes, "despite dissociation's self-preserving properties, the subsequent shattering often becomes problematic to the survivor" (130). In choosing to read Nathan's dissociative

split as symptomatic of a deeper psychological wound, I reject purely Gothic interpretations of the novel which position Nathan's "doubling" as an ultimately constructive phenomenon. Versed in post-structural and queer theories that revel in the supposedly liberating deconstruction of identity, Jarraway privileges the novel's adherence to pre-existing Gothic tropes over a more nuanced psychological reading of Nathan's character. Reading, for example, Nathan as "delighted to enter the decaying plantation house," Jarraway views the plantation shadow as a positive, even desirable, space for Nathan because it allows him the prospect of "losing himself . . . within the maze of its dark recesses" (96). Thus, Jarraway sees this "dark shadow" as an indispensable aspect of the novel's Gothic configuration:

> What appears, moreover, to be key to this euphoric state of polymorphous self-actualization outside and beyond the constraints of sociocultural regulation is that 'black space' into which identity 'vanishes,' that 'blackest shadow' of Nathan's life where it might be possible for any number of human 'eyes'/Is to secrete themselves, and thus reconfirming the nature of Gothic textuality as fundamentally 'the site of excess.' (96)

Viewing Nathan's splitting in the presence of the shadowy male figure as a "euphoric state of polymorphous self-actualization," Jarraway casts this moment as a purely liberating one for Nathan, one that neglects the psychic fracturing that the presence of the male figure triggers in him. Although this split may temporarily resolve the ambiguity Nathan experiences, the house ultimately remains antithetical to Nathan's attempt at self-actualization precisely because it remains inextricably intertwined with the shadows of the father's abuse and the historical distortions and abuses of southern society. Thus, while I agree with Jarraway that the plantation's dark shadow presents Nathan with the potential loss of self, I read this loss as a sign of Nathan's inability to escape the death

(both social and actual) imposed on him as a gay subject who has no potential for life in a world imbued with the violent impulses of masculine dominance.

In reading Nathan as a gay subject, I am, once again, purposely invoking a theoretical framework that runs contrary to the anti-identitarian ideas of critics such as Jarraway. Jarraway's theoretical approach traffics in the work of such queer theorists as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and produces a curious and ultimately disturbing reading of the novel. The novel's core features the frank sexual relationship between two teenaged boys, one of whom, Nathan, makes absolutely no mention or suggestion of sexual attraction to members of the opposite sex. In an attempt to question existing regimes that seek to limit or confine one's sexuality to a specific and singular cultural script by calling into question the very construction of sexuality itself, Jarraway ends up erasing gay identity from the novel entirely. Nathan, according to Jarraway, "is equally able to live a part of his life in the straight-identified world that Roy more frequently 'inhabits'" and "shows little signs throughout the novel of surrendering the double claim that Gothic discourse makes upon him" (94). Invoking Sedgewick's claim that "'the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically,'" Jarraway reads Nathan's splitting in the plantation house as a moment of reprieve from the culture's attempt to fix his sexual identity (qtd. in Jarraway 94). In doing so, however, Jarraway consistently misreads Nathan's ambiguity, his so called "ability" to live in "the straight-identified world," as a product of his own choice, a decision that fails to register the very notion of compulsory heterosexuality that causes this ambiguity in the first place. I am more inclined to believe Leo Bersani when he claims, in *Homos* that "if these suspicions of identity are necessary,

they are not necessarily liberating" (4). According to Bersani, this tendency to resist the labeling of gay identity (even in an attempt at self-identification) "has had the curious but predictable result of eliminating the indispensable grounds for resistance to, precisely, hegemonic regimes of the normal. We have erased ourselves in the process of denaturalizing the epistemic and political regimes that have constructed us" (4). To be fair, Jarraway never completely dismisses the possibility of gay subjectivity for Nathan, but his theoretical need to see Nathan as a fundamentally ambiguated character, so that the novel more closely fits into a Gothic and postmodern framework, creates a dangerous blindness regarding the homophobia that ultimately forces Nathan to live at all in the straight-identified world of the father.

Far from being a feature exclusive to the Gothic space of the plantation house, Nathan's splitting seems more closely tied to the presence of a dominant male figure, one whose presence suggests either a real or psychic death. Thus, while Nathan's experience of this divided moment is perhaps more elaborate in the plantation house, this kind of dissociative occurrence is not exclusive to this space. Nathan, for example, experiences his first divided moment earlier in the novel when he watches Burke, Randy, and Roy swim in a local river below a train trestle the boys use as a diving platform. Unable to swim, Nathan secretly watches the boys undress in preparation for their dives until Burke grabs hold of him, positions him out from the trestle, and threatens to drop him in the water below. Although Nathan remains "strangely peaceful" at the prospect of the fall, once Burke lets him go safely on the ground, Nathan experiences a division of time: "Nathan hovers unsteadily, glimpsing below, his own face slipping beneath the dark water. As if the moment has divided, as if he has both fallen and not fallen" (66). Like the

divided moment in the plantation house, Nathan's division here seems triggered by the presence of a man who signals a potential death, a submersion into a darkness from which he cannot escape. However, by being able to view "his own face slipping beneath the dark water," Nathan is able to detach himself psychologically from his body, giving him the ability to believe that such an act is happening to someone else, not him. As Cassese explains, "the dissociative phenomenon of depersonalization offers a cinema-like sense of 'detachment from the self,' including 'a sense that one is observing the self from the outside' (Steinberg, 1994)" (130). Far from representing a liberating loss of identity, though, the dark water covers Nathan's face, a symbol, not just of his potential death, but one of his inability to sustain an identity, and indeed a healthy sense of self, when confronted with the threat of male violence.

These divided moments then are not the apex of Nathan's attempts at self-actualization but a sign of his failure to develop an identity in a world dominated by a form of aggressive, dominant masculinity, a process complicated by the fact that his current love interest, Roy, still remains uncommitted to existing exclusively in Nathan's world. Roy still clings to the world of heterosexuality, insisting to Nathan that he has a girlfriend, and at least on one occasion he pleads with Nathan to not say "anything about this [their sexual encounter] to anybody" (42). Nathan's world, however, remains exclusively grounded in the desire for sexual sameness, which promises a model of egalitarianism that stands in direct opposition to the hierarchical networks that pervade the heterosexual world Roy still inhabits. As such, Nathan's world constitutes what Leo Bersani defines as "homo-ness," a field of relations produced by this desire for sameness and the concurrent egalitarianism achieved as its effect. In applying Bersani's theory to

instances of same-sex desire in literature depicting the southern plantation system, Michael Bibler views homo-ness as a provocative model for explaining how these moments can create alternative models of resistance to the hierarchical structure of the patriarchal plantation model. Evoking Bersani's theory, Bibler argues that "the widespread association of homosexuality with sameness proposes a unique model of relations in which other factors of individual difference could fail to produce any kind of power differential between people. That potential for homo-ness makes homosexuality a powerful site for rethinking the hierarchical networks of relationality that dominate culture" (8). Significantly, in the only two scenes when Grimsley writes of Nathan and Roy merging into "one flesh," they are both lying supine in the forest wrapped in each other's arms, neither one standing above the other, which becomes a visual marker of their egalitarian union.

Precisely because homo-ness promises the possibility of an egalitarian model of relations, it could only remain viable within the plantation system when other forms of oppression were present to ensure white male superiority. Within the plantation system, for example, southern white men did not always need to utilize homophobia as a means to ensure white male dominance if certain other forms of oppression still existed. As Bibler explains, far from same-sex intimacy between white men of the planter class being exclusively prohibited in the plantation model, it was often integrated into its construction, provided that the "plantation's hierarchies of racial, class, and gender identities" remained intact (18). According to Bibler's assessment, "as long as those hierarchies continue to assure his superiority, the possibility that the planter might enter into a homosexual relationship with another white man from the same class—a second

patriarch, as it were—does nothing to undermine or threaten his masculine identity" (19). Grimsley's novel, however, depicts a much different era, one in which the supremacy of the white male is no longer guaranteed by an institution that enforces racial and gender inequality. In a world in which institutionalized racial and gender subordination can no longer be used as the structural pillars of white male supremacy, homosexual relations become too volatile to contain in a system where his masculine identity encounters constant threats. Homophobia, like racism and sexism before it, becomes only the newest tool in the white male arsenal used to ensure white masculine supremacy.

Not surprisingly, then, Grimsley's revisiting of the plantation house posits Burke's expression of homophobic violence as a recent structural supplement emanating from an original patriarchal plantation model designed to ensure white male superiority. Consequently, Roy's decision to abandon the hierarchical model of masculine dominance (signaled by his willingness to initiate fellatio on Nathan) in the plantation house acts as a virtual powder-keg, explosive in its potential to undermine the very foundation of the white, masculine social order, one needed in order to keep the homoerotic impulses of someone like Burke at bay. The apparent destabilization is immediately clear when those eyes that Nathan senses watching him in the plantation house manifest in the disapproving, homophobic gaze of Burke and Randy who witness Roy and Nathan's sexual act. Consequently, when Burke witnesses the act, he intuitively understands the egalitarian (and thus emasculating) threat of Roy and Nathan's model of same-sex desire. For Roy, the exposure confirms the belief, according to Michael Kimmel, that "our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies,"

which becomes a censure that Roy cannot face, thus prompting him to leave Nathan and the plantation house (104).

Grimsley's scene, in which the eyes Nathan imagines in the darkness of the plantation shadow transmute into the eyes of Burke and Randy, depicts the pinnacle of what Michael Kimmel describes as "that nightmare from which we never seem to awaken" (103). In describing the genesis of a panoptic male gaze that follows a male child throughout his life, one that constantly surveys his masculine performance, Kimmel argues that the "father is the first man who evaluates the boy's masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life. Other men's eyes will join them . . . the eyes of his peers, his friends . . . and the eyes of millions of other men, living and dead, from whose constant scrutiny of his performance he will never be free" (103). The nightmare, according to Kimmel, is that these other eyes, these other men, will recognize our "sense of inadequacy[;] they will see that in our own eyes we are not who we are pretending to be" (103). In this paradigm, masculinity becomes an insurance against the revelation of men as frauds, "an exaggerated set of activities that keeps others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves" (103). For one like Roy who engages in homosexual acts, this gaze becomes especially feared, for it could reveal the very constructed nature of masculinity itself, one he has used, until now, to deflect suspicion concerning his sexuality. For Burke, he can only act upon his homoerotic desire within a paradigm of heightened violence, so that even in the fulfillment of his (homo)sexual desires, he ends up reaffirming his masculinity in a brutal display of dominance.

In Burke, Grimsley depicts the inevitable consequences of embracing and continuing the destructive logic of the masculine identity embedded in the plantation model, for Burke becomes an ideological descendent of the plantation system, one which placed the white male at the top of its social hierarchy. Burke's father embraces the racist logic of his generation, refusing to let his son play football because the team consists of black players, and Burke truly becomes his father's son so that when Nathan and Randy softly hum church hymns while on the camping trip, Burke alone sings "I wish I was in the land of cotton" (131) as the boys approach the plantation house. Far from rejecting his father's model, Burke internalizes it, a process that dooms him to a perpetual cycle of aggression and violence needed to reaffirm his masculine identity, one defined by his ability to exert power over other people. The psychic dissonance created by the clash between Burke's homosexual desires and this model of masculinity as dominance consigns Burke to a state of frustrated confusion and repetition, so that when Nathan encounters Burke's image on Poke's road, Burke remains "confused, pacing up and down the bank of the dark creek" (184). Unable to acquiesce permanently to his homosexual desires for fear of losing his status as a man, Burke remains invariably trapped between his desire and a masculine order that necessitates its disavowal: "It will be his image, it will always linger. It will wait for Nathan, it will wish for Roy. It will take off its shirt, it will be a man" (184). In the current model of masculinity as dominance, Burke can "be a man" only if his homosexual desires remain forever anticipatory, never consummated.

If Burke represents the son's failure to reject the father's model of masculinity in order to embrace a homosexual identity, Nathan functions as his inverse, a son whose love for another man gives him the strength to abandon the father's world and thus refuse

the masculine identity it represents. Far from becoming trapped forever in the plantation house, Nathan, as Grimsley suggests, must leave the father's space completely, forever abandoning the father's houses (the church, the farmhouse, and the plantation house), and return to the forest where his flesh and spirit can be restored. If Nathan is to remain in a relationship with Roy and avoid the other psychic splitting he experiences in the plantation house, one triggered by the anxiety over the ambiguous male figure, one who could be either Dad or Roy, Roy must also relinquish both his claim to the world of heterosexuality and the status of privilege, of dominance, it bestows upon him. Only in the forest do Nathan and Roy truly become "one flesh," and this desire for unification (not the splitting of self Nathan experiences in the plantation house) serves as the ultimate balm to Nathan's history of trauma (142). Although desirable for its regenerative properties, the forest cannot be purely utopic for the boys since it excludes them (and gay people in general) from the realms of power still afforded to heterosexuals in the space of the father, therefore allowing heterosexuals to exert control at every turn.

Signaling the forest, and not the plantation house, as the truly recuperative space, Grimsley heralds an optimistic vision of the forest finally overtaking, covering, and ultimately reclaiming the crumbling remnants of the plantation house and its adjacent structures: "Out past the shacks lie the once cleared fields of the farm, long since overgrown. One day even the house, even the stone barn, will be reclaimed by the forest" (138). The image of the forest reclaiming and eventually breaking down the plantation, the physical evidence of the white man's dominion, exists as a recuperative one, suggesting the utter demise of an exploitative system of oppression, a kind of natural order taking the place of an unnatural one. If gay subjects are to live full lives, expansion

and renewed life must replace the destruction and death that permeate the patriarchal world of the father. Subsequently, Grimsley's scene reimagines the mythology of the plantation construction in which the white male subdues the wilderness, taming it, clearing it, killing it in order to build the house, which serves as the symbol of his authority and privilege, such as Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*. However, if Faulkner depicts the past as a paralyzing and ultimately death-inducing burden for a "queer" subject like Quentin Compson, Grimsley offers a redemptive vision, one in which a gay subject like Nathan can reimagine the past in the present so as not to fall victim to its potentially lethal effects. Nathan continues to live despite a past that would otherwise consign him to an inescapable death. Such an impulse for survival suggests a new paradigm of southern fiction regarding the potentiality for gay life, for all of Grimsley's gay characters remain alive, even when death seems to surround them on all fronts.

To be clear, however, this specific vision of the forest overtaking the plantation, of life replacing death, is more prophetic than actual. Anticipatory in design, it registers the optimistic desire to erase any remaining vestiges of the white father's paradigm of supremacy and violence, but the continued existence of the plantation house and the spectral presence of the beheaded plantation owner suggest that traces of white male supremacy still linger in and haunt the present. Precisely because this world of the father remains haunted by past memories of violence and abuse, Nathan, as a gay subject, cannot return to his father's house. Signaling his growing refusal to remain subject to the mental split he will always feel as a gay subject if he remains in the oppressive world of the father, Nathan, arisen from the plantation attic, is initially reluctant to leave the

protective space of the forest to find Roy who abandoned him in the plantation house after the moment of their discovery. In an ingenious critique of the traditional resolution of green world narratives, such as *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, in which the lovers leave the forest only to return to the law of the father's house and subsequently submit to the compulsory heterosexual marriage, Grimsley creates a scene in which Nathan emerges from the forest only to misrecognize his own funeral as the wedding of Roy and his girlfriend, Evelyn. This momentary association of Nathan's funeral with the heterosexual marriage of his lover, Roy, clearly suggests how heterosexual marriage exists as a veritable death of gay subjectivity. Grimsley implies that in these traditional narratives that conclude in the father's world, gay subjects like Nathan can only meet one kind of end: death. For the Nathans of the South to live, writers must imagine alternative narratives, and indeed alternative lives, for their gay subjects, ones that move out of this death-inducing world of the father's domain.

Consequently, Grimsley's narrative ends, not in the death-haunted space of the father but in the regenerative world of the forest. Intuitively understanding his limited potential outside the protective space of the woods, Nathan emerges reluctantly, and only briefly, to find Roy standing outside the church. Nathan acknowledges, "I don't think I can stay here," which forces Roy to choose between being with Nathan and leaving the world of the father forever or leaving Nathan and returning to his heterosexual life outside the forest: Roy "is understanding, now. He is choosing. He looks deep into the trees" (193). What Roy seems to understand for the first time is that there can be no more ambiguity, no more splitting between two worlds if he and Nathan are to be together, for such splitting, as Grimsley suggests in the plantation house scene, only furthers psychic

fragmentation. Thus, when Roy chooses Nathan, they intuitively understand that they can only exist together if they abandon the space of the father: “It is a relief that they can feel each other, that their hands are warm. It is a relief that they are in the same world. They disappear into the woods” (193). Once in the forest, the two lie down in the fallen leaves and experience once again that feeling of unification, the moment when they “become one flesh,” a corrective resolution to the fragmentation Nathan experiences in the plantation house (195). Perhaps most importantly, Grimsley couches this unification in the language of natural growth, explaining that “Roy is rapt, as if he is singing inside. Or maybe it is more as if he is blossoming, a flower opening at this very moment” (195). In this scene Grimsley suggests that the true reciprocation of love and subsequent growth occurs not when Roy agrees to perform fellatio on Nathan but when he decides to abandon the space of the father and enter into Nathan’s territory, the regenerative world of the forest. Having rejected the model of heterosexuality imparted by the father, Roy can finally accept himself and experience a rapturous moment of self-actualization. Roy’s moment of self-actualization, however, occurs only after he drops his Bible in the grass, signaling the rejection of organized Christianity, the Law of the Father, in favor of the spiritual possibilities of the forest.

Ultimately, though, Nathan and Roy’s future in the forest seems indeterminate, as it exists as a liminal space, a temporary refuge between the world of the father and the idealized world of the North to which Roy suggests they should go. Invoking, as Madden notes, the “free” space of the North so often the destination of southern run-away slaves (128), Roy’s proposition parallels, too, the familiar historical narrative of gay subjects fleeing the South to the urban centers of the North in search of established gay

communities, ones not entrenched in a kind of compulsory Christianity that seems antithetical to their formation of gay identities. Although Grimsley revises a prior history of representing gay subjects in southern literature by having Nathan survive his bludgeoning in the plantation attic, his novel acknowledges the real challenges of gay subjects creating a viable future in a rural South that seems unable to sustain those with alternative sexualities. Nathan and Roy are indeed together, both in the same world, but in a world transformed from one readers may recognize. As such, Grimsley's ending note of utopian fantasy may put off some readers, but it remains absolutely crucial to maintaining his vision of survival. As Tali Sharot argues in a different context, "to make progress, we need to be able to imagine alternative realities—better ones—and we need to believe that we can achieve them" ("The Optimism Bias"). For Roy and Nathan, such optimism remains a crucial and indeed life-sustaining impulse, for they could not make their decision to "stand and go . . . [and] never look back" without the belief that they would be turning to something better than the world of the father they are leaving behind (195). Consequently, if gay subjects are to remain alive at the end of southern narratives, writers like Grimsley must continue to imagine the contours of these alternative realities, to demonstrate what could be possible, before such realities can materialize.

Not surprisingly, Grimsley's fifth novel, *Boulevard,* the one that returns to the genre of the gay bildungsroman, begins where *Dream Boy* seemingly leaves off, with a young, white, male protagonist leaving both his family and the oppressive confines of the rural South in search of an existing gay community, one that will be conducive to the exploration of his homosexual identity. Though Newell does not move to the idealized world of the North, as Roy suggests in *Dream Boy,* he heads to New Orleans, a city that

has long functioned in the southern literary imagination as a space of escape from the repressive, homophobic, and potentially violent culture of the rural South. Thus, on one level, Newell's flight to the perceived sexually liberating urbanity of New Orleans in the late 1970s confirms the predominant historiographical model that links gay identity formation with the advent of "capitalist industrialization and urbanization" (Howard 12). However, if Newell's own past remains remarkably free of trauma because of the absence of the patriarch, in *Boulevard*, Grimsley returns to the idea of a South haunted by a repressed history of racial violence, one that complicates Newell's vision of New Orleans as a utopian space ideal for the reinvention of the self. If in *Dreamboy* Grimsley suggests that both racial and sexual minorities become victims in the white male's desire to establish authority and control, in *Boulevard*, he investigates how visions of the city, specifically New Orleans, as a queer utopia are often dependent upon an historical erasure of racial oppression.

Thus, in *Boulevard*, Newell's desire for New Orleans to be a queer space, to see the city as an open and ultimately unscripted place in which anything is possible, is often at odds with the image of New Orleans as a city rooted in a violent and traumatic racial history, a history that bears witness to the limitations of personal freedom and a history that continually reverberates in the present despite attempts to suppress it. Grimsley evokes this clash of narratives by interweaving images of gay sexual gratification between Newell and Mark, a native New Orleanian, with Mark's rumination about the traumatic history of the Lalaurie house, a location long rumored to be the site of grotesque slave torture. The disjuncture between these two different images of the city, as the place of both sexual freedom and racial violence and oppression, produces a kind

of narrative schism, one that mirrors the fractured sense of self felt by those native New Orleanians like Mark "who studied the past because he felt confused by the present. About who he was" (225). Therefore, Newell's construction of New Orleans as a place of opportunity and potential transformation rests on his ability to push aside the city's history of trauma and racial inequality. When this deflection becomes impossible, however, New Orleans becomes a place for Newell, the Alabama native, to leave because it is one that threatens to unravel his coherent sense of self.

Evoking a history of travelers who seem at first compelled to live in New Orleans but ultimately choose to leave it, Grimsley follows a number of gay American authors like Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams, and Truman Capote whose sojourns in New Orleans serve as the impetus for their literary depictions of the city, which, in the cases of Whitman and Capote, seem conducive to the explorations of homosexuality. However, unlike these earlier, pre-Stonewall authors whose depictions of New Orleans as a queer space are often tempered by the stark reality of a reading public still uncomfortable with expressions of open homosexuality, Grimsley presents a much different time and place, a 1970s New Orleans in which public displays of gay sex become a form of rebellion against the sexual repression of earlier generations. By strategically setting his novel in a time after Stonewall but before the height of the AIDS epidemic, Grimsley consciously evokes an era in which the construction of a gay identity can occur without the encumbrance of moral prescriptions about homosexual behavior. This ethos of permissibility, however, is not just about a moment in time but also about place, for New Orleans becomes a crucial component in the construction of this philosophy.

In an interview with fellow novelist Andrew Beierle, Grimsley elaborates on the crucial importance New Orleans played in the construction of the novel:

> I moved to New Orleans right after school because some of my friends had moved there and I could stay with them and take a look at the city. In fact, most of my reason for writing the book was New Orleans. I wanted to paint a kind of picaresque portrait of New Orleans, of a country kid moving to the city and landing in a whole bunch of adventures. So it was very important to me. I shaped the whole book around drawing a portrait of the city. (qtd. in Herren 6)

Grimsley's self-proclaimed "picaresque portrait of New Orleans," however, rests largely on the synechdochic use of the French Quarter to serve as the representative whole of the city. This tendency to position the French Quarter as the public face of New Orleans has long been associated with a tourist culture aimed at attracting a white clientele. Historian J. Mark Souther calls attention to the development of this marketing strategy in post 1950s New Orleans in which the "ugly realities of black urban life" become eclipsed by a tourist industry intent on selling an idealized vision of the Quarter (806). Souther notes that "the privileging of the French Quarter ensured that local and visiting whites could 'construct' a New Orleans relatively free of urban pathologies" (807). With prostitution, public displays of sex, drug running, pedophilia, and alcoholism taking center stage in the novel, however, Grimsley's depiction of the Quarter is in no way a sanitized, Disneyfied version of the city, but nevertheless his recognition of its problems become almost exclusively linked to the hedonism of the Quarter. What is conspicuously absent in Newell's construction of the city, then, is any real acknowledgement of how the city's history of racial inequality, which surfaces quite frequently in the novel, affects the contemporary moment. Although Grimsley ends up shifting narrative registers and entering the mind spaces of local New Orleanians to provide accounts of the city's

history of racial trauma, Newell refuses to see this history as relevant to his experience in the city.

Undoubtedly influenced by a tourist image of the city, Newell arrives in New Orleans and heads straight to the Quarter, the so-called "center of the city," which has occupied his consciousness and imagination. Consequently, the French Quarter, and more specifically Bourbon Street, becomes Newell's desired residence and for him the perceived epicenter of life in New Orleans. By having a visible and established gay community, the Quarter offers Newell the prospect of transformation that has previously been denied to him in Alabama, a place that has not provided him with any models of queer life on which to base his own identity. But while the Quarter's gay bars, bookstores, and diners present an image of a city that is both open and accepting of homosexuality, its buildings also contain evidence of a different history, one of racial trauma that must be carefully managed, repackaged, and often erased in order to maintain this ethos of tolerance and revelry.

Newell's transformation in New Orleans is successful in part because he is unable to see traces of his own past in the city, and what he does see when he first enters the gay district of the Quarter, men making a living as female impersonators, becomes a "clear sign that the world was larger than anything [he] could ever have learned about in Pastel" (28). This immediate disassociation from the rural space of his roots, although disorienting at first, unhinges Newell from his previous life, thereby allowing him the opportunity to reinvent himself. Newell registers this intoxicating quality of the Quarter when he reads the local paper for the first time: "the local news made no sense, about places like Plaquemines Parrish, Shreveport, names completely unfamiliar to him, and

even the national news, the latest about Jimmy Carter, for instance, or where Betty Ford was speaking this week, came to him as though diluted; perhaps because the paper was green, nothing he read in it seemed quite real" (42). For Newell, the French Quarter becomes a "narcotic" capable of distorting reality and providing him with a necessary break from the impact of the outside world. This disassociation, however, lulls Newell into a dreamlike state in which he becomes blind or callous to the historical forces that structure the daily lives of the city's native population.

Glimpses of the Quarter's history of racial inequality surface sporadically throughout the novel, and the longer Newell lives in New Orleans, the more he realizes that the city is not an unscripted space, but a location whose history is written, in part, in its architecture. Early in the novel, the architectural uniqueness of the French Quarter presents a challenge to Newell who feels that "these buildings were a language unto themselves" (35), and as he walks down Royal Street to the room he has rented, he calls attention to the street's architectural façade: "the street was a wall of buildings, fences, and gates, and he had the feeling that all this was to hide what went on inside these buildings, these courtyards" (19). What remains behind the fence, as Newell notices upon more careful inspection, is a series of small buildings that once served as slave quarters, which have been carefully concealed from public view. As this brief episode illustrates, New Orleans is a city whose buildings bear witness to the constant process of negotiating a public façade, of carefully constructing an acceptable exterior to manage, to conceal the untidiness, the undesirability of its past history of oppression. This concealment and suppression of the past becomes a crucial component in maintaining a vision of New Orleans as an open space, alluring in its promise of providing

opportunities for the reinvention of the self. As Ruth Salvaggio recently notes about the construction of New Orleans in the public imagination, “the city has become a poster site for erasing the past and therefore ensuring that everything is possible” (305).

As Newell starts to emerge from the dreamlike trance New Orleans first evokes for him, he begins to acquire a more complex understanding of how slavery has impacted the representation of the Quarter in the historical imagination. Picking up a used copy of George Washington Cable’s *Strange True Tales of Louisiana*, he reads the history of Madame Lalaurie and her famed Royal Street mansion in which she, as the legend goes, tortured her slaves and chained her elderly cook to the kitchen through the use of an iron collar. In a desperate attempt to free herself, the cook sets fire to the kitchen as a way to expose the crimes of her mistress. Upon rereading Cable’s description of the enslaved cook, however, Newell feels the iron chain around his own neck, as if he has become the woman: “[he] read that [story] over again, chilled by it, as if he were that old woman with heavy iron chafing her neck to blood” (115). Thus, Newell filters Cable’s vision of the past through the only history of oppression he knows intimately, his own, but it is a move that, while demonstrating empathy, displaces and dislocates the trauma from the history of its origins. By imaginatively reconstructing the account in such a way that he becomes the victim, Newell foregoes a more complicated investigation of how his whiteness may structure and inform his perception of the city differently than that of its African American citizens. Even the architecture, the slave quarters he can still see from the balcony of his room, seems dislodged from its origins: “He put down the book at one point, went to his door, stood on the back gallery, looked at the slave quarters, which Louise had fixed up into such a nice apartment for herself” (115). While Newell can still

see the remnants of New Orleans' slave-holding past, his compassion for and understanding of the city's history of African American oppression seems conditioned by his need to consign it to a bygone era or to see it as a metaphor for contemporary homophobia.

Newell's vision of New Orleans and indeed his ability to transform himself in it exist through a dislocation of his past and a purposeful refusal to contemplate seriously the history of the city, which are tasks not easily performed by those native New Orleanians whose pasts are inevitably bound up with the history of the city. Unlike Newell, Mark, a city native, appears obsessed with rehearsing history as a way of defining and understanding himself in the present. Consequently, when Mark first meets Newell, he begins to tell Newell of his "family [who] was descended from the king of Comus" (182). In the novel, Mark's acid propelled ruminations about his past become interwoven with current scenes depicting him and Newell traveling the city streets. Once at Newell's apartment, the two begin to have sex, but Mark's rehearsal of the past continually interrupts the present action. Frustrated with his own failure to tell the history correctly, Mark says to Newell, "You don't know anything about history," to which Newell responds, "No. What the fuck do I care about that for, now?" (187). Although Newell's comment obviously registers the inappropriate timing of Mark's history lesson, his rejection of Mark's history, which becomes intermingled with the history of New Orleans, is also necessary for him to maintain his vision of the city as a place where anything is possible. Interested only in sexual freedom, Newell does not want to know of any limitations or complications to his own potential for identity formation that may arise

from seeing the city's history as a force that continues to shape the contours of its inhabitants' lives.

Only by switching narrative voices, by entering into the head-space of Mark, can Grimsley capture a more complex reading of the city that bears witness to its history of racial trauma. Prior to their acid infused jaunt through the streets of New Orleans, Mark, the Tulane history graduate, has been at work transcribing a personal journal from the nineteenth century belonging to a female neighbor who lived close to the Lalaurie mansion and witnessed the fire that nearly destroyed it. Interjecting passages from the journal amid scenes of Mark and Newell strolling the city, Grimsley creates a pastiche of sorts, evoking a multi-layered narrative that infuses the past into the contemporary moment. As Mark and Newell are sitting watching the river, a spot only blocks away from where the author of the journal once lived, Grimsley includes passages recounting the tragic history of the Lalaurie house, of first the young black African girl who Lalaurie allegedly threw off the roof of the house and then the eighty year old cook who she chained in the kitchen. Graphically recounting the aftermath of the fire set by the cook, the journal depicts the female slave who has "an iron collar sharpened at the edges still gripping her at the neck, she barely able to walk, her neck, wrists, and ankles scored with wounds, and other ghastly bloody marks on her body" (210). The horror of these crimes once exposed to public view, however, provokes outrage among the citizens who begin to destroy the house by taking it apart so that when the journal author walks by the site again, "it sits an empty shell, as though the woman and all her cruelties had never existed, or as if it required so complete a scouring to cleanse the crimes away" (217). Regardless of motive, this public erasure of the traumatic past and the creation of an acceptable

façade to conceal the ugly realities of racial inequality become emblematic of a city intent on constructing an image of itself that allows its white citizens to live in relative peace, unburdened by feelings of guilt and complicity. In Grimsley's recounting, however, these lingering images of traumatized black female bodies tear into the current narrative of the text, cutting it, breaking it apart in an attempt to defy a totalizing vision of the city. This odd, jarring textual juxtaposition of past images of pain with current images of pleasure creates for the reader a fractured, schismatic vision of the city, one that resists the notion of an official history that would signal a complete closure of the past.

For Mark the continual resurfacing of this trauma in the present serves as a psychic wound that keeps compelling him to contemplate the pain just underneath the public image of pleasure and decadence. Therein lies the difference between Mark, the native, and Newell, the visitor, who continually rejects such narratives that threaten to interfere with his pursuit of transformation. At the end of their "trip" through the city, Mark's rumination about the past once again stymies his sexual performance and distracts him from the contemporary moment. Visibly disengaged, Mark tells Newell,

> "I'm thinking about some things right now."
> "What?"
> "Strange true tales of Louisiana."
> "I only know strange true tales of Alabama," Newell said.
> "Alabama, right. But you don't live there anymore."
> "No. I don't." (224-5)

Offering an implicit critique of Newell, the passage once again demonstrates his failure to engage the history of the city and to see it as more than just an open space to explore his burgeoning homosexuality. To be clear, however, Mark's acknowledgement of the past and engagement with the city's history of racial trauma is not some empathetic move that brings him closer to understanding the contemporary plight of African Americans. In

fact, these ruminations exist in spite of Mark who seems unable to forget them, despite his drug-fueled attempts to do just that. Cognizant of the city's history, Mark turns to LSD as a way to free himself from the burden of the past. On LSD Mark is able to stand "in the dreaming place but awake, with a sense of knowing the world as though he had constructed it himself" (203). The desire to construct a reality free of the trauma of the past is a common impulse then, both for natives like Mark and for visitors like Newell. However, for those, like Mark, who know the history and still choose to live indefinitely in the city, they become trapped in an endless cycle of trying to forget.

Thus, in *Boulevard* the city natives, Mark and Miss Sophia, an aging, alcoholic, and potentially schizophrenic transsexual, appear to be psychically damaged, as if the city's continual process of concealment, erasure, and public invention of its own identity has prevented its citizens from developing and maintaining a coherent and stable sense of themselves. What becomes solidified as authentic New Orleans within the *tourist* imagination is, ironically, its capacity for invention. Miss Sophia, the invented and consciously displayed persona of Clarence Dodd, becomes for tourists the real New Orleans:

> It was easy for Miss Sophia to get a good sip from the vodka now and again, and people noticed but they thought it was cute to see, a man dressed up like a woman getting drunk in Jackson Square, weren't these New Orleans drunks all so cute and colorful? But a man in a purple dress, you didn't see that everywhere, and real breasts, too. He could almost see himself as if he were outside himself, and the spectacle he made, the wig and dress and boa, the shoes, the purse, the liquor, the walk, the whole parade, that gave him a feeling of soaring over all the rest of these people, of carrying himself grandly through the crowd as if he were a procession all by himself, because he had invented Miss Sophia, after all, and she was far more interesting to inhabit than nearly anybody he could see. (153)

In the fetishized gaze of the tourists, the ability to invent oneself becomes New Orleans' defining characteristic, but this invention, this construction of the self, serves to conceal a body wracked with pain, for Miss Sophia parades the streets as a way to silence the existential voice in her head that asks her, "Why do I go on? . . .Why did it turn out like this?". For Miss Sophia, however, there is "no way to stop the words except to keep the body moving, to work, or to walk the streets" (162). In the objectifying stare of the tourists, pain becomes transformed into spectacle, a move that once again conceals a history of trauma. Precisely because the French Quarter already has a history of concealing racial trauma, it becomes a desirable place for Miss Sophia to conceal her own personal pain, but it is a feat only accomplished through the mind numbing effects of alcohol.

For Newell, when the trauma becomes personal, impossible to ignore, the city loses its value in his imagination. Having been beaten to the point of losing consciousness during a sexual encounter that began as pleasure, Newell can no longer maintain the image of New Orleans as a space unaffected by trauma, and the novel implies that if he chooses to stay, he will inevitably end up like Mark and Miss Sophia, who seem to be mentally unraveling as a result of their destructive efforts to recreate themselves apart from the past. The city becomes a place for Newell to abandon, for "there were so many other places to live, now that he had lived in New Orleans" (292). Newell's "escape" from New Orleans, unlike Danny's escape to the river in *Winterbirds* and Nathan's escape to the woods in *Dream Boy*, stems not from a history of trauma originating from a violent and tyrannical father, but from a failed attempt to subvert via sadomasochism (S/M) the oppressive structures of power that have historically facilitated

homophobia. Grimsley's penultimate chapter, "Pleasure for Pain," squarely addresses the issue of S/M as an avenue for, as Foucault suggests about S/M practitioners, "inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their bodies" (qtd. in Bersani, "Foucault, Freud, Fantasy, and Power" 12). Not long after Newell's arrival in New Orleans, he attempts to play, although rather unconsciously, with these roles of power, which serves as a necessary step in his sexual awakening process. The city, with its established gay community, offers Newell a form of sexual agency denied to the protagonists in Grimsley's previously mentioned novels, and such agency gives Newell the opportunity, but perhaps not the will, to rethink the positions of power, those of submission and dominance and of master and slave, that permeate the fraught relationships in these three novels.

Recalling the iron collar that Newell imagines around his own neck when he reads the Cable story about the slave chained to the kitchen table, Newell begins to wear a dog collar while working at the adult bookstore. For Newell, wearing the collar becomes a sign of his transformation of self and his growing acceptance of his homosexuality, but Grimsley suggests that such an appropriation, turning what was once a symbol of torture, subservience, and ultimately violence into a symbol of freedom and sexual expression, is never complete precisely because the earlier connotations can never be fully extracted from the object itself; the sign can never be fully emptied of its original meaning. Newell, despite his protestations otherwise, remains a subject informed by and identified through a history that he cannot erase completely. The limited subversive potential of this act lies not in its ability to undermine the very network of power resulting from the binary of master and slave but in its ability to insert gay men into a power structure from which

they have previously been denied. Commenting on the subversive potential of S/M as practiced within the gay community, Bersani questions whether or not these practices actually disrupt existing power structures: "sometimes it seems that if anything in society is being challenged, it is not the networks of power and authority but the exclusion of gays from those networks" (Bersani, "Foucault" 15). Seen in this context, Newell's move offers only a marginal critique of the networks of power, for rather than question the very categories that structure power in the first place, it merely expands the categories of power to include gay men. The sexual freedom symbolized by Newell's ability to don the collar at will carries with it an element of self-destruction that threatens to undermine the very agency he desires.

Newell's collar, like the slave collar before it, becomes a harbinger of violence, evoking a paradigm of dominance and subservience that becomes intimately connected to the threat of death. When Newell, wearing the dog collar, first meets Mark who is high on LSD, Mark grabs the collar, presumably in an attempt to rip it from his neck, but he ends up choking Newell instead. Mark, although clearly addled by drugs, gives Newell the most lucid of responses when Newell asks him what he is trying to do: "'I'm trying to kill you'" (183). Mark quickly follows this comment with an invitation of sex, telling Newell, "I want to fuck you. Take me home. I'll be good" (184). Mark erotically charges this negotiation of power, playing with the roles of dominance (choking Newell) and subservience (telling Newell that he'll be good, a remark that positions him in the submissive role that Newell initially plays by wearing the collar). Admittedly, Mark and Newell's ability to play freely with these roles of dominance and subservience signals a much different historical paradigm than the one of the female slave cook who cannot

freely choose to wear her collar. Precisely because of this potential for choice, advocates of S/M, such as Foucault, are careful to point out that the master/slave relationship in S/M is "different from oppressive social structures of domination" (Bersani, "Foucault" 17). Foucault argues that S/M is not "a reproduction, within the erotic relationship, of the structure of power. It is an acting out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure" ("Interview" 30). Contrary to the liberating tone Foucault uses to speak of S/M as an avenue for "acting out of power structures," Grimsley's novel ultimately casts a tone of skepticism surrounding this function of S/M, suggesting that this form of fantasy does more to remind people of how power operates rather than how homosexuals can imagine power differently.

Despite Grimsley purposefully setting the novel before the height of the AIDS epidemic so as to capture a moment in time when one could speak of sexual liberation as a necessary constituent of gay liberation, the last chapters of the novel question the subversive potential of S/M to serve as a model of achieving gay liberation. Ideally, S/M, according to Ian Young, should not reinforce these structures of power but allow practitioners the "opportunity to be more aware of the elements of dominance and submission in all relationships" (qtd. in Mains 73). While Mark and Newell's encounter outside the bookstore should not be judged as an actual, mutually agreed upon instance of S/M, it serves as a reminder of just how willfully ignorant Newell is to the impact of forces of power on his personal life. Grimsley makes a nod to what Bersani terms the "culture of death" at work in the S/M fantasy by quickly morphing Mark's initial drug-addled profession "I'm trying to kill you" into "I want to fuck you." Mark makes visible the fine line between sex and death so that Newell's decision to sleep with him even after

he twice attempts to choke him serves as a poignant reminder not just of Newell's naiveté but of his refusal to see himself as someone who can be impacted by forces of violence he is unable to control.

Newell's almost irresistible attraction to Mark during this encounter reveals yet another principle at work regarding the allure of S/M fantasies. Arguing about the appeal of S/M, Bersani notes that "S/M strips away the defenses against the joy of self-dissolution; in more general historical contexts, the countervailing instinct of self-preservation drives that joy underground, buries it, so to speak, in proud displays of mastery" ("Foucault" 23). Ultimately, Bersani remains suspicious of gay men's willingness to mimic these structures of power in acting out S/M fantasies, implying that gay male participation in this process can never be fully separated from the original exercise of power because the result remains the same:

> as we have seen over and over again, with dispiriting frequency, the oppressed, having freed themselves from their oppressors, hasten to imitate them, as if it were in the position of dominance that the drive toward destruction—and ultimately toward self-destruction—could be most effectively pursued. . . . S/M lifts a social repression in laying bare the reality behind the subterfuges, but in its open embrace of the structures themselves and its undisguised appetite for the ecstasy they promise, it is fully complicit with a culture of death. (23)

The self-destruction that lies at the heart of gay male participation in S/M, Bersani argues, renders impossible the attempt to reimagine the outcome of such existing structures of power. The irony, as Bersani alludes to in the passage, is that gay men who participate in S/M are often willfully subjecting themselves to a "culture of death" that remains indistinguishable from one enacted by a homophobic society that would love nothing more than the destruction of gay male bodies. Yes, in S/M role reversal allows for gay men to experience the power often denied to them in society, but as Bersani

argues, the use of violence remains unquestioned: “Everyone gets a chance to put his or her boot in someone else’s face—but why not question the value of putting on boots for that purpose in the first place?” (“Foucault” 16).

Grimsley envisions just this scenario in Newell’s S/M experience with Jack, an encounter that begins as a consensual act of sex but morphs into a violent, nearly fatal beating. Already conditioned to accept this kind of power game by his previous experience with Mark, Newell willfully enters into this experience with Jack. Although Newell admits that, “it was true he had said yes to everything Jack wanted to do,” he ultimately feels “terrified” of how Jack’s sadism, which began as a game, morphs into something more violent, less controlled (291). In Newell’s recollection of the experience, Jack oversteps the boundaries, beating Newell until he is unconscious, but Newell remains too afraid to ask him to stop for fear that Jack will not honor his original promise to do so should he ask. Jack’s actions begin to resemble those of an abusive master intent on destroying the object of his pleasure out of a self-gratifying display of power. Switching to a first person narration, Grimsley reveals Jack’s inner thoughts about his motivation for participating in S/M: “I have this boy to remind me that Paradise is coming, and I shall use him for that, until he is all used up, like all the rest, and his burnt-out husk will drift away from me into the air, and I will scent him on the breeze as he dissolves, and I will carry the smoke from his fire inside me, walk down to the river, drift away” (287). Jack remains vibrantly alive only through a systematic and sadistic torturing of submissive boys, using their youth, their internal “fires,” to facilitate and extend his own. This systematic torturing that results in the “slaves” becoming “burnt-out husks” is chilling in its evocation of the master and slave relationship in both the post-bellum South

and Nazi Germany. Jack's description of these S/M encounters remains frighteningly similar to accounts of white men responsible for burning lynch victims throughout the twentieth-century South and the Nazi soldiers responsible for burning victims in the ovens during the Holocaust. Little if anything in this passage suggests that this S/M encounter subverts existing power structures. Quite the opposite is true. Newell's experience with this S/M fantasy, as Bersani argues about S/M encounters in general, becomes fully complicit with this "culture of death," as gay bodies become nothing more than "burnt-out husks" and whiffs of smoke.

Although this encounter does not end up reimagining the structures of power differently, it does seem to break Newell's rather utopian vision of the city and of his agency within it, which allows him to be more cognizant of his own desire for self-destruction. Bersani argues about S/M that "by singing the praises of enslavement and torture, S/M self-sacrificially warns us of their profound appeal—self-sacrificially because S/M itself might not survive an antifascistic rethinking of power structures" ("Foucault" 18). What resonates most with Newell after his encounter with Jack, and the idea that seems to propel him to leave the city, is his newfound understanding of this appeal, of his desire for enslavement and torture. When Newell returns to his room to pack his belonging in preparation to leave, he remains afraid, not just that "he would return and find Jack in the doorway," but of "the fear of what it meant to say yes to Jack" (290). Finally cognizant of the implication of his own desires, Newell seems afraid of remaining in a place in which those desires could become real.

Newell's decision to leave New Orleans occurs at a time immediately before the city's gay population begins to die from AIDS, as Newell's best friend, Henry, "soon

sickened and died of Kaposi's sarcoma, one of the earliest deaths from that disease in New Orleans" (280). From a larger historical perspective, Grimsley's novel captures the moment when AIDS begins to complicate the idea of the city as a queer utopia within the gay imagination. Once upheld as a beacon of gay life, the city becomes the epicenter of gay death as AIDS begins to decimate the city's gay population. Newell, of course, remains unaware of this unfolding of events, such that his escape cannot be connected to the knowledge of this larger impending death. Nonetheless, the city in his mind becomes forever connected to the possibility of his own death, not by AIDS, but by the nearly fatal beating he experienced at the hands of Jack. Thus, Newell's decision to return to Pastel, Alabama, becomes imbued with new meaning, new life. Titling the last chapter "Reason to Live," Grimsley once again favors the instinct of self-preservation over and above the death of self-dissolution, such that in its drive toward life, Newell's escape from New Orleans begins to mirror more closely that of Danny in *Winterbirds* and of Nathan in *Dream Boy.* The perspective of how that life may be sustained may have evolved over the course of these three novels, but Grimsley's vision remains firmly committed to survival above all else.

Chapter 4

Writing the Father, Rethinking the Self:

The Impulse for Reform in Contemporary Southern Memoirs

> Fathers have always been, in life and literature, a mystery we believe we must decipher before we can understand ourselves.
>
> --Andrew Holleran

For southerners Kevin Sessums, Kevin Jennings, and Lewis Nordan, whose biological fathers all died before they reached the age of nine, the father's absence haunts the memories of their early childhoods, which they record in their memoirs, *Mississippi Sissy; Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son;* and *Boy With a Loaded Gun*, respectively. Though as children they remain unable to connect with their fathers, their memoirs reveal an intense longing for paternal connection, a desire to love the father and to have that loved returned in recognizable ways. For Sessums and Jennings, who eventually identify as gay, this desire remains particularly acute given their feelings of isolation and inadequacy exacerbated by their estrangement from their fathers over their inability to become heterosexual and conventionally masculine men. Even though their nascent homosexuality forces Sessums and Jennings to reject the father's heterosexual masculinity as a viable model for emulation, they still seek to identify with the man, the individual, whose acceptance and approval they cannot help but to crave. For Nordan whose biological father died when he was an infant, the father's absence leaves a void,

one he attempts to fill by continually re-narrating and revising the father/son relationship in both his memoir and fiction. For all three memoirists, returning to the lives of the father becomes an essential task for understanding their own lives and of accepting the men they have become.

Collectively, these memoirs chart varying alternatives to the oedipal model of adolescent male development, one necessitated by the authors' belief that to become whole and healthy men, they must reform the structures of domination (racism, sexism, and homophobia) that inform their fathers' masculine identities. Additionally, for Sessums and Jennings, their memoirs challenge the long-held belief that heterosexuality presents the most stable and productive resolution to a child's sexual development. In doing so, the real-life narratives by Sessums and Jennings offer a more constructive framework for interpreting the relationship between fathers and their gay sons, effectively challenging the earlier psychoanalytic models that positioned the gay son's rejection of the emotionally absent or weak father as the cause of the son's homosexuality. Both reveal not the pathology of homosexuality, but the lasting damage a compulsory heterosexuality inflicts upon boys who do not model the conventional gender expressions expected of them.

Departing from the realm of fiction and the purely imaginative, these memoirs provide a factual basis for the damage enacted by these fathers, demonstrating that these men are not simply literary inventions or ideological pawns and that their actions have real-life consequences that contour the trajectories of their sons' lives. As personal testimonies, the two gay memoirs provide the next generation of gay sons access to a written, public record of adolescent gay life, offering them a model by which to gauge

their own process of maturation. Though both Sessums and Jennings were avid readers as children, they did not find themselves reflected in the books they read, not because they lacked access but because sympathetic depictions of proto-gay children simply did not exist in the non-fiction literature of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies when they were coming of age. Their memoirs, like so many in the "coming out" genre of gay literature, seek to fill this void, one that intensified the feelings of isolation of an earlier generation of men who struggled to identify as gay without a public precedent to guide them.

The inclusion of Nordan, a straight author, in this trio of memoirists, may at first glance seem an odd choice. Although Nordan does not identify as gay, his feeling of being an outsider in his hometown of Itta Bena, Mississippi, his burgeoning imagination that defies the emotional reticence of his stepfather, his strong identification with the feminine within himself, and his inclusion of queer characters in the corpus of his fiction position him in a unique space among straight, southern male memoirists. His feelings of isolation and exclusion over not fitting into the male circles of his hometown parallel those of Jennings and Sessums, and his resistance to the problematic forces of racism, sexism, and homophobia position his memoir as a part of a "queer" critique of these normative regimes. For this critique of white southern patriarchy to be fully effective, gay subjects cannot sound the exclusive call to rethink the dangerous elements that inform southern white masculinity. Rather than position the gay subject as the exclusive site of resistance to the destructive forces of the white southern father, one must also consider how straight but queer friendly subjects, such as Nordan, are willing to examine and

reform the debilitating elements of a masculinity that maims rather than sustains those who attempt to uphold it.

Including Nordan's memoir as a primary example of his thesis in his essay "Drinking Poisoned Waters: Traumatized Masculinity and White Southern Identity in Contemporary Southern Memoirs," James Watkins contends that white southern autobiographers are beginning to shift away from the dominant model of writing out of a sense of racial guilt as being a constituent factor of southern identity and have instead began using self-writing as a form of therapy to heal from the traumas of their lives. In doing so, they figure southerness "in the language of pathology" (220). Without question, all three of these memoirists describe elements of southern culture as pathological, capable of inflicting wounds from which they must recover, and they escape the geographical spaces with which they associate them, suggesting that they can best accomplish healing only by removing themselves from the primary sources of their pain. Notably, all three memoirists discussed here write of the South only after leaving it, choosing to narrate their formative years in the South as the nexus of their identities. Although the memoirs of both Jennings and Nordan extend beyond their early years in the South and discuss problems that are not exclusively southern in nature, much of their writing contends with the values, pathologies, and traumas they inevitably trace back to their southern roots and their fathers in particular.

While Watkins's characterization of this new brand of autobiographical writing as "trauma recovery narrative" provides a rich model with which to understand these three memoirs, his observation that this trend represents a shift away from what "Fred Hobson calls the 'white southern racial conversion narrative'" offers too clean of a division

between trauma narratives and narratives of racial guilt (220). Such a division elides the ongoing tension these memoirists feel over their presence in a thoroughly racist South and their efforts to resist the racial assumptions embedded in the notion of white southern masculinity they critique. To varying degrees, all three of these men feel culpable as white men growing up in a racist South, and while the racial guilt Nordan and Sessums feel is often one more of association rather than commission, their burden of implication becomes a crucial drive in their desire to resist the dominant model of white masculinity embodied by the men in their immediate environs. To view these memoirs as exclusively narratives of trauma would be to elide the ways in which all three of these *white* men benefited from a system of racial supremacy in the South and the role their self-writing plays in their reckoning with this fact.

In the cases of both Sessums and Nordan, the decision to flee Mississippi becomes intimately connected to perceived differences between the atmosphere of racial violence and intolerance in segregated Mississippi and their own sensitivities to racial equality and civil rights. For Sessums, the 1964 murders of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman, and the largely positive response they drew from the circle of white men he knew, became the tipping point, the one that invariably confirmed his feeling of difference, the belief that he was a "spy" who would "report back one day on all that [he had] witnessed" (18). For Nordan, the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till and his step-father's friendship with one of the murderers "had been the final reason, if [he] had needed a final reason, that [he] had left Itta Bena to try to find a life in the larger world" (84). For Jennings, who grew up poor in rural North Carolina, his sensitivity to racial inequality is a much slower evolution, for as a young boy, he idealizes Alabama's segregationist

governor George Wallace as his first hero, and he plasters his bedroom with Confederate flags, explicitly identifying with an ethos of white supremacy that he must later address and challenge as he begins to delve deeper into the struggle for gay civil rights.

In this regard, Jennings' memoir more closely resembles the arc of the white southern racial conversion narrative Hobson describes in *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*, in which the older narrator atones for past racial sins and describes a racial "conversion" frequently couched in the language of a religious awakening. These narratives often begin with an explanation of the author's inculcation into the racial sins of the South and his or her emergence as a defender of segregation and a firm believer in white supremacy. Typically, they include a description of a pivotal moment, some form of racial incident, directly leading to the author's racial awakening, one that causes him or her to see southern tradition in a new light. Having become a true convert, the author proceeds to preach a message of racial equality and civil rights. In the case of some memoirists, such as Lillian Smith, they often augment their creative endeavors with political activism aimed at changing the racial status quo of the South.

Both Jennings' and Sessums' memoirs are firmly within the tradition of the white southern racial conversion narrative Hobson describes and exist as the logical extension of work began by lesbian Lillian Smith. Lillian Smith's 1949 memoir *Killers of the Dream,* which Hobson identifies as one of the first in this tradition, wages a fierce critique of a racist South in need of reformation and redemption from its racial sins. Before her death of cancer in 1966, Smith became a vocal advocate of civil rights, denouncing the evils of segregation during her travels. What Smith was unable to do in both the initial publication of her memoir in 1949 and its reprinting in 1961 is openly

identify as a lesbian. As Hobson explains, "Smith was a lesbian in a homophobic culture," and the only time the word lesbian appears in her memoir is in the 1961 edition when she is discussing the "southern suspicion of the arts and artists" (21). In Hobson's assessment, Smith's inability to deal publicly with her sexuality in her memoir actually fuels her boldness as a "*racial* commentator": "If she could not speak openly and personally on the one taboo subject, homosexuality, she would speak all the more boldly on another, racial integration" (22). Hobson acknowledges that the main theme of Smith's work addresses the fragmentation of the individual rent by prejudices and barriers based on race, gender, and sexual orientation and that her primary goal became the subsequent quest for wholeness: "The great purpose of all of her work was to demolish walls, barriers, between people—and racism and sexism as well as distinctions of class and religion built those walls" (22).

Writing more than a half century later, Sessums and Jennings are able to identify openly as gay men in their memoirs and therefore can isolate the destructive force of homophobia as one of the primary causes of fragmentation in their lives, but such an ability produces mixed results regarding the fervor of their commitment to fighting for racial justice. As such, their memoirs provide another layer of complexity to the racial conversion narrative, revealing how the authors' forthright attack on homophobia often tempers or detracts their attention away from their fight for racial equality. While their ability to become more aware of racial oppression and to recognize their own positions of privilege as white men in a thoroughly racist South furthers their desire to reject an identity in which racism and homophobia work together to solidify heterosexual, white male dominance, this result is by no means the only one. Admittedly, Sessums' feeling of

racial guilt distorts his vision of African Americans, rendering them mere tools in his quest for atonement, and Jennings, who follows more closely Smith's path of political activism, admits that his early commitment to racial equality proves to be an avoidance tactic, a way for him to feel as though he is addressing inequality without having to identify himself publicly as supportive of gay rights.

Though their commitment to racial activism ultimately proves less forceful than that of Smith, all of these memoirists echo her quest for wholeness and further her willingness to connect the forces of racial prejudice with other prejudices based on gender and sexual orientation. Hobson's chapter "The Sins of the Fathers" in which he discusses Smith's work could easily serve as a description of these three memoirs. They all isolate their "fathers" as the primary builders of these barriers, but the language of "sin," of framing the problems of the South using the rhetoric of Christianity, is noticeably absent from these newer memoirs, representing a significant divergence from the tradition Hobson describes. While Smith could frame racial segregation as a sin incompatible with the Christian doctrine of "love thy neighbor," she could not as easily use such rhetoric to wage a critique of homophobia given the explicit Biblical passages denouncing same-sex acts. Today, evangelical Christianity proves to be one of the most strident opponents of gay rights and the leading proponent of reading homosexuality as a perversion of God's law, a belief that continues to cast an aura of pathology around homosexuals. The fundamentalist Christianity that saturates the early lives of Sessums and Jennings must be addressed, challenged, and ultimately reformed in order for them to achieve a sense of personal liberation and positive self-identity as gay men. Both narratives do indeed traffic in the trope of transformation, but it is one accomplished only

through an abandonment of the rhetoric of sin and guilt produced by the Christian church of the fathers.

For Sessums and Jennings, their transformation from resistance and denial to self-acceptance regarding their homosexuality draws more specifically upon the tradition of "coming out" narratives in gay autobiographies.[1] What has become in the early twenty-first century a ubiquitous, and some would argue exhausted, form of gay autobiographical writing, the "coming out" narrative remains a relatively new development, less than fifty years old, but it, nonetheless, contains a structural similarity to the white racial conversion narrative. As literary critic Paul Robinson argues, these gay autobiographies, like those racial narratives described by Hobson, "are conversion narratives" (308). Just as these racial narratives describe the formation of a new consciousness and a new identity, so too do "coming out" narratives: "They begin with an account of the oppressions—social and psychological—endured by the closeted 'old man,' and they describe the writer's inexorable progress, through moments of crisis, toward self-acceptance and the announcement—more or less public—of his new identity" (Robinson 308). While this form of conversion is central to both Sessums' and Jennings' memoirs, they offer significant structural variations to this classical formula, such as Sessums' non-linear narrative that disrupts the formula's chronological timeline and Jennings' description of queer activism that occupies nearly half of the book. Most importantly, their memoirs seem as concerned with the authors' confrontation with the South, with the notions of home and family, and the often painful memories they evoke, as they are with

[1] Gary Richards lists Sessums' memoir as the latest example of autobiographically based narratives that combine the sub-genres of the "white southern racial conversion narrative" and the coming-out novel, but he does not offer an analysis of the memoir itself. See Richards, "Everybody's Graphic Protest Novel: *Stuck Rubber Baby* and the Anxieties of Racial Difference," *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2011), 165.

the public declaration of their homosexuality. The two become inextricably intertwined, as the personal reconciliation over the acceptance of their homosexuality prefigures their ability to come to terms with their formative experiences in the South.

In the South and elsewhere in 1960s'America, psychologists still conceived of male homosexuality as a developmental pathology, a failure to achieve an appropriate masculine identity. Labeled a "sissy" as early as age three, Kevin Sessums quickly learns to view himself as different from other boys and that he should regard this difference with an attitude of shame. Admitting that his own reflection in the mirror was the first freak he ever "recognized down South," Sessums confirms his own feelings of marginalization and the powerful self-distortion homophobia creates in the queer imagination (3). Such a feeling of difference prompts Sessums to depict Mississippi as an alien land and himself a spy, an interloper, listening, watching, and ultimately biding his time until he can escape to the North and recount his memories of growing up in such hostile territory. That report, Sessums' 2007 memoir *Mississippi Sissy*, bears witness to his struggle to come to terms with his homosexuality in a place that provided little room for such non-normative expressions of masculinity. As Sessums' title implies, his self-perception as a young child could hardly be untangled from the public acknowledgment of his failed masculinity. Long before the recognition of his homosexuality, Sessums' feminine characteristics place him at odds with the culture's traditional notion of masculinity, and these early signs of femininity fuel his father's ultimate suspicion and fear of a child who primarily views women as more suitable role models.

Initiating Sessums into a world of heterosexual male rejection, his father, Howard, emerges in his remembrance as a confused and ultimately disappointed man who remains

unable to nurture a son who seems incapable of emulating him. A one-time professional athlete drafted by the New York Knicks, Howard returns to Mississippi at his wife's ultimatum that he either live with her and their newborn son in Mississippi or continue with his athletic career in New York without her. Ultimately, Howard agrees with his wife, that New York is no place to raise a family, but such a choice causes Sessums to speculate as to whether his father forever equates his birth with the death of his own professional dreams. In retrospect, Sessums arrives at a far more plausible but more disturbing revelation that his father's continued look of disdain is more a look of fear over Sessums' homosexuality.

The retelling of the father's rejection occurs early in Sessums' memoir, signaling its importance to how he understands the trajectory of his life. In the prologue, he recounts the time when he was four and his father took him into the locker room of the high school basketball team he was coaching. After one of the players escorts Sessums into the office where the assistant coaches are eating a meal prepared by his mother, one of them, upon seeing his entrance into the room and his defiant stare complete with hands on hips, whispers to the other coaches, "'Can you believe this sissy is Ses's?'" (11). The coach's implicit critique of Sessums' effeminacy acknowledges the perceived glitch in the heterosexual initiation process between father and son. As Andrew Holleran argues in the foreword to the anthology *The Man I Might Become: Gay Men Write About Their Fathers*, our culture has one common fundamental expectation for fathers: "to initiate their sons into the male role, the realm of men, which is to say the world" (xiii). Inherent in this initiation process of the heterosexual father is the expectation that the son will model the father's heterosexuality, which for gay men becomes an aspect of identity that

they "cannot replicate" (Holleran xiii). That Sessums' father, the handsome, athletic, and conventionally masculine coach, can produce a son who so obviously flaunts his feminine characteristics casts doubts upon the social constructionist theory of homosexuality. For Sessums, the event becomes a moment of recognition, a conscious awareness of his father's feelings of fear and estrangement from a son who seems alien, unknowable, and unable to mirror a similar masculine identity.

This moment, the one in which Sessums' father first notices his difference and nascent homosexuality and the father's subsequent look of fear and bewilderment, reveals one of the core challenges facing the queer son when contemplating his relationship with his father. As psychologist Walt Odets claims, "there's not a gay man alive who does not feel that he's let his family down" (qtd. in Holleran xiii). The inability to forge an intimate connection with a father who is ultimately suspicious and disapproving of his son's homosexuality represents a significant problem among gay men. This disapproval creates an estrangement, a primal wound, one that marks these young men at an early age and creates a divide in the paternal relationship that sometimes can never be bridged. As I discussed in the introduction, for decades, psychoanalysts isolated this troubled relationship between the father and gay son as evidence for their constructionist views on the origins of homosexuality. Viewing this estrangement with the father as a substantive cause of the son's homosexuality, psychoanalysts often pathologized the son without directly questioning the health of the father's own masculine identity. Sessums' narrative confirms Richard Isay's theory that often the father and not the son initiates this rejection and that the father's homophobia plays an integral role in this process.[2] As such, the

[2] Gay affirmative therapist Richard Isay reversed years of psychoanalytic thought by arguing that the father often initiates this rejection in the relationship because of the son's perceived homosexuality, an immutable

coach's incredulity over Sessums' behavior in the locker room stems in part from his defiance of the "weak father" theory of homosexuality, the belief that male homosexuality originates as a result of an absent or weak father and /or a smothering and controlling mother. Quite simply, sons are expected to be a "chip off the old block," a mentality infused with a kind of heterosexism rarely questioned in our culture.

Sessums' father is not privy to the coaches' exchange and only becomes afraid of his son's behavior when he witnesses his son crying in front of the other men. In a novelistic moment of comeuppance, Sessums throws up on the man's shoes who had called him a sissy after his cigarette smoke made him sick at his stomach, but when his father reenters the room, Sessums begins to cry. Apologizing to the man for his son's behavior, Howard turns to Sessums with a look of disapproval:

> That reoccurring look of sad disdain he could deliver stopped my tears. He was even sadder than I was. Then, for the very first time, the sadness morphed into that more perplexed look of fear. I did not take my eyes from him. It comforted me to know that my father, who was afraid of nothing, was afraid of me. I unfolded my arms, I put my hands back on my hips. It was the last time I cried in his presence. (11)

This moment alters their relationship irrevocably. The supposed strength Sessums draws from exposing a chink in his father's imperviousness to fear may seem a positive precursor to his decision not to cry in his father's presence. Sessums' decision, however, reveals one of the fundamental pitfalls of the father's disapproval. Sessums willfully limits his natural range of human emotion in an effort to not be the "sensitive" boy who elicited his father's disdain. Sessum intuitively realizes that a failure to adopt a respectable masculine identity remains particularly suspect for a patriarchal culture that consistently devalues "feminine" characteristics.

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aspect of the son's identity. Thus, the troubled relationship with the father was often not the cause but the effect of the son's homosexuality. See Isay, *Becoming Gay: The Journey to Self-Acceptance*, 63.

Before this moment, Sessums primarily identifies with his mother and goes so far as to mimic her feminine characteristics in order to gain his father's attention. The first memory Sessums has is one of his mother sewing a skirt for him, after much pleading from three and a half year old Sessums. Using the leftover scraps from the dresses they are making for themselves, Nancy Carolyn, Sessums' mother, and his grandmother reluctantly agree to his request, reasoning that he should "'get all this out of his system while he's young" in hopes that he will "'grow out of it'" (61). Rejecting this seemingly affirmative childrearing approach, Vena Mae, Sessums' great aunt, offers a more pragmatic, but less openly nurturing, response to his skirt-wearing request. She scolds the other women, saying, "ya'll aren't right in the head for letting him get his way and encouraging him like this. He has to learn to live in this world and this world don't abide boys like that'" (61). While Vena Mae's response reads as an enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, she articulates an uneasy truth about the relative safety of a boy who so radically defies the gender norms in 1960s Mississippi. Such a boy is not really safe in "this world," the world of the fathers, the world of white men who applaud the assassination of President Kennedy, support the murder of civil rights activist James Earl Chaney, and joke about enacting a Kennedy hunting season once a year (17). Given that Sessums' great Uncle Benny vocalizes these positions, "this world" of violence and those who condone it are closer than Vena Mae might realize. Both responses, that of his mother and great aunt, remain informed by an understanding that heterosexuality is the only appropriate, healthy, and suitable outcome for adolescent sexuality. Sessums may temporarily be allowed to indulge in his effeminate behavior, but it must be something he

eventually overcomes on the path to normative heterosexuality, one that necessitates a biological distinction between men and women.

Too young to understand that his behavior defies deeply ingrained gender norms, Sessums desires his father's approval by identifying *as* the mother, the doting lover, rather than the oedipal son fearful of the emasculating father. Ecstatic about the skirt he can make billow by spinning around, which he demonstrates for the women in the sewing room, Sessums can barely wait to show his father his skirt, expecting his father to "love the way [he] looked" (61). The women only watch in expectant silence as Sessums waits at the carport for his father's return from a trip. Sashaying up to his father and spinning around so he "could marvel at how cute [he] was," Sessums elicits both horror and rage from his father who demands to know how his son found a skirt to wear. He then proceeds to chase Sessums and rip the skirt from his waist, to march into the kitchen to grab a box of matches, douse the skirt with lighter fluid, and demand that Sessums light the skirt on fire as he throws it into a drum in the back yard. Holding Sessums so that he can see the fire, Howard warns him, "'See that? Take a good look. . . . That's what happens when boys try to be girls. That's what happens'" (63). Making an explicit connection between gender subversion and lethal violence, the father reinforces Vena Mae's warning that "this world don't abide boys like that," but who actually enforces such a dictum if not the white men in Sessums' world?

Howard fully understands the threat Sessums' performance poses to white male supremacy, for when his wife tells him that Sessums "is not hurting anything," the father screams, "'He's hurting me! He's hurting himself with such nonsense! He's hurting this family!'" (62). For Sessums, the eldest son, preferring to dress as a girl is not only a

rejection of the father as model, but also a rejection of the power afforded to straight, white men in a culture that consistently devalues not simply homosexuality but women as well. Even if the father's act is a misguided attempt to protect his son from an outside world that cannot tolerate such boys, his behavior affects a damaging psychological toll on his son whose first memory in life is of a father who uses the threat of violence to demonstrate his disapproval of his son's behavior. From this event, Sessums learns very early the danger posed by straight, white men whose dominance depends on their ability to enforce the division between the sexes.

The father's threat of violence remains only a part of a larger, cultural system designed to prevent the development of homosexuality altogether. Writing in 1990, Eve Sedgwick argues that our culture poses little resistance to the "wish that gay people *not exist"* (23). A proto-gay child living in the 1960s developed amid an environment that was overwhelmingly dedicated to his erasure. As Sedgwick further explains:

> [t]he presiding asymmetry of value assignment between hetero and homo goes unchallenged everywhere: advice on how to help your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think. On the other hand, the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large. There is no major institutionalized discourse that offers a firm resistance to that undertaking. (23)

Even as late as 1987, psychiatrist Richard C. Friedman, who was instrumental in the push to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of disorders, sided with parents in their right to raise their children in a way that encouraged heterosexuality as the most desirable outcome. As he states, "[t]he rights of parents to oversee the development of children is a long-established principle. Who is to dictate that parents may not try to raise their children in a manner that maximizes the possibility of a

heterosexual outcome?" (260). In Friedman's logic, the prevention of gay people becomes not simply a parental right but a therapeutically condoned approach undergirded by a belief in the supremacy and health of heterosexuality.

As merely one representative of a culture that wishes gay people did not exist, Howard is far from an anomaly of heterosexual masculinity; he remains a product of a much larger and more subtle system of heteronormativity. Howard's inculcation into the romance of the nuclear family that serves as the cornerstone of the heteronormative narrative becomes evident in his attempt to smooth over his previous behavior and comfort his now distraught son. Sitting on the sofa with his son, Howard peruses the *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine that the women had previously looked at while sewing their dresses. Asking Sessums which homes he preferred, which yards looked the best, and what furniture looked the most comfortable, Howard tells him, "'Someday we're going to live in a house like one of these . . . I promise you that, Kevinator . . . Your mama deserves a house like these. You deserve it'" (65). Howard fantasizes about the prototypical nuclear family and the capitalist mantra that the right house, the right yard, and the right furniture will erase the problems of domestic life. He escapes into the fantasy, one always linked to heterosexuality, as a way to reaffirm his threatened masculinity, for if he can promise to give this life to his family, he can reestablish his role as the heterosexual father, the provider and responsible patriarch of the family.

Nothing is inherently problematic with the father desiring to provide for his family, for in this moment Sessums claims to have "never felt as safe," but overwhelmingly, the father's outbursts create an idiosyncratic and unpredictable personality that does not instill a sense of continued confidence in his son (66). His

moments of tenderness read as reactionary ploys designed to counterbalance his acts of aggression. Through Howard's initial outburst, in which he threatens violence to his son and ends up slapping his pregnant wife, he induces a kind of panoptic fear over the regulation of appropriate gender behavior. He blames not only Sessums for this act of gender betrayal, but also the "goddamn women" who encourage it, which causes all of them to be mindful of their behavior in his presence (64). The initial discussion of making the skirt for Sessums rests not on what it may mean about him, but on how his father might react. Vena Mae warns, "'you better not let Howard know about this," and his grandmother tentatively agrees, saying "'Veeny's right. Howard might not like it. You know what he's like when you get him riled'" (61). In the end, the father's judgment becomes the one that really matters, the one that cannot be disregarded or overruled.

Howard's career, coaching for a local junior college, positions him and his family in the public eye and only intensifies the scrutiny he places on his family regarding acceptable gender behavior. He remains particularly suspicious of creative, artistic expressions, both from his son and his wife, and suppresses them whenever possible. He forbids his wife from preforming a skit at a local charity event, which she had been secretly practicing with a neighbor. After her secret comes out when Sessums confesses about her illicit dress rehearsal by restaging his own version of the performance in drag, Howard tells her, "coaches' wives are like preachers' wives. They have a place in the goddamn community and it's not for goddamn sure showin' off all snaggle-toothed and parading their snatches around on stage!" (83). In framing Nancy Carolyn as "a coach's wife," Howard underscores the real threat her performance poses, for the danger is not

that she will embarrass herself, but that she might bring dishonor or shame upon him. Her sexuality, her appearance, and her very body become something for Howard to police and control, and this control serves as a means to establish his own identity as man, and conversely, to establish Nancy Carolyn as woman. As radical feminist Monique Wittig argues, "what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation ("forced residence, domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.") (20). Howard's very identity as a man depends upon this ability to determine the relationship with his wife.

When Howard unexpectedly dies in a car accident in 1963 at the age of thirty-two, Nancy Carolyn finally acknowledges the effects of such an appropriation by her husband. She tells Kevin, "I always wanted to teach English but I had you children to raise and your daddy . . . well . . . he wouldn't . . . let's just say I had to raise him, too" (87). Beginning to recognize her scripted role under a system of compulsory heterosexuality, she urges Sessums not to let others define his life the way she allowed others to do for her: "'I've always lived my life as if I were taking down shorthand dictated by someone else. . . . Don't you dare do that. You be your own special word, Kevin. I know people call you a sissy. I know Daddy did a lot of the time, God rest his soul'" (87). Teaching Sessums to appreciate the strength, beauty, and poise in the look and sound of the letters that form the word sissy, Nancy Carolyn allows him to appropriate its meaning, offering him an example of the way language can destroy but also liberate. As Sessums begins to join his mother in calling himself a sissy, they are momentarily able to exorcise the shame that so often accompanied the father's use of the

word. Sessums can finally take joy in this moment "without [his] father to threaten to hit [them] with his Big Black Belt or to hold [them] in his arms and say he was sorry or to fill the rooms with . . . his loving, wary looks smiled [their] way" (88). Unfortunately, this moment of joy is fleeting, for Nancy Carolyn succumbs to esophageal cancer a year after her husband's death and has little time to realize her own dreams or further instill a sense of confidence in her son.

In trying not to suppress, deny, or reject Sessums' feminine behavior in this moment, Nancy Carolyn initiates his journey of self-acceptance that could only take hold in the father's absence. Sessums learns a love of liberalism from his mother as well, who proudly announces herself a LBJ girl to the dismay of her staunchly Republican mother. Nancy Carolyn's early death, however, leaves Sessums deprived of his most fervent ally, the one who "was always encouraging [his] endeavors, no matter what they were, no matter how sissified" (121). The mother's sickness and death place Sessums in the care of his maternal grandparents, members of an older generation who are neither liberal nor particularly progressive regarding sexual politics. They no doubt love their grandson and provide a stable home for him, but they lack the willingness to defy convention and southern custom that facilitated Sessums' connection with his mother. Living with his grandparents exposes him to another sort of ally, one who readily understands the feeling of societal ostracism, albeit for a very different reason. Nurtured through an evolving relationship with Matty May, his grandmother's black maid, Sessums develops a growing race consciousness amid the backdrop of the brutal violence of mid-1960s Mississippi. Matty May's ability to give voice to her own feelings of alienation and victimization contours the development of his queer consciousness, allowing him to recognize the

mechanisms of both racial and sexual othering that solidify white, heterosexual male dominance.

Despite his mother's liberalism, Sessums retains a racist mindset, a point he exemplifies one morning when he casually asks Matty May if she can "believe a *nigger* won Best Actor," referring to Sidney Poitier's 1964 Oscar winning performance in *Lilies of the Field* (100). At age eight, Sessums repeats a word he has heard extended family use countless times, but *his* use of the word particularly troubles Matty May. She tells Kevin, "I thought you was different, child. Lawd be, if they can get you t'sayin' such things, there ain't no hope. No hope" (100). Although Matty May never clarifies why she believed Sessums "was different," her comment suggests not just the optimistic hope that the next generation of white southerners would be better than their racist forbearers but that Sessums' own "sensitivity" might extend to matters of race as well. Crying, Matty Mae explains to Sessums that nigger is an ugly, hurtful word. Asking what he should call her then in light of his grandparents' daily use of the word, she explains, in an unusually hard tone, that she has a name, Matty May, and that he should call her by it. She tells Sessums that when she overhears people use the word nigger in her presence at the general store, she says her name, Matty May, Matty May, Matty May, over and over again to drown out their voices, and now she has another name, Sidney Poitier, nearly as beautiful as her own, to use in such cases. Sessums wishes to adopt her coping strategy and asks if he can say her name over and over again in his own head "when somebody calls [him] a sissy at school" (101). Interestingly, Sessums does not respond in the self-affirmative way Matty May does to instances of public belittling by repeating his own name. Instead, he asks to repeat her name, a move that correlates strength, defiance, and

comfort with an African American feminine persona, a pattern he will repeat through his early adolescence.

Sessums' cross-racial identification with Matty May forces him to reevaluate the racist worldview that goes unquestioned in his extended family and lays the groundwork for his moment of racial conversion. In keeping with the traditions of the white racial conversion narrative, Sessums' racial awakening offers him a clarifying vision of the South and its inhabitants. Unlike many of the moments Hobson describes, however, Sessums' account seems compelled not just by the guilt over his own racial "sins," but through a shared sense of alienation with African Americans. Sessums' epiphany occurs after the funeral of his mother who dies in 1964 just a year after his father. Back at his grandparents' house, the white men in his extended family begin to talk of current politics and the state of race relations in Mississippi, recently enflamed by the murders of civil rights activists Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman. Sessums' great Uncle Benny, a staunch advocate of Ross Barnett, Mississippi's pro-segregationist former governor, offers a vitriolic and hate-mongering diatribe in response to the radio broadcast announcing a confession Horace Barnette had made to the FBI about the murder of the three activists: "'I bet that Horace fella is kin to old Ross, sure as tootin. . . . bet the Governor told him to add that extra 'e' onto his name so's to piss off that littler Kennedy that can't keep his nose out of our business. If you ask me, they kilt the wrong Kennedy. Shoulda kilt both of 'em while they were at it. We got a deer season and a duck season and a quail season. I say we have a Kennedy season oncet a year, too" (17). No less vitriolic is Benny's final assessment of the murders of the activists: "The mistake they made was killing them two white boys, . . . that's what made the mess" (18). The right to

invoke violence toward black people with impunity becomes an expected privilege of southern white masculinity, one that Benny fears is coming under attack by Northern agitators like Robert Kennedy. As one of the other white men tells Benny, "'it's a sad state of affairs, ain't it, when you can't scare the coloreds no more and get away with it'" (18).

Just as Howard recoiled in fear at the sensitive son he could not understand or see as part of himself, Sessums has a similar moment of suspicion and disdain when he looks at these white men. He thinks, "*the men, What kind of creatures are these? Are they a part of me? Flesh of my flesh?*" (18). Calling into question not just these men but an environment that could allow them to exist, Sessums doubts his own viability in such a hostile place: "*I do not belong here. I will report back one day on all that I have witnessed. I am a spy*'" (18). The moment that instigates Sessums' rejection of this form of white masculinity, prompting him to foretell of his eventual abandonment of Mississippi and the South, is one of racial bigotry rather than explicit homophobia. In rejecting affiliation with "those men who did not know what to make of" him, Sessums intuitively connects their devaluation of black life with their suspicion of his own effeminacy (18). Rather than simply substituting an anti-racist position in lieu of an anti-homophobic one, Sessums rejects the structures of dominance embedded in these men's version of white male heterosexuality. For Kevin, the similarity of these two aims, antiracism and anti-homophobia, rests not simply in the parallel experiences of the victims, but rather in attacking the structures of power that give rise, in this particular instance, to both racial and queer alienation.

In this moment, Sessums' feeling of queer alienation fosters his identification with African Americans as an oppressed group of people. From a larger, sociological perspective, such a move remains contested by scholars who question the viability of framing queers and African Americans as similar marginalized groups in society. Briefly reviewing scholarly objections to such "like race" arguments, Michael Bibler notes a fundamental question in this line of critique: "if queers are 'like' African Americans in the public sphere, where does that leave queer African Americans?" (281). In spite of these objections, Bibler argues that in American modernist texts, "queer white writers imagined queer desires to be inextricably bound with antiracism in subtle and provocative ways" and that "civil rights did not simply stand in as a surrogate for, or sublimation of, the wishes of queer whites for sexual freedom" (282). Bibler's argument, though tailored to literature predating Sessums's memoir, opens up a more affirmative approach to analyzing the function of queer alienation in Sessums's text.

In Bibler's reading of fiction by Murrell Edmonds, an "almost forgotten" southern, white, queer writer of the modernist period, he provides a useful framework for interpreting this moment of cross-racial identification in Sessums's memoir. In reading Edmunds's novels, Bibler claims that "his unique portrayal of perverse sexuality as a queer force" is one "that turns alienation—so often considered a core element of modernist experience—into . . . a usable affect" (283). Alienation, as it appears in Edmunds's fiction, "is typically a byproduct of oppressive social structures that categorize and exclude some individuals as undesirables or outsiders. And these feelings of estrangement foster an emotional, affective relation with other alienated and oppressed people" (Bibler 283). Sessums' estrangement from these white men, signaled by their

implicit acknowledgment of his "sissy" status, serves as one marker of his queer alienation, which in turn fosters an "emotional, affective relation" with African Americans, specifically with Matty May. Tellingly, Sessums overhears the racist conversation of the white men as he is standing at the window inside the house, choosing to segregate himself with the women of the family. He is the perpetual eavesdropper, just on the outskirts of male spaces, forever listening but rarely participating in this forum of men.

Sessums understands too that racism is not limited to male spaces, for earlier he overhears his Aunt Lola use the word "nigger" in reference to her black maid. Her use of the word causes Sessums to think that he "knows better" than to use such a word considering his earlier encounter with saying it in front of Matty May. To add further insult, Sessums' grandmother rebuffs Matty May's offer to help them on the day of the funeral and "politely" reminds her of her position as the hired help, telling her to "'come on over the next day and help [her] clean up all the mess'" (14). Racism pollutes both spaces, male and female, which undoubtedly factors into Sessums' belief that he does "not belong," not just in the circle of heterosexual white men, but also in this domestic space with women who could alienate a confidant like Matty May, who he wishes were there more than anybody else. He thinks that if "*Matty May were here . . . he'd have somebody to talk to,*" but the ease with which he could talk with her must be read within the larger context of race relations between a black maid and the grandson of her white employer in 1960s Mississippi (14).

At eight Sessums can recognize overt acts of racism directed towards Matty May, but he is yet unaware of the complex set of racial mores that in many ways predetermine

his relationship with her. Despite being “an old friend” of his grandmother’s, Matty May is not part of the family and thus not allowed to participate in the intimate grieving process. She is the hired helped, economically bound to make Sessums’ bed, cook his food, and attend to his needs, so the idea of her completely rejecting Sessums’ desire for intimacy and maintaining her job is highly unlikely. For him, she exists only within the context of his life, in the white spaces he inhabits. His understanding of black life remains contoured by what he can see, and at times, his vision suffers from this lack of exposure. As a child, he projects identities onto African Americans based on this incomplete information, and as he grows and becomes aware of more of the world, he must continually revise his understanding of them. Unlike the moments of racial conversion in the narratives Hobson describes, Sessums’ conversion happens rather early in his life and must be augmented by a more informed and complex understanding of African Americans as he matures. Sessums’ racial awareness is a developmental process, as is his understanding of Matty May. Three moments in Sessums’ memoir stand out as significant in this process and reveal both the limitations of his vision and his recognition of his shortcomings. The emergence of Sessums’ eight year old black, female, imaginary friend; the scene in which he picks cotton in the field with Matty May, and his first sexual encounter with a black man all become crucial episodes that inform both his understanding of race and ultimately the recognition of his privileged position as a white man in the South. These moments illuminate not just Sessums’ tendency to identify with blackness as a way to oppose the forces of racial oppression, but also as a means to understand and negotiate his queerness in an alien and homophobic environment.

Sessums' most explicit identification with African Americans occurs through his creation of an imaginary black friend, Epiphany, whose mannerisms, voice, and behavior he models after Matty May and characters he sees on television. Believing that Epiphany emerged from the television to join him in the real world, he claims that she "was a much-needed ally in a place where allies were nonexistent. Epiphany understood, in her obvious otherness, how I felt in such a world" (103). As Sessums' creation, Epiphany's presence seems both an instance of racial ventriloquism and an honest attempt of a child to negotiate not just the grief over the impending death of his mother, but his sense of alienation that stems from not being able to see someone like himself, an effeminate white boy, reflected in the adults who surround him. Having rejected the racism of the white southerners in his immediate environment, he turns specifically to a black female as a model for emulation. He takes "pains to mimic Epiphany during [his] most private moments—her akimbo stance, her head tilted just so in contemplation of how [they] had both arrived in such a place" (102). That Sessums' choice for imaginary companionship and comfort is an African American female seems understandable given that she becomes a surrogate for the mother he is losing; Epiphany is a younger version of Matty May, the female who assumes the role of nanny and the only other figure of alienation he can identify in his immediate environment.

No doubt Sessums' alliance with Epiphany underscores his ability to connect his own alienation with that faced by African Americans, but his identification remains the product of a child's imagination, limited as it is by his inability to see the black female as anything but a helpmeet to a white subject like himself. When Matty May leaves her position with Sessums' grandmother under mysterious circumstances and Sessums

reencounters her in the cotton field, he experiences her outside of the domestic space and thus outside of the nanny role in which he has come to know her. In the cotton field, Sessums encounters a different Matty May, no longer deferential but direct in voicing her annoyance with having him as competition to her primary and essential source of income. During their lunch break, when Sessums asks Matty May why she left her position with her grandmother, she tells him of the time she had overheard him use the word nigger in a children's game one day as he was playing with some friends. She speaks of her acceptance of his grandparents' use of the word, suggesting that they "ain't much better than a couple of niggers," which is "why they use d'word so much" (168). Hearing the word from him again, after already telling him how much it hurt her, is simply too much for her to bear: "Little sissy thing like you, child, is smarter than most folks in these parts. You know better. God put some kind of—Lawd be—Yankee sense in you. We both know that" (168). Candid in both her assessments of his grandparents and of him, Matty May offers a level of honesty not allowed her in her previous employment. She responds to Sessums' declaration of love by saying, "love ain't enough in a place like Mississippi. . . . We standin' on the same ground but we folks from different lands" (169). Matty May questions the strength of cross-racial alliances, suggesting that such relationships are tenuous at best in light of the ongoing economic and institutionalized racism in segregated Mississippi. If white people cannot accompany such admonitions of love with direct action aimed at changing the status quo of race relations, such gestures, as Matty May declares, "ain't enough."

What this moment allows Sessums, the narrator, to acknowledge is not just his continued investment in a culture of racism but clarity of vision, one that forces him to

contemplate the narrowness of his understanding of Matty May. The adult Sessums admits how little he actually knew about Matty May: "I only knew her within the parameters of my own life. To be honest, I wasn't sure back then if she had kids of her own. (She did: Flozell, Odell, and Ruby Nell.)" (171). He understands, too, that his cotton-picking is a lark, a one-time event, unlike the economic necessity it is for Matty May. In doing so, he is beginning to understand his privilege as a white man in the south. Even as a sexual other, his whiteness grants him certain advantages not offered to African Americans, such as his Uncle Benny paying him more than he rightly earns, a gesture Benny makes in full view of the other workers. Matty May's ultimate incredulity regarding Sessums offer of love suggests a continued hesitation on the part of African Americans to see queer whites, such as a "sissy thing" like Sessums, as legitimate partners in the fight for equal rights. Matty May's suggestion that she and Sessums are "folks from different lands" serves as a reminder that although they both experience feelings of alienation, such a parallel does not always translate into a shared commitment to anti-racism. Her disappointment in Sessums occurs precisely because he fails to live up to her belief that he is an ally because he is different from other white men.

Even as Sessums' presence in the cotton field occurs as a result of his family members' effeminophobia, the alienation he experiences, as Matty May demonstrates, is not on par with the ongoing economic exploitation of African Americans. Sessums' Aunt Lola offers the plan for him to pick cotton with "the niggers" as a way "to get some of the girl out of him," a suggestion that riles Sessums' grandmother who retorts by questioning whether such measures did any "good" for Jim, Lola's youngest son whose sissy ways culminated in him attending an art school in Florida and becoming an interior decorator

(149). The women never overtly connect gender inversion with male homosexuality, choosing instead to vocalize their sons' "problem" as a lack of a demonstrable masculine identity. While Lola's enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality privileges the manual labor of cotton picking as a positive, masculinizing endeavor, her husband, Benny, reads such behavior as potentially problematic given its ability to place white men on par with African Americans. When Sessums asks Benny if he can stop picking cotton after only spending a few minutes in the field, Benny responds with a similar message he told his sissy son when he asked for a reprieve from cotton picking: "You can stop, but if you stop you ain't goin' back down in them fields. If you pick cotton with the niggers then you pick it just the same as them. Nigger rules is your rules" (165). Sessums' defiance in returning to the fields elicits Benny's caution: "Nigger rules, then, it is for you. But best be careful. . . . Jim did the same thing. Turned on his little Miss Priss heels just like you did. Far as I can tell, he's been playin' by nigger rules ever since" (166). In conflating the second-class status of homosexuals with that of African Americans, Benny warns Sessums about purposefully turning his back on the privilege and power associated with both whiteness and heterosexuality.

Rather than creating the rules, which Benny does as the white land owner, Sessums could permanently forgo this privilege of white supremacy by continuing the sissy behavior that placed him on the same ground as the black cotton pickers in the first place. Based on Benny's comment, "niggers" are the ultimate others through which he gauges all societal others, but if his words suggest that he believes white homosexuals to be like blacks, his actions imply otherwise. In paying Sessums double what he rightly earns in picking only two pounds of cotton, Benny confirms that he does not believe in

holding Sessums to “nigger rules” after all (171). As his overpayment shows, Benny believes Sessums’ whiteness (and family relation) to be inherently superior to African Americans, regardless of Sessums’ sissy ways. It simultaneously demonstrates to Sessums that Benny, a white heterosexual, will not have to play by “nigger rules,” but rather, he remains the one who creates them in the first place. Matty May intuitively understands such hypocrisy, which is why she cannot see Sessums’ expression of love in the cotton field as a viable foundation to build a cross-racial alliance.

Although Sessum only sees Matty May one time after this event, it creates an indelible mark in his psyche. Haunted by the thought of being a racist, and not so different from the white men in his family, he harbors guilt over using the “N-word” and being the cause of Matty May walking away from her employment with his grandparents. But rather than make him more sensitive to the feelings of African Americans, his guilt only distorts his vision of them further by turning them into political pawns in his quest to prove himself not a racist. In college when Sessums begins to frequent Mae’s Cabaret, Jackson’s only gay bar, he meets Frank Dowsing, an African American football star who returns to Mississippi instead of becoming an out, gay player for the Philadelphia Eagles. Although Frank’s beauty initially piques Sessums’ interest, his allure, as Sessums readily acknowledges, lies primarily in his symbolic role in Sessums’ quest for absolution: “I had to admit to myself that sleeping with Frank Dowsing would be a way of doing penance for insulting Matty May so deeply with my use of the N-word that she left my grandparent’s employ and, in turn, my life” (252). Sessums’ logic implies that by breaking the taboo of interracial sex by purposefully sleeping with a black man, he can prove to himself that he is not like other racist whites. By becoming submissive to the

sexual desires of Frank, Sessums hopes to subvert the existing power structure, placing himself as the recipient of pain rather than staying the perpetrator of it as he was in the case of Matty May. Sessums openly admits to such a plan when he experiences being a bottom for Frank for the first time: "I tried not to cry out at the pain he was causing me, the pain I accepted as the penance I had come seeking" (257). Although the act of penance is generally symbolic by nature in that it is not always commensurate to the "sin" committed, Sessums' conception of it here dangerously conflates a history of unsolicited racial bigotry with a mutually agreed upon and voluntary sexual act.

This line of thought, as Frank points out, only furthers a reductionist racist logic, one that fails to allow Sessums to imagine African American men outside a limited white gaze. Upon learning Sessums' history with Matty May and its role in leading him to this moment, Frank challenges his reasoning for wanting to have sex: "'That's all I am to you? . . . I'm the buck who makes you feel better about yourself" (256). Indeed, in Sessums' imagination Frank remains only an object, a metaphorical racial other needed to carry out a purely self-serving political plan. In Sessums' mind, Frank's blackness, just as it exists in the societal taboo against interracial sex, is a stain, a mark that will defile the purity of Sessums' whiteness. When Frank climaxes inside of Sessums, he thinks to himself about Frank's sperm in his body: "Stay inside me. . . *Stay* [he] said aloud. . . *Stay, Stay"* (257). Even as Sessums challenges a racist culture by defiantly accepting this product of "blackness," he does little to expand the position of African American men in the white imagination. Frank is nothing more than his blackness, desirable now, but not because of his intellect, his humor, his imagination, or his interests.

In Sessums' involvement with Frank during this moment, one finds little redemptive about his quest for penance or proof of his growing racial consciousness. One of the inherent limitations of this genre of racial conversion narratives is that such a focus on white guilt as an entry into racial awareness can direct attention away from African Americans and the fight for equal rights and onto the white subject's search for psychic healing. Hobson identifies just such a limitation in his critique of Smith's *Killers of the Dream*: "To a black reader of *Killer of the Dream*—as, indeed, of most white racial conversion narratives—the author's thinking might have seemed somewhat self-indulgent. That is, attaining psychic wholeness for whites sometimes seemed for Smith to be at least as important as attaining equal rights for blacks" (33). For Sessums, the danger in white guilt is more than simply self-indulgence; his continued lack of awareness regarding the need for black self-determination complicates any meaningful strategic alliance between himself and African Americans. Perhaps for Sessums white guilt remains an inevitable component of the racial conversion process, but as it manifests in his relationship to Frank, it does not offer a promising foundation on which to build long-lasting cross-racial bonds.

While Sessums' disgust at the unchecked racism of his extended family increases amid the violence that marked the end of the 1960s, the strength of his identification with African Americans as models for emulation wanes as he comes into greater awareness of his homosexuality. Though Sessums still turns to African American autobiography and fiction, such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, as a means of coping with his own sense of alienation, these narratives prove less powerful than the Christian one of transformation and unconditional love

typified by the rhetoric of the Billy Graham crusades Sessums begins watching on television. Like many queer southern sons, Sessums delves into Christianity seeking the approval of a different kind of father as a way to forestall his own acceptance of his homosexuality, but this alternative paternal figure proves even more detrimental to Sessums' nascent sexuality than his biological one. Revered by Sessums' grandmother as a religious man of God and viewed as an appropriate male role model, Dr. Gallman, a traveling preacher, molests Sessums on two separate overnight outings to Jackson. This molestation by the hands of a religious father only furthers entangles in his mind his bourgeoning sexuality with a sense of shame and guilt: "what he had inflicted upon me conflated in my thirteen-year-old thoughts—wrongly so—with my own emerging sexual identity" (231). Such abuse under the guise of religion forever mars Christianity's promise of transformation for Sessums, and his eventual dislocation from the South further removes him from a compulsory Christianity he identifies with Mississippi. Sessums acknowledges that the hold religion had on his siblings, Kim and Karole, "has remained steadier, its grasp more secure, than it has in [his] own life. Maybe it's because they still live in Mississippi and churchgoing is not so much a choice one makes there; it is a social obligation" (196). As such, his extrication from Mississippi and the compulsory Christianity it expects proves vital, not simply for the acceptance of his homosexuality, but also for his psychic health in general.

Precisely because of this lack of applicability of existing paternal models for the queer son within the heterosexual paradigm, the child attempting to model a homosexual male identity must develop alternative kinship bonds that can aid in his identification process. Recognizing the differences such a queer development presents, queer theorists

have turned their attention to non-bio-genetic bonds that do not follow the normative, Oedipal pattern of development, one which emphasizes the importance of blood ties, longevity, succession, and replacement. As queer theorist Judith Halberstam argues, "the Oedipal frame is particularly damaging and inappropriate when applied to queer culture if only because it presumes a heteronormative frame (a frame in other words that sees older and younger people as parents and children) for a community which is resolutely NOT structured by parent/child relations" (317). Such rejection of the Oedipal frame leads Halberstam to question, "what alternatives to family models and normative kinship are available to us?" (319). Offering a list of such models, what Halberstam refers to as "non-Oedipal logics" (319), she includes the concept of "inter-generational exchange," a possibility she develops more fully in her book *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (180-186). Though Halberstam discusses inter-generational exchange within the context of "contemporary dyke scenes" with queer musicians from two distinct generations, the idea of a non-sexual, non-conflict based relationship that does not operate under the framework of "mandatory continuity" proves foundational in the trajectory of Sessums' life and his process of gaining confidence within a supportive queer community (185).

Sessums experiences such an inter-generational exchange through his contact with Frank Hains, the local arts editor of the *Jackson Daily News* who also works closely with the *New Stage* theatre company in Jackson. An older gay man already comfortably situated within a queer community, Hains introduces Sessums to a larger, cultural world of arts, theatre, film, and music, and his house becomes a safe-haven, an epicenter for liberal-minded and queer friendly persons, including Eudora Welty and several of her and

Hains' friends (Jane Petty, Karen Gilfoy, and Charlette Capers) who routinely meet there. In Hains' presence, Sessums feels "*seen*," "gently guided," and "unjudged," and he becomes, not a replacement for Sessums' biological father, but a queer mentor: "Frank Hains was my first true mentor for he did not have any ulterior motive except, maybe, in nurturing me, to expand his already generous spirit" (260). Perhaps because of the death of his biological father, Sessums remains reluctant to abandon the Oedipal paradigm completely and admits, "I wish I could say that Frank Hains was a father figure to me, but it was my mother's absence I was aware of when I was in his presence" (259). Precisely because he is not a substitute paternal figure, Hains can provide Sessums a model for identification denied to him by his biological father. Hains becomes instrumental in both Sessums' education and the direction of his life, encouraging him "to audition for the Julliard School of Drama" and giving him a blank check to help pay for travel to and from New York (276). Hains also offers Sessums a room in his house the summer before he enrolls at Julliard, and within this space of cohabitation with an older, gay man, Sessums feels "*at home*," fully comforted by Hains' "taste, his take on life, the grace with which he honed his vast curiosity" (276). This idea of home, countering as it does the traditional, heterosexual paradigm of the nuclear family, presents a queer alternative to the Oedipal model and offers Sessums his first chance to express all of who he is in a non-judgmental environment.

Such a departure from the conventional, nuclear home proves hard for the public to accept, and their friendship becomes summarily denigrated and scandalized by a local photographer after a drifter with an extensive criminal history murders Hains in his home during the summer of 1975. Sessums discovers Hains' body, lying naked in his bed, his

feet bound by several neckties, his head bludgeoned with a crowbar. Later, when Sessums returns to Hains' house while the police are still conducting its investigation, a photographer asks him: "Are you the house boy? . . . Are you the murderer? You queer, too?" (298). The title "house boy" both sexualizes and diminishes the friendship between Hains and Sessums and reinforces the belief by heterosexuals that the only plausible relationship between gay men remains a sexual one. Framing his memoir at either end, Hains' murder affects Sessums profoundly and only further positions Mississippi as a place of death in his imagination. Occurring only weeks before his departure to New York, Hains' murder and the homophobia it generates from the public confirm his decision to leave Jackson and the South altogether. Ending his memoir upon his arrival in New York, Sessums implicitly positions the South in opposition to the life-affirmative space of the urban North, a move that follows the predominate trajectory of gay sexual awakening in which the gay adolescent leaves the confines of small-town, rural life to experience a larger community of queer people in an urban space.

For Kevin Jennings, educational opportunity outside the South also proves instrumental to his acceptance of his homosexuality, a process he charts in his memoir, *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son.* Education and a love of reading initiated by their mothers exist as saving graces for both Jennings and Sessums, but for Jennings, the New England preparatory school where he lands as a teacher merely positions him within a larger, institutionalized closet. Devoting over half of his memoir to recounting the queer activism he engages in after his graduation from Harvard, Jennings' narrative expands the conventional "coming out" autobiography that Paul Robinson identifies in *Gay Lives*, one that ends with the public announcement of the writer's new self. Such an expansion

shifts the bar of self-liberation beyond the doors of the private closet and challenges the implicit assumption that leaving the South and its history of bigotry behind for the relative "utopic" space of the North signals the end of the struggle against homophobia. By intertwining his private battle of coming to terms with his homosexuality with a larger, political narrative about challenging a history of institutionalized homophobia within educational systems, Jennings' memoir collapses the arbitrary divide between the personal and the political, demonstrating, in this case, that they are one and the same.

Though the latter half of Jennings' memoir departs substantially from Sessums' final chapters, their openings depict a similar story of the growing divide between a homophobic father and a son incapable of demonstrating an appropriately masculine identity. Like the first retrievable memory Sessums records in which he wears a dress to gain his father's attention, Jennings initial memory describes his identification with his mother and a subsequent estrangement from the father. Hospitalized for "whooping cough" when he was three and a half, Jennings, weak and fragile from his illness, evokes his mother's fierce concern and protection: "I became 'Mama's boy,' which is, of course, the worst thing any self-respecting Southern male child can be. . . . So I guess there never was a time when I felt like I was a normal boy" (xii). Normal, as Jennings quickly learns, becomes directly linked to a heterosexual masculinity, one epitomized by his sports-loving and God-fearing father, but unlike Sessums, who attempts to attract his father's affection by identifying as the mother, Jennings initially models the oedipal pattern of identifying with the father as a way of ultimately gaining his father's approval: My father "was a *man*, and I prayed I'd grow up to be just like him" (14).

Turning first to sports and then to religion, Jennings embarks upon a seemingly futile attempt to earn positive recognition from his father by embracing the two items his father loved the most. Seeking to emulate his older brothers whose sports-playing prowess attracted their father's attention and approval, Jennings participates in his father's effort to enroll him in a children's football team when he is still two years away from the minimum playing age of eight. When the coach rejects his father's attempt to skirt the rules, Jennings becomes the one to feel the shame: "there had to be something wrong with me, I must not have measured up in some way and that was why the coach rejected me. I just wasn't enough of a man" (4). Such a rejection, although not directly at the hands of his father, imparts a profound sense of inadequacy in Jennings, one he increasingly begins to associate with his gender non-conformity, which, as in the case with Sessums, becomes the first visible sign of his suspected homosexuality. Jennings' other attempt at soliciting his father's favor meets a similar end when his father, a Southern Baptist preacher, refuses to allow Jennings to "accept Jesus" and become an official member of the church, claiming that he is too young to understand fully the decision he is making.

These formative moments tied to the father's rejection initiate a self-loathing that prevents Jennings from not simply experiencing love from his father, but from all men. Such a history in which Jennings associates love exclusively with a heterosexual paradigm (such as the one between him and his mother) contributes to his correlation of homosexuality with only sexual acts and not love between men: "I never associated 'gay' with 'feelings' before. 'Gay' was two animals humping: love was something between a man and a woman" (98). This belief becomes part of the collateral damage of a

compulsory heterosexuality that must be abandoned in order for the gay adolescent to overcome feelings of shame, guilt, self-hatred, and inferiority on his path toward self-acknowledgment, which psychologists define as the ability for the adolescent to accept the fact that homosexuality exists as his permanent, immutable, sexual identity. For the gay adolescent, the dream of fulfilling the heterosexual life envisioned by the parents must die in order for him to achieve both an acceptance of his sexuality and a positive sense of self-worth. As Isay explains, "to self-acknowledge he must have also achieved enough independence and self-reliance to realize that he is never going to be able to fulfill those needs of his parents that relate to his living a conventional life with a conventional family. To some extent he has to give up his wish to do so" (80). Thus, he must reject the strong appeal of the heterosexual narrative of life development, but the script for a positive, homosexual development at the time remained uncharted and subsequently unknown for boys like Jennings.

For Jennings, his father's death before he can establish either a confirmation of his acceptance or a rejection of the life his father envisions for him interrupts this process of self-acknowledgment, creating a void to which he attaches feelings of shame and guilt further exacerbated by the belief that he caused his father's early demise. When Jennings' father dies of a heart attack while swimming at the Y during Jennings' eighth birthday party, his brothers, searching for someone to blame, begin to attribute his heart attack to the shock of the cold water, which they reason he would never have experienced had Jennings not wanted to visit the Y for his birthday. Such logic typifies the scapegoating his brothers employ as a result of Jennings' perceived effeminacy, and in the father's absence, they become the authoritative male models and serve as a form of gender police,

continuing to teach Jennings the expected codes of adult, heterosexual masculinity. When Jennings begins to cry at his father's funeral, his brother Mike barks, "Don't cry. Be a man. Don't be a faggot" (19). Such conditioning teaches Jennings one of the definitive lessons of adult masculinity:

> By age eight, I had learned everything I needed to know about being a man from my dad and my brothers. Being a real man meant taking advantage of anyone smaller or weaker than you. Being a real man meant never showing emotions or "weakness," even if you were eight and at your dad's funeral. And any male who deviated from those standards had a name. That name was *faggot*.
>
> That would be me. (19)

In this construction of masculinity, homosexuality becomes a constitutive counterpoint to normative heterosexuality. One becomes a man through the repression of behaviors attributed to homosexuality, but such a formation leaves the proto-gay child essentially no available space in which to mature and no recognizable models on which to base his development.

Denied the acquisition of self-knowledge that marks the adolescent's entrance into adulthood, the proto-gay child, as Kathyrn Bond Stockton argues, cannot identify as gay and must, therefore, grow sideways. In *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Stockton contends that the queer child's homosexual identity comes into focus only at the moment the "heterosexual" identity of the child dies and passes out of existence, but it is a form of "backwards birth" since such a queer identity can only be made by the grown adult in a retrospective assessment of his or her childhood (6-7). When as an adult Jennings receives the question, "When did you know you were gay?", he responds with a pat answer, "I always knew," but in his memoir he offers a more complicated truth that confirms Stockton's theory. Wondering how he could not

have known he was gay, Jennings responds, "*Because I wasn't allowed to know.* Being gay was unthinkable. After all, my parents weren't, my sister wasn't, my brothers weren't, no one I knew was. I didn't make the connection between my feelings and what I was. I couldn't. It was the ultimate thought-crime" (25). Only as an adult, in a reexamination of past events, can Jennings claim that he was a gay child. As such, his memoir and the one by Sessums seek to resuscitate through the refashioning of memory a subject position, that of the gay child, which could not be acknowledged, appreciated, and loved during its brief existence. Read in this light, Jennings' initial answer to the question of when he knew he was gay reads as a reflexive desire to affirm the existence of the queer child, for the other option, to say that he only knew he was gay when he emerged out of adolescence, would be to negate the queer child altogether, thereby denying a history of feeling different from other boys his age.

Unable to identify as gay and not quite able to ape a heterosexual masculinity, Jennings, like Sessums, experiences a profound sense of alienation, but Jennings does not initially view African Americans as potential partners who can commiserate with him over a shared feeling of otherness. Barely able to pay for housing, Jennings and his family could not afford domestic help, African American or otherwise, so in the absence of an integrated domestic space, Jennings does not initially connect his own queer alienation with the alienation experienced by African Americans as Sessums does. Rather, he clings to his white identity and a Lost Cause mythology that positions white southerners as victims of Northern aggression and tyranny. Following in his family's belief, Jennings accepts the conventional assessment of African Americans:

> My family held the typical attitudes of poor white Southerners of our time. Blacks were at the same time both inferior and threatening, like wild

> animals, stupid but capable of great savagery, and hence they needed to be segregated away from us as they might contaminate or harm us if we mixed. The "outside agitators" who were trying to change these arrangements were a threat and had to be stopped. The work *nigger* was used casually, without any particular animus, simply an ordinary word that meant "black person." (66-7)

Rather than identify with African Americans, Jennings casts them as inferiors in an effort to counteract the marginalizing effects of his suspected homosexuality. Jennings declares, "I, thank God, was white, and I was a Baptist. I was fine. That's all I needed to know" (22). Describing how he accepted without hesitation the dominant racial ideology of many poor southern whites, Jennings parallels the authors of those early racial conversion narratives Hobson identifies.

Believing this racist worldview along with the religious one presented to him by his father, Jennings accepts his father's implied logic that racism and Christianity are compatible. Born in Massachusetts in 1924, Jennings' father moves to the South and converts to Christianity, specifically the Southern Baptist denomination, at the behest of Frank, his brother-in-law, who Jennings knew was "somehow involved in the Klan," so the father's racial politics remain shaped not only by a denomination that broke away from the national Baptist church over the right of southern states to continue slavery but also by an extended family with ties to a violent, racist, organization (67). Though his father rejects an offer to join the Klan, the entire family remains sympathetic to an organization they feel are protecting them from blacks, especially during a period of court ordered integration of the Winston-Salem/ Forsyth County Public Schools. Over time desegregation proves vital to cross-racial understanding, as Jennings' older brother Allen, having developed friendships with black people first on athletic teams and then later in the Marines, challenges the cardinal rule against race-mixing by marrying Claudette, an

African American woman. Allan's decision elicits condemnation from the father who declares, "You can do what you want, but that woman is never going to step foot in my house" (70). Despite the family's initial disapproval, Allan's marriage to Claudette and Jennings' eventual visit to meet his new sister-in-law and her two daughters from a previous marriage lays the groundwork for Jennings' own racial conversion.

When Claudette and her daughters do not uphold the stereotypes Jennings has of African Americans and accept him without hesitation, Jennings realizes "he had been lied to" concerning the nature of black people, and such an epiphany begins his process of racial conversion (76). Having received him openly with kindness and warmth, Claudette and her children do not simply dispel racist stereotypes; they offer Jennings a chance to feel normal, countering an earlier history of ostracism and antagonism from other white people. The visit proves monumental in his ability to see black people apart from a racist gaze, and such clarity of vision allows him to identify with African Americans in the struggle for equal rights for all people. Evidence of Jennings' racial conversion exists shortly after his return from visiting Claudette, as he begins to challenge racist comments by white children and to break the unspoken rule of racial segregation in his fifth grade classroom by giving both his white and black classmates Valentine's day cards. Now that he knows actual African Americans, he "stopped buying in to the racial divide" (78).

Even though Jennings suggests that such activism for African Americans places him at odds with both his classmates and even his own family members at times, he can vocalize support for racial equality in ways he cannot for gay rights at this point in his life. Still unable to accept his own homosexuality, Jennings turns publically to the fight for racial equality as a way to participate in an ongoing dialogue about basic human

rights without having to announce himself as homosexual. Jennings, for example, uses his graduation speech at Harvard not to address issues of homophobia but to go off script and denounce the administration's handling of students who had protested earlier about the university's continued investment in and support of "a racist, apartheid regime" in South Africa (128). Likewise, when Jennings receives his first professional job at Moses Brown School, a prestigious, private, New England secondary school with a Quaker tradition, he willingly challenges the administration, not on his right to be an openly homosexual faculty member, but on its hypocritical belief in the school's diversity when African American students make up only two percent of its population (137). Again at the school, Jennings opts to tackle racism before homophobia when he supports the only black teacher, who is also a lesbian, after the administration admonishes her for misspelling words on the board even when in advance of her hiring she told the school of her dyslexia and that such misspellings were bound to happen occasionally. Having earned a degree from an Ivy League school, Monique has both the qualifications and intelligence required for her position, and Jennings rightly suspects that the parents' complaint about such an "uneducated" person teaching their children is simply "racist code language" (138). When Jennings makes an appointment with the headmaster, Mr. Forrest, to advocate for Monique, he suggests that as the only black teacher, Monique stands in a unique place as a role model, "and whether she succeeds or fails is going to say a lot to black students, to the whole community, in fact, about the place of black people here" (138).

Though in this episode Jennings acknowledges the importance of black role models for the school's students and can openly advocate for an African American

teacher to the headmaster, he cannot do the same for himself regarding his own homosexuality. Jennings openly admits as much, declaring, "brave though I might have been on some social issues at Moses Brown, I was much more timid about challenging the status quo on sexual orientation" (139). In analyzing such a disparity, Jennings argues that because racism already carries a societal stigma in ways that homophobia does not, he could not yet overcome the belief in his own inferiority to advocate for gay rights: "a lifetime of having been taught I was wrong and bad had penetrated in a deep way, and the fierceness I showed around issue of racism—an issue that society had validated was wrong—was not matched by a same fierceness on my own behalf, as I wasn't sure I deserved to be treated as equal to straight people" (140). Though honest in identifying the corrosive effects of internalizing homophobia, Jennings and his explanation raise a central issue regarding the participation of whites in the fight for racial equality. If Jennings can advocate for racial equality because society has already deemed racism morally unacceptable, could he advocate for African Americans in a situation when it proves not to be politically expedient for him? In the case of Monique, the answer appears to be no. The administration fires Monique after one year, validating Jennings's earlier suspicion that the school has no real interest in racial diversity, but such a blatant display of racism does not prevent Jennings from accepting his renewed contract at the school. Though angered over the decision to fire Monique and seriously unhappy with the administration's tolerance of homophobia, Jennings still returns to teach at the school for another year and only decides to leave after a student reacts badly to the discovery that he is gay.

In light of Monique's firing, Jennings' choice for self-preservation above political solidarity with African Americans underscores the limits of his support for racial equality, which emerges as a choice rather than a personal necessity. Quite simply, Jennings can choose when and how far to take this fight in ways that Monique cannot, and his unwillingness to forgo white privilege in this moment highlights the real differences in their two subject positions. Admittedly, this level of commitment to racial equality by whites sets an extremely high bar, one no one in the school meets, so the point is not to castigate Jennings for a failure here, especially since he is the only one to challenge the administration over its unfair treatment of Monique. More precisely, the point is to demonstrate that in this particular situation, queer alienation, even when it facilitates a bond with an African American, proves *not* to be like that of racial alienation, thereby highlighting a real limitation as to how far one can take the parallel between African Americans and gay people as similar, oppressed minority groups.

To point out the limitations of such logic is not to suggest that Jennings' queer antiracism serves as a surrogate for his desire for sexual freedom, a critique Bibler rightly challenges in his work on Edmonds, but to acknowledge how developing a positive sense of self-worth functions as a prerequisite for the efficacy in *any* fight for equal rights. In this moment, Jennings' battle for racial equality ultimately proves insufficient, not because he fails to connect his own plight with that of Monique, but because, as Jennings already explains, he has yet to overcome a damaged self-esteem that prevents him from even fighting for himself. While such an argument does not negate the fact that Jennings simultaneously benefits from white privilege in this situation, it sheds new light on Hobson's critique of Lillian Smith's implication that the quest for psychic wholeness was

on par with "attaining equal rights for blacks" (33). Though Jennings' psychic health is not *more* important than Monique's ability to receive equal treatment, it exists as a precondition for achieving the confidence needed to engage in advocacy that may place Jennings at significant personal risk. Undoubtedly, Jennings' identification with African Americans remains strong, evidenced by his decision to dedicate his memoir to Claudette, who became "his favorite family member" and fervent life-long ally, but as in the trajectory of Sessums' life, the focus on African Americans as models for identification wanes as Jennings' comes into contact with older, openly gay men who guide him into a greater acceptance of his homosexuality and later his entrance into queer activism (77).

Even as Jennings rejects the lie of African American inferiority underpinning white supremacist southern culture, it remains but one in a system of interconnected lies he must dispel during his process of transforming the masculine identity of his father. That other lie Jennings must confront, the egalitarian promise supposedly at the heart of American democracy, exists as another dangerous fantasy perpetuated by a white patriarchal culture. Increasingly influenced by his mother's nascent feminism resulting from her inability to overcome a system of sexual bias that prevents her from earning a living wage, Jennings begins to see the idea of American meritocracy "for the lie that it was, that American society wasn't an even playing field, that factors like race and gender and class often dictated the course of your life, and that working hard didn't necessarily mean you got ahead or that those who got ahead really deserved to be there" (84). His mother's struggle to provide financially for the family after the death of his father highlights the barriers poverty and institutionalized sexism present to her search for

economic security. Born in Appalachia during the depression, Jennings' mother, Alice Verna Johnson Jennings, excelled academically in elementary school, even skipping grades, but her father forced her to drop out at the age of nine so she could find a job to help support the family. As an adult, Alice's hard work and perseverance earn her a manger position at McDonalds but not the equal pay given to male managers in the same rank as her. When Alice confronts the franchise owner, Mr. Halverson, about the pay inequity, he responds, "Alice, these are men who have to provide for their families. Of course, I have to pay them more!" (80). Despite Alice's explanation that she too works to provide for her family, the manager refuses to raise her pay to the level of the male managers. Alice's potentiality remains foreclosed by both a private history of male oppression, specifically a father whose vision of her life severely limits her possibility for future success, and a patriarchal capitalist culture that consistently devalues women's work.

Jennings' political awareness, as in the case with Sessums, begins with his mother whose discriminatory treatment in the workforce convinces her of the need for the Equal Rights Amendment, a change to the Constitution that would prohibit discrimination according to sex and theoretically pave the way for equal pay for equal work. Such support, though, places her at odds with the Southern Baptist Church, one she adopted in order to support her husband's chosen profession. Her final break with the church, precipitated by her current pastor's condemnation of the ERA for its potential to "upset the natural order of the sexes," furthers Jennings' own growing discomfort with the denomination whose beliefs prove antithetical to his formation of a healthy, homosexual identity (83). Until this point, Jennings bases his perception of religion on a masculine

model of an omniscient God intent on punishing those who sin. Earlier, when his father dies, his mother tells him "that when people die, they go to heaven, where they look down on you and know your every thought and action," but such a perception of a panoptic biological father causes Jennings to fuse him with that of the omniscient God of Christianity: "my dad and our Father had merged together" (40). Such conflation exacerbates the guilt Jennings feels as an adolescent over his masturbatory fantasies, which serve as one of the earliest expressions of his nascent homosexuality, and he internalizes a sense of guilt and shame over failing to live up to the heterosexual ideal of both fathers.

Jennings' rejection of the church's homophobia and his mother's rejection of its subordination of women become correlative parts of the same desire to reform the church's model of the omnipotent father/Father. When in 1998 the Southern Baptist Convention "passed a resolution telling women that a good wife should 'submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband,'" Alice retorts, "submitting to men is what ruined my life," and it would have ruined Jennings life too had he not been able to revise this destructive practice relatively early in his life (83). Jennings, like Sessums, initially turns to Christianity to free himself from the "evil" of his homosexuality, but he learns that the problem lies not with himself but a faulty religious paradigm. After the failure of Jennings' earnest immersion into Christianity, complete with the dating of a Christian girl, he recognizes the problem with his perception: "Before, I was the one who was failing God; now I decided He was the one who had failed me. . . . The Baptist Church had left me only a legacy of self-hatred, shame, and disappointment, and I wanted no more of it or its Father" (101). In implicitly rejecting the sin the church correlates with

homosexuality, Jennings pushes further the language of reformation espoused by Lillian Smith in her memoir *Killer of the Dreams*. Though Smith also questions the faulty Christianity of the fathers, she does so while holding onto the fathers' rhetoric of evil and sin, using it to wage a critique of both racism and segregation. Jennings' departure from the church marks a break with the rhetoric of "sin" and "guilt" to frame the problems of racism, homophobia, and sexism, though he, like Smith did before him, continues to couch his conversion using the rhetoric of Christianity, as evidenced by several of his chapter titles, "The Road to Salvation, Part One," "The Road to Salvation, Part Two," and "Alpha and Omega."

Despite Jennings' earlier, forthright rejection of God the father, he does not dismiss religion completely. He comes back to the church, a more liberal Unitarian one, only after he heals from the damage done to him by his father's faith. As an adult, now comfortable with his homosexuality and role as a gay rights activist, Jennings, asked to deliver a speech coinciding with National Coming Out Day, preaches a sermon titled "Faith of My Father . . . and Mother" (242). His message, delivered in his home state of North Carolina, confirms both a private and regional transformation: "I talked about how my father's faith was one of fear and suspicion, of self-loathing and self-hatred—a life negating faith that nearly killed me—but my mother's faith in the power of education had been the one that had sustained me, and had saved and guided my life" (242). Not only has Jennings' changed himself by rejecting his father's faith in favor of the affirmative, sustaining one of his mother, but the southern culture, containing as it does a liberal, non-homophobic church only miles down the road from the one he rejected earlier, has undergone a transformation as well. In the tolerant space of the Unitarian Church, the

South now embraces a queer son of its own, offering Jennings the acceptance he could not find as an adolescent.

Though Jennings' penultimate chapter in which he successively revises the role of the father as pastor serves as an appropriate conclusion to his personal journey of transformation, his memoir as a whole expands the relatively private tale of conversion at the center of the "coming out" narrative. The earlier accounts of his queer activism in mentoring the first high school Gay and Straight Alliance and later becoming the founder of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) mark a public commitment to challenging both a history of homophobia that went unchecked by educational leaders during his own adolescence and the absence of gay roles models that exacerbated his feelings of loneliness and isolation as he struggled to accept his own homosexuality. Jennings becomes the mentor he never had in the educational arena, offering students at Concord Academy a visible gay role model, one who can affirm the possibility of queer life and dispel the prevailing cultural belief that homosexuality consigns one to a life of unhappiness and shame. Even at the inception of both the Gay and Straight Alliance and later GLSEN, Jennings affirms the need for straight allies, suggesting that changing a culture of homophobia within educational institutions could not be achieved by gay teachers alone: "this was about making schools better places to learn, and the gay teachers could not do all that work by themselves" (183).

Given Jennings' rise to national prominence, the conservative right has perverted both the broad aim of his initiative, to make "schools better places to learn," and his presence as a gay leader in the educational arena when in 2009, three years after the publication of his memoir, President Obama appointed him as the Assistant Secretary of

Education, a position he held from 2009 to 2011 (183). Jennings encountered a conservative backlash, spearheaded by the Christian group the Family Research Council (FRC), who began a smear campaign, "Stop Kevin Jennings," that selectively used portions of his speeches and writings, including his memoir, against him in a failed effort to derail his appointment. Peter Spriggs, writing on behalf of the FRC, asserts that "the Jennings/GLSEN concept of 'safe schools' actually extends far beyond the prevention of 'harassment' and 'bullying' to active 'affirmation' and 'promotion' of homosexuality" ("Talking Points"). Such a critique only confirms the hesitation Jennings acknowledges in his memoir before he agrees to advise the first Gay/Straight Alliance at Concord Academy: "I'd always heard the accusation that gay people recruit children, and knew how this claim was used to damn us as a community" (176). In his denunciation of Jennings' advocacy, Spriggs willfully ignores a history of educational leaders affirming heterosexuality as the only desirable outcome of adolescent development, thereby denying the real damage such conditioning causes to scores of gay children, including Jennings, who came of age in an environment that provided no space for them to exist openly. Drawing upon early passages in Jennings' memoir before he returns to Christianity, Spriggs also accuses Jennings of being "viciously hostile to religion" ("Talking Points"). By willfully ignoring a history of religion's hostility toward homosexuals, one that Jennings also records in his memoir, Spriggs creates yet another double standard, implying that only homosexuals and non-religious people are capable of inflicting harm to children.

Fortunately, the Family Research Council does not represent the views of all straight people, and Jennings' mother, Alice, emerges as a representative model for the

straight ally. Though initially disturbed by her son's proclamation of his homosexuality, Alice pushes beyond mere tolerance of it and into an advocacy for gay rights that rivals that of Jennings. In an effort to understand her son and bring him closer to her, she starts a chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in her hometown of Winston-Salem and later begins volunteering at an AIDS hospice in which all the patients are black men. In the epilogue, Jennings pays homage to the magnitude of his mother's transformation: "I thought about Mom's own improbable journey, from an Appalachian, gospel-singing, preacher's wife who took it as given that blacks were inferior and gays were evil, to a woman who spent her days with a group of primarily gay black men. The distance I had traveled seemed slight by comparison" (241). Despite her own battle with the destructive forces of a patriarchal culture dedicated to the devaluation of all that is feminine, Alice fulfills Lillian Smith's quest for psychic wholeness by effectively dismantling those barriers of racism, sexism, poverty, and homophobia that had previously limited her life. Appropriately, Jennings' memoir emerges as a testimony to not only the destructive forces of the father's masculine identity but to the sustaining, nurturing, empowering identity of a mother whose life continues to imbue his own with direction and purpose.

By insisting upon a place for straight allies in the public battle for equal rights, Jennings broadens the site of political resistance to include those who do not identify as gay, bi-sexual, or lesbian and opens up the possibility of including Lewis Nordan's memoir *Boy With a Loaded Gun* within a "queer" paradigm, a mode that provides, according to Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet,* "a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (xxvi). In explaining the "preference for queer," Warner argues

that "for both academics and activists, 'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual. . . . The insistence on 'queer' . . . has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simply intolerance, as the site of violence" (xxvi). Though Warner never specifically addresses the possibility of a straight participation in such a queer critique, straight critic Calvin Thomas suggests that Warner's work along with that by other notable queer theorists "would seem to invite, or at least not explicitly forbid, something like a 'queer aspiration' on the part of subjects who do not identify themselves as homosexual, gay, or lesbian" (12). In Thomas's view, a straight "resistance to regimes of the normal" seeks "to trouble the stable boundaries of sexual identity or identity politics" (12).

In chapters one and two, I argued for the application of a queer lens to Nordan's *fiction* to understand how his exploration of same-sex desire in specific moments offers an alternative to the debilitating effects of a repressive southern white masculinity on the developmental process of young boys. These queer moments in his fiction expose how such a rigid masculine identity prevents them from the unfettered exploration of both emotional and bodily expressions and their burgeoning imaginations. Occasionally, Nordan links these moments to instances of transexuality, in which the male child willingly adopts a female gender identity and subsequently arrives at imaginative insights unavailable to him in his traditional male identity. Though Nordan never consciously identifies *as* female nor evokes same-sex desire in his memoir, *Boy With a Loaded Gun,* he suggests that his identification *with* women nurtures his imagination in ways that would not be possible if he fully embraced his father's masculine identity, which he views as antithetical to creative expression. Ultimately, Nordan's early identification with

the feminine as a result of the death of his biological father, his step-father's inaccessibility, and an awareness of a debilitating history of white southern masculinity offers him the intellectual freedom to imagine these queer moments he depicts later in his fiction.

As in the memoirs by both Sessums and Jennings, the absence of the biological father's acceptance and love animates Nordan's memoir from its inception and negatively affects the formation of his earliest sense of self. Though all three authors experience alienation and loneliness over the early loss of their biological fathers, the death of Nordan's father when Nordan is eighteen months old leaves him with no memories of his father and thus no record of experiences, either positive or negative, on which to build the foundation of his male identity. Nordan subsequently describes his biological father using the language of absence; his father becomes "an invisibility," a "blank spot" in his imagination, and the second man his mother marries, an emotionally unavailable alcoholic, proves unsuitable for emulation (6). This initial emptiness and the subsequent disappointment of his step-father become the impetus for Nordan's life-long task to fill in these blank spaces, to imagine both an ideal father and his love, even if these invented stories do not correspond to a factual reality. In the posthumously published essay "Dangerous Inventions," Nordan admits to such a process, claiming, "I have been inventing a father. It was a way of inventing myself – my *self*. . . . I was determined to have a father, and so I have invented one out of the man whom I was given[;] . . . he is ironic and accepting of me." Whereas the nascent homosexuality of both Sessums and Jennings force them to relinquish the desire of paternal acceptance conditioned upon the son's heterosexuality, Nordan, who later identifies as heterosexual, does not undergo

such a break and subsequently does not let go of this fantasy of approval. While this prolonged attachment to the wish for paternal acceptance produces fertile ground out of which his fiction grows, it does not serve him well in his actual life, as evidenced by his struggle to break away from the most destructive aspects of his step-father's masculinity.

From a critical perspective, this practice of "dangerous inventions" complicates any straightforward treatment of Nordan's autobiographical writing, and parsing out the significances of this interplay between fact and fiction consumes much of the criticism on Nordan's memoir, as evidenced by the work of Marcel Arbeit and Gregory L. Morris. Though Morris positions Nordan's memoir "as the latest example of the southern 'conversion narrative," thus invoking Hobson's framework for understanding the kind of racial transformation Nordan undergoes, he ultimately positions racism in isolation from the other negative and traumatic forces of a problematic southern masculinity that invariably accounts for Nordan's disintegration as an adult. Morris argues that "while *Boy With a Loaded Gun* deals occasionally and perhaps tangentially with race and with Nordan's attempt to disentangle himself from the bleak inheritance (both historical and familial) of racial prejudice, the more apparent and immediate concern of his confession is the weakening and collapse of the individual moral self that is Lewis Nordan" (68). At the other end of the spectrum, James Watkins frames Nordan's narrative as substantially different from the white southern racial conversion narrative and argues that his memoir heralds "the recent appearance of trauma recovery narratives within the firmly established tradition of the southern family memoir" (226). Both frames, that of Morris and Watkins, produce a reductive understanding of the correlative forces of racism, sexism, and homophobia that underpin both the father's masculine identity and a cultural

legacy of white southern manhood. Nordan's "collapse," to borrow Morris' phrase, occurs precisely because he initially fails to enact such a multilayered strategy in his effort to become a different kind of man than that of his step-father.

By placing Nordan's memoir within a "queer" framework, I seek to locate his desire for transformation within a broader resistance to the normative expectation that he follow the white southern masculine identity of the father. Let me be clear in pointing out that such a transformation does not mean Nordan's memoir contains direct evidence of same-sex desire, as it does not, nor that same-sex desire represents the *only* entrance into a "queer" critique of masculinity. In Clyde Smith's essay "How I Became a Queer Heterosexual," he suggests that a heterosexually identified person can undertake a "queer" critique given the ability for the term "queer" to apply to a broad field of inquiry: "the emergent use of the term 'queer' also indicates radical notions regarding gender. In both aspects, queer emerges from the opposition to and subversion of such binaries of sexuality as hetero/homo and of gender as male/female" (61). Though Nordan's subversion of the binary of sexuality remains most evident in his fiction, his memoir charts a personal struggle to identify with normative notions of gender in a southern culture that restricts such characteristics as empathy, compassion, imagination, and vulnerability to a feminine identity.

My interest in Nordan's memoir lies with how he implicitly genders his burgeoning imagination and its influence on his subsequent desire to leave Mississippi and the South. Nordan associates the genesis of his imagination with the "feminine," his mother, which he casts in opposition to the imaginative cipher of his step-father: "my new father seemed to have no imagination. He was not one to tell stories. He didn't care

much for the movies. When he was not too drunk, he read Western novels, but with no comment. He had no gift of narrative" (17). As an emotionally crippled alcoholic, Nordan's step-father retreats to the world of drinking men at "Shiloh's bootlegging establishment," the only space in which he could converse freely, a feat accomplished only through the liberal use of alcohol. These men, whom Nordan characterizes as "violent drunks who once in a while threw fists, or ax handles, or even pulled a pistol," prove unsuitable for emulation, and their conversation, which contained "plenty of racist, sexist, homophobic talk" does not inspire Nordan as a child (27). This masculine space remains antithetical to a creativity that relies upon an empathetic imagination requiring the abandonment of one's own subject position in order to enter into and understand the subject position of someone different than oneself. Intuitively realizing how such a masculine space forecloses his imaginative capabilities, Nordan writes, "I understood that I would forever be more comfortable in a woman's world than in one inhabited primarily by my own gender" (18). The discomfort Nordan associates with these exclusively male spaces and the subsequent identification with feminine ones mirror the experiences of Sessums and Jennings and place Nordan in a similar position of resistance to what Warner calls "the regimes of the normal" (xxvi). To spurn these men in this masculine space questions the attitude of supremacy they endorse based upon the normative markers of their identities: white, male, heterosexual.

Associating the suppression of imagination with spaces dominated by the southern white father, Nordan positions Mississippi as a prison, not unlike the closet it becomes for Sessums, and it becomes a place to escape if he is to reach the full potential of his creative powers. One of Nordan's first attempts at flexing his creativity occurs as a

child when he struggles to develop his own voice using a ventriloquist dummy he bought from a mail order catalogue, but the words do not come, and Nordan discovers that he "had nothing to say" (56). Nordan strains to hear words that would convince him that he had "become possessed of a new self, somehow, one that might someday leave Itta Bena and exist, nay thrive, in another world" (56). Importantly, Nordan desires not simply the new voice of a writer, but a voice capable of being transplanted outside of Itta Bena, which positions this new self in opposition to that of his step-father. Writing of the tenuous nature of his step-father's conversations with his friends at Shiloh's bar, Nordan declares that "outside Shiloh's Store they scarcely spoke to one another, not even at the Southern Café or a high school football game. They knew each other over whiskey, that was it, nowhere else. . . . These were not friendships likely to survive transplantation of even the smallest kind, let alone into private homes with women. With children, for God's sake" (29). In longing for a voice that could "thrive" in another world, Nordan desires to move beyond his step-father's voice and the bigoted space of a rural, Mississippi bar that nurtured it. As a child, Nordan finds stimulation outside of Mississippi, not in the exclusively white male spaces of the father, but in the predominantly black space of Beale Street in Memphis, where he sees W. C. Handy, the father of the Blues, and later in the desegregated space of a New York coffee house in which he sits with an African American for the first time in a social setting.

At the inception of Nordan's writing career, literary fathers replace biological ones, and he must contend again with the restriction of his imagination in the shadow of a paternal literary legacy. As a revision of the scene in which Nordan as a child momentarily relinquishes his search for a new voice and puts away the dummy, Nordan,

now a burgeoning writer, turns to the feminine as a way to circumvent the creative inertia he fears from writing in Faulkner's shadow. In an interview with Katherine J. Jones and Jeremy L. C. Jones not long after the publication of his memoir, Nordan speaks about his struggle to develop a voice substantially different than the one created by Faulkner:

> My imagination snapped shut again, and I thought, "I'll just only write parodies of Faulkner." I just had a very hard time believing that I could go beyond that. But then I wrote two or three stories in a row that suddenly were about things that Faulkner never would have had a clue about how to write about. . . . And one of them was about a girl who goes on a blind date with a guy and goes swimming and has to end up saving him from drowning. I was writing from a woman's point of view, about places I knew, about men whom I had been afraid of, as this girl was afraid of this man, and something—I don't want to say my feminine self exactly—I want to say some vulnerable part of me, though, that I had to place in a feminine voice allowed me to write what I wanted to write rather than what I thought Faulkner wanted me to write. (7)

Although Nordan's anxiety of influence recalls Flannery O'Connor's famous quote that "the presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do," he frames the problem as one primarily of gender (45). Nordan turns to the feminine voice in order to "go beyond" what Faulkner could say, and not surprisingly, the emotion Nordan captures is a feeling of vulnerability in the presence of men who struck fear in him as a child. In his adoption of the feminine voice to speak of his own vulnerability, Nordan simultaneously reveals both a desire to move beyond the limitations of a literary father and the lingering damage of his exposure to the rigid version of masculinity he experiences as a child in Mississippi. Nordan remains conditioned by a masculine culture that only allows women the freedom to express vulnerability, especially if such an emotion arises as a result of the frightening presence of other men. By imaginatively adopting a female persona, Nordan can finally undertake

the fiction he "wanted to write," but such a subversion of expected gender roles exists within the realm of narrative possibilities rather than real life.

Nordan appears less successful as an adult in implementing these strategies of gender subversion in his personal life and subsequently remains unable to dispel the most damaging characteristics of his step-father's identity, his alcoholism and emotional unavailability. Nordan becomes exactly the kind of father he despised, a rage-filled alcoholic who verbally abuses and terrorizes his wife and child. Nordan admits in his memoir that "compared to my own behavior my father seemed saintlike and admirable. I was loud and abusive and violent. I was having an affair with a college girl, my wife's best friend" (169). In this regard, Nordan's narrative departs sharply from those of Sessums and Jennings, who because of their homosexuality enacted a more decisive break from the identities of their fathers, but their fathers, though problematic in their own right, did not model for them the addictive behavior Nordan's step-father exhibited with his alcoholism. Though Sessums and Jennings still contend with male family members after the deaths of their biological fathers, this absence of the paternal figure allows them the freedom to rethink their identities in ways that Nordan never could because of the continued presence of his step-father.

Though one cannot attribute all the problems in Nordan's adult life to his step-father and his formative years in Mississippi, only until he leaves the South does he gain the distance he needs to heal from the psychic damage of his early life. Here, Nordan's memoir returns to the narrative trajectory of those of Sessums and Jennings who associate psychic health with the flight to the urban North. Only in these Northern spaces, New York, Massachusetts, and Pittsburgh, places that do not evoke memories of their

biological fathers or a cultural legacy of white southern manhood, do Nordan, Sessums, and Jennings have both the distance and freedom to reinvent themselves as men decidedly different than their fathers. In positioning the South as antithetical to their overall mental health, these men, as Watkins argues about Nordan, describe southernness "in the language of pathology," but these pathologies ultimately prove to be little different than the ones Lillian Smith originally identified in 1949 (220). In addressing more directly how the fear of homosexuality becomes instrumental in the construction of a damaging white masculine identity responsible for continuing these pathologies of the South, Sessums, Nordan, and Jennings further Smith's project of transformation and offer alternative models of male development that will hopefully provide the next generation of southern sons a more inclusive, compassionate, and less destructive vision of masculinity to which they can aspire.

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BIOGRAPHY

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