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GRADE / DEGREE:	ANNÉE D'OBTENTION / YEAR GRANTED
M.A. (English)	2003
TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS: QUEERING DIXIE: THE CHALLENGING OF SOCIAL NORMS IN CONTEMPORARY GAY FICTION	

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
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English

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TITRE DE LA THÈSE - TITLE OF THE THESIS

Queering Dixie:
The Challenging of Social Norms in Contemporary Gay Fiction

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Queering Dixie:
The Challenging of Social Norms
in Contemporary Gay Fiction

by Richard Evans

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
of the University of Ottawa
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English Literature

University of Ottawa
Department of English
Supervisor: Professor David R. Jarraway
January 2003

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0-612-79340-0

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Abstract

This thesis inquires into how three contemporary gay and lesbian Southern authors under the age of 35 challenge and question the established notions of gender, class, sexuality, and religion in the American South.

The three authors under consideration are Christopher Rice (*A Density of Souls*), Poppy Z. Brite (*Drawing Blood*), and Julia Watts (*Finding H.F.*). By examining the works of a gay man from New Orleans (an urban area), a bisexual woman originally from Georgia now living in New Orleans (urban/rural spheres), and a lesbian from small-town Kentucky (rural space), respectively, the notion of the security and power of an established urban “queer” community reaching out to positively influence the rural space is explored.

The traditional expectation within gay and lesbian writing of the necessity to flee the repressive rural space for the liberation of the urban Mecca is thus both explored and challenged by these three young authors.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor David Jarraway, without whose guidance, encouragement, and time I would not have completed this work. His belief in this project from the very beginning has been invaluable to me. I thank the Department of English at the University of Ottawa for their support of this endeavor. I would especially like to thank Professor Lorrie Graham for her support and friendship throughout the many months of researching and writing. A special thanks goes to Ms. Debra Hubert, the former Administrative Assistant at the Department of English, whose guidance made this journey much less stressful.

Over the course of this project, many people have helped me enormously through their support and concern. Of these, I particularly wish to thank Angela Deziel, for the late-night marathon phone conversations to/from Kingston and for the ongoing blessing of her friendship; Kathryn Munroe, who always knew when I needed to be dragged away from my computer and has been looking forward to reading the finished product since August of 2001; and Carolyn Pilote, whose "constructive criticism" has always helped me (even when I didn't want to hear it... "I hope you die on your way home!" Lo siento, querida) and whose enduring friendship I greatly treasure. I would equally like to thank Ms. Mekitarian at General Vanier for being such an inspiring teacher and caring mentor over the past decade. Also to Mr. Peter Greene, whose style and panache made his classes some of my most memorable high school memories, and, finally, to Kim Eckford for always allowing me to be "the rose among the weeds".

I will be forever grateful to Elaine Evans, someone I am so proud to call both my sister and my friend, for all the late-night chats, the early-morning commutes, and especially the post-*FAME* dinner at Coriander Thai in 1999.

I also thank Hilda Mealing-Evans (1906-1988), whose love of learning influenced me greatly during my childhood. My father, David Evans (1934-1995), was always so proud of my achievements. His wit and wisdom ("Just do it!") are greatly missed. I will always cherish the seventeen years we had together as father and son.

Of all the people who have encouraged me and helped me throughout this project, the person to whom I owe the greatest debt of gratitude is my mother, Valerie Woodman-Evans. This thesis is therefore dedicated, in its entirety, to my mother, whose unconditional love, unwavering support, and independent spirit have inspired me every day of my life.

This town thinks I'm crazy
They just think I'm strange
Sometimes they want to own me
Sometimes they wish I'd change
But I can feel the thunder
Underneath my feet
I sold my soul for freedom
It's lonely but it's sweet

-Melissa Etheridge "Talking To My Angel"

Introduction

“So here it is: I’m putting it down for you to see if our fragments match
anywhere, if our pieces, together, make another larger piece
of the truth that can be part of the map we are making together
to show us the way to the longed-for world.”

-Minnie Bruce Pratt¹

Taking as the context for study the American South, a region of the United States known for its social and political conservatism, I undertake in this thesis to inquire how three young gay, lesbian, and bisexual authors write against the constraints of homophobia inculcated by long-held traditions with respect to religion, gender, and class south of the Mason-Dixon line. How do these young authors go about challenging such long-established traditions constraining behavioral norms? In what ways do they differ in their individual approaches to these forces? How do they go about imagining and creating Pratt’s notion of a “longed-for world” free of intolerance and homophobia? It is these questions, among others, that this study explores and examines. It is the fiction of young “queer” novelists writing against the outdated image of the isolated, self-hating young person who cannot reconcile his/her homosexuality with the concept of a happy and successful normative life that I particularly choose to focus upon in this thesis.

This antiquated notion of the doomed homosexual is well-represented in Bobbie Gentry’s 1967 hit song “Ode to Billy Joe”, in which the titular character mysteriously “jump[s] off the Tallahatchie Bridge” to his death (Howard, *Men* 177). The actual reason for his unexplained swan-dive remained a mystery for nearly a decade², until a novel and a film interpretation of the song were released in 1976 (Howard, *Men* 182), in both of which Billy Joe’s realization of his homosexuality drives him to commit suicide. So ingrained within the audience’s consciousness was this concept of the self-hating gay man who dies, that even gay men who saw the movie

when it was released in theaters remember responding, “Oh, *that* was what was going on” (Howard, *Men* 182). To them, at that moment in time, this self-destruction seemed a curiously expected or oddly acceptable response to the discovery of one’s homosexuality in the rural South. My three younger authors completely reject suicide and despair as an acceptable response when discussing gay and lesbian life at the end of the twentieth century. The notion that “[a] sure and early death awaits the homosexual” is challenged by the younger novelists being explored in this project. The younger authors can be seen as members of the “successive generations of increasingly self-identified and politicized lesbians and gays [who will] attest to the resiliency of an ostensibly self-destructive and nonreproductive people” (Howard, *Men* 174).

The limited number of southern novelists writing on gay and lesbian subjects and the scarcity of previous academic discourse on this subject have made this modest project quite challenging. Donna Jo Smith comments in her essay “Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity” on the need to “address the obvious bias toward East and West Coast urban centers in queer U.S. history to date” (*Carryin’* 370). My research has shown me that this bias appears to exist in gay and lesbian literature as well.

Through extensive reading, though, I discovered that there exists a growing record of recent research on the subject of homosexuality in the southern United States from which I have garnered useful and pertinent information. To explain my focus in more specific detail, I am exploring the notion of how southern authors under the age of 35 challenge, modify, or sometimes even reject established social norms through my close readings of *A Density of Souls* by Christopher Rice, *Drawing Blood* by Poppy Z. Brite, and *Finding H.F.* by Julia Watts. These novels, written by three authors from three distinct areas of the South who belong to three different sexual groups within the “queer” community (a bisexual woman from Georgia, a gay

man from New Orleans, and a lesbian from rural Kentucky, respectively), thereby provide a fuller sense of the points-of-view that exist within the literary culture of the southern states.

My research has revealed that established gay and lesbian authors of the South, such as Jim Grimsley and Dorothy Allison, either send their characters away from the rural space to large urban areas to live in already established gay communities, or make their discovery of their sexuality seem fraught with insecurity, loneliness, and danger. At the beginning of Grimsley's *Comfort and Joy*, for example, the gay protagonist, Danny Crell, has fled his rural North Carolina roots to live in Atlanta; at the end of his novel *Boulevard*, the young protagonist, Newell, nearly dies in a vicious rape. Similarly, Allison brings her lone lesbian character from *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Aunt Raylene, out of the closet only at the very end of her novel, and thereby leaves her somewhat underdeveloped.³ While her "queer" character neither physically suffers nor leaves her small town for a big city, as represented in Grimsley's novels, she remains closeted and emotionally isolated from both her community and her family.

Rice, Brite, and Watts, the writers that I am focusing upon in this thesis, do not subscribe to this way of thinking or writing. Their characters all experience sudden epiphanies about their homosexuality or bisexuality that quickly allow them both to adapt to their new identities with ease, and to confront intolerance and narrow-mindedness with a mixture of bravery and humour. Collectively, then, all of these characters are conscious of the fear and ignorance that appear in Grimsley and Allison, yet nevertheless actively challenge and question these established beliefs rather than retreat to metropolitan areas or rural isolation.

The "Queering Dixie" of my title thus aims to foreground this opportunity for expansionary optimism. In the context of this thesis, "queer" should be seen as something that permits one to "travel across boundaries of gender" (Brasell, *Out* 166) and transcend the exclusiveness of the male term "gay" and the female term "lesbian" to form a sort of

wide-reaching community that includes gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, or persons who simply do not wish to label themselves heterosexual or “straight”. It should also be noted that throughout this thesis, the term “gay” will also be used along with the term “queer” more easily to encompass for the reader the variance and diversity of the GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community.

Accordingly, my title makes reference to the diverse communities that the gay and lesbian protagonists of the novels form beyond the confines of traditional heterosexual concepts of family. It also gestures toward the possible growth and potential proliferation of ideas, such as the chance for the lessening of gender-role constraints for all Southerners, gay or straight, male or female, that could occur by embracing the variety of sexual and gender identities that exist within all societies, but specifically within the American South. Lastly, the title “Queering Dixie” also shows my desire to explore the ideas and concepts associated with the notion of “Dixie” and the South being “more sexist, more classist, more heterosexist, and more violent, as well as more passionate, more religious, more polite, and more generous, than the rest of the nation” (Smith, *Carryin’* 378). While nearly all of these assumptions about the region are reflected in the novels being explored, the writers all nevertheless find ways to question, challenge, and subvert these presupposed expectations of their rural or urban space.

Each of the three chapters is devoted specifically to one of the three primary novels that I am studying which is paired with a novel by either Dorothy Allison or Jim Grimsley that embodies the notions regarding the rural or urban gay experience that the younger writer wishes to question or challenge. As with the differences between “older” and “younger” writers I have previously mentioned, I find that the “younger” authors are reacting constructively to the above-listed social constructs, rather than simply displaying them as problematic as do the “older” authors. As an example, Allison and Grimsley both present religion in their novels as

repressive and hypocritical rather than as an affirming force in their characters' lives. In the novels I am exploring, the younger authors actively engage the concept of religion in three different ways: Rice ponders its ability to instill evil and hatred under the guise of promoting tolerance and love; Brite rejects established religion outright and derides it at every opportunity; yet Watts has her characters adapt religion to their own needs and individual lives. The "younger" writers approach homosexuality, gender, and class, in very much the same way: actively encouraging solutions and challenging conventions rather than simply presenting the problems that exist in both the urban and rural South.

In the first chapter I explore Rice's *A Density of Souls*. I think it is wise to begin with this novel, for it is in many ways the one that embodies large cities as the sole area of tolerance and self-expression for gay and lesbian people, a concept that the two subsequent authors will attempt to dispel. In several of my secondary sources I discovered that the idea of flight from the bigoted, backward small town to the enlightened big city was a common experience for many of the authors and essayists in order to avoid intolerance. In his essay "Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South", the author Jim Grimsley states that "we [southern gays and lesbians] have the country inside [us] Then we grew up and moved to the city . . . we left home in order to find space for ourselves" (*Out* 232-233), thereby making the urban metropolis the necessary destination of escape for every non-heterosexual in the rural South.

Rice seems glad, however, to take his readers inside both schools and houses in urban New Orleans and display the homophobia that still runs rampant therein, dispelling some of the "out in the open, in sunshine, in our city" progressiveness with which Grimsley endows the urban space (Grimsley, *Out* 235). It is this unexpected challenging of the image of the big city as the ultimate place of refuge that I think remarkable and worthy of exploration. By writing against this notion of the relative safety, security, and anonymity of urban areas, Rice's novel

hints at the gay world that exists beyond places like New Orleans and Atlanta and thereby provides an opening to move from the urban to the rural space more explicitly explored by Brite and Watts.

Further in the urban context, Rice also challenges late twentieth-century evangelical Christianity through his introduction of a violent religious splinter group, The Army of God, that lurks throughout his novel as a sort of new-millennium danger for the urban gay community. Religion is not about love, salvation, and inclusion in this novel; religion for Rice is fraught with hate, condemnation, and exclusion. The author also provides the reader with a fascinating view of male sexual fluidity in his novel, a notion that is also reflected in *Drawing Blood*, where none of the young male characters are exclusively heterosexual, yet their need to label either their actions as homoerotic or themselves as gay or bisexual varies enormously from character to character. Rice's willingness to create characters who occupy an undefined area between the exclusive extremes of heterosexual and homosexual melds with the author's apparent openness to creating a new concept of masculinity and femininity in the South. Rice is not afraid, however, to show in his novel how a slavish adherence to traditional, stagnant notions of gender and sexuality can lead to suffering and tragedy, even in urban areas such as the supposedly liberal and tolerant New Orleans.

In the second chapter, I will address the novel *Drawing Blood* by Poppy Z. Brite. With this novel, I explore how an author displays in both a big city and a small town what she would like the South to become. Her characters make the reverse journey that the protagonists of Watts' novel will make, and travel from the metropolis of New Orleans to the fictional small town of Missing Mile, North Carolina. The movement from urban center to the rural site exists here as it did not in *A Density of Souls*. The characters in *Drawing Blood*, a group of addicts, strippers, and orphans, inhabit a completely different space than that of the wealthy characters in

Rice's novel. They are all "queer" and from New Orleans, yet the social spheres they exist in within this city are entirely separate. Also, Brite's characters are wholly prepared to defy small town conventions by engaging in public displays of affection and by making no secret of their relationships.

In so actively and openly flouting and challenging social convention, Brite writes a novel in which the South appears as a place rife with repression that can potentially be overcome if one has the bravery to live one's life honestly. As with the characters in the other novels who are "Queering Dixie", Brite's protagonists feel no guilt or shame about their homosexuality; indeed, they never label themselves as gay throughout the novel, but rather see themselves simply as two people in love. I believe that by writing in such a manner, Brite in some ways strains the reality of the novel by creating a tiny southern town where almost no one is homophobic. But at the same time, she seems to applaud her gay characters and the truly open-minded residents of the South who people her pages, for refusing to isolate themselves in thriving urban communities, by living so openly. I feel she is writing the South as she thinks it should/could be if gay, lesbian, or bisexual people were willing to leave the ghettos and have the bravery to exercise freedom of choice about where they live.

As this chapter finally shows, by the end of the novel the gay characters do in fact leave the small town of Missing Mile and flee the country. My analysis reveals, however, that, unlike with Danny, the protagonist in Grimsley's *Comfort and Joy*, the reason for their flight from the rural space has to do with past legal troubles rather than with their sexuality. Also, the lovers end up in a small rural community in Jamaica where they live their lives as an openly gay couple. Hence, while there is the departure from the urban center to the rural community, my chapter will demonstrate that the characters do not ultimately stay there once the novel ends. It

is only Watts in the final chapter who brings her characters back to the small, rural community in order to have them live their lives as gay or lesbian people.

With the third chapter of the thesis, I focus on the notion of forming a gay or lesbian social life in a rural southern community through an examination of *Finding H.F.* by Julia Watts. Her novel is in many ways the opposite of Rice's and Brite's in that her protagonist is a poor, rural lesbian from Kentucky. Angelia Wilson's book *Below the Belt*, as well as Laura Milner's essay "From Southern Baptist Belle to Butch (and Beyond)" in *Out in the South*, were especially helpful in encouraging me to see the gender-role expectations forced upon young southern women and men through the authors' interviews and personal recollections. The roles that these two essayists present are uniformly that of poor, rural women trapped by gender codings and a class structure that inhibits growth or movement. A southern woman is either the "belle" or the "farm wife", according to Wilson, and there is seemingly no space available for a third option to bridge these two extremes (53-54). Writers such as Dorothy Allison reflect this in their novels, yet the solution usually presented in the novels by the "older" authors is independence through self-isolation from the local rural community rather than active engagement with the community in order to elicit change. Men on the other hand can escape this social/gender bind, but only by moving to big cities to live, or by returning from large cities as educated men who nevertheless remain as outsiders. Thus, there is very little movement for men or women within rural social hierarchies according to both these essayists and the two "older" writers.

Watts' novel, however, provides a further reflection upon the friendships that young gays and lesbians at the beginning of the new millennium might form within their high-schools as a means of support within the rural community. This sense of connection to a larger gay and lesbian community appearing at such a young age is something that neither Allison nor Grimsley reflect in their books, as they perhaps did not experience "queer" friendships in their own

adolescence. The one example of a same-sex friendship/relationship that exists and temporarily thrives in the “older” authors’ works is found in a text not examined in my study, namely Grimsley’s *Dream Boy*, but this novel ends tragically in rape and murder.⁴

Watts does indeed send her young protagonists off to the big city, in this case Atlanta, in search of H.F.’s long-lost mother; however, they do not remain there at the end of the novel, but instead return home to Kentucky to create their own space in their own small town. This departure from the expectations of older gay and lesbian writers of the American South thus becomes a prominent theme both in this chapter and throughout the entire thesis. I believe that this willingness to return to a place of hostility and make a stand, rather than flee to a big city, is quite radical. What is more, this willingness to challenge convention bravely and openly in areas where there is not a large, established gay or lesbian community is what sets the younger authors apart from their predecessors: they are willing to confront homophobia right in their own rural communities and schools rather than from a distant urban enclave.

As with all the novels I am working with, the theme of an absent or deceased same-sex parent is an ever-present one. In this concluding chapter I argue that the lack of a parental structure/model permits the young gay and lesbian characters the opportunity to craft their own concepts of family and of gender for themselves, rather than adhere to previously established static models. This notion of a family in crisis is frequently represented in the novels of the “older” writers, yet, as with most social problems presented in their novels, there is little attempt at altering or improving the situation in their texts. Watts embodies religion as an institution that has gone astray from its true roots, but she reveals that it is still a positive force provided the individual rejects a strict adherence to another’s dogmatic interpretation of words and ideas. She also effectively resolves the concept of a conscious isolation from the “straight” world far

better than do the previous two authors, for in Watts' work there is a genuine sense of connection with the heterosexual community.

Rice, Brite, and Watts all write positive stories of gay and lesbian lives with happy endings. Beneath these positive stories, though, it is my view that the authors all feel the need to rebel and rail against society's ills (homophobia, sexism, religious conservatism), whether through anger or humour, in order to show that there is still progress that needs to be made. This focus on a happy ending seems to be primary. But the journey that these characters undertake in order to attain this eventual happiness is one that automatically requires them to defy southern traditions and expectations.

The older generation of gay and lesbian writers, such as Jim Grimsley and Dorothy Allison, simply do not question the social conventions in the way that the younger generation are willing to do in their texts by actively challenging long-held notions about gender, sexuality, and religion. The urban center is a necessary resource to rural "queer" youth, but it should not exist as the unique location for the expression of expansionary views of sexual and gender diversity. It is possible that the concept of a distant gay community in some faraway metropolis may be enough to inspire some gay and lesbian teenagers to plan eventual escape from their small southern towns. But it is the positive appearance of gay and lesbian, as well as gay/lesbian-friendly, people in these same small towns that these authors contend would alter the perception of gay and lesbian life in the South, as my thesis ultimately attempts to demonstrate.

A fine example of the gap between the urban and rural gay experience that I hope to bridge in some small way with this undertaking is represented in the following quote which ends Edward R. Gray's essay "Looking for a City: The Ritual and Politics of Ethnography":

... I too, am looking for a city. I search for a place where often inconsistent, sometimes conflictual, social memberships, like being gay and Christian or queer and traditionally Southern, a scholar of American religion and a gay man, can be blended. A city in which everyone relies on the kindness of strangers. (*Out* 182)

With this thesis, I think I have succeeded in showing that the ideal space that Dr. Gray is searching for in the South does not have to be exclusively a city, but can equally be a town or hamlet that similarly possesses all the attributes of openness and tolerance so much sought after in a metropolitan space.

NOTES

1. Pratt, 32.
2. In *Men Like That*, John Howard devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 5: Representations, 174-229) to the representation of gay men from Mississippi in film and literature since the mid-1950s. This chapter is especially interesting in showing how the cryptic lines of Gentry's song became a film/novel that propagated the homosexual suicide myth. Much of the song's initial success came from Gentry's refusal to specify just what Billy Joe "threw off the Tallahatchie Bridge." The chapter also includes an examination of the works of Thomas Hal Phillips and Carl Corley, two early American writers focusing on gay themes whose work is just being discovered by academia.
3. The image of the isolated rural lesbian (or lesbians) can equally be found in the characters of Mim and Jean, a young couple from Georgia who befriend the protagonist, Cissy Byrd, in Allison's *Cavedweller*. They, too, remain on the fringes of both the novel and society.

Their influence on the outcome/conclusion of the plot is far less than that of Aunt Raylene in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Though they permit Cissy to consider the possibility of loving another woman, this is never developed by the author and Cissy leaves Georgia to return to Los Angeles at the end of the novel.

4. One of two novels by Jim Grimsley (see #8 in Chapter 2) not examined in this paper, *Dream Boy* tells the tale of a seemingly doomed first romance between two teenage boys, Roy and Nathan, in rural North Carolina in the 1960s. Like the uncertain ending of *Boulevard* with the two options of “death” or “flight” left for the reader to consider as the outcome of the story, this novel appears to lean more towards the former ultimately tragic outcome.

Chapter One:
“Sodom of the South”

“Antony had behaved like a cad and had run away . . . to that Sodom of the south, New Orleans”
(366)

This quote from Alex Haley’s *Queen*, describing an occurrence during the 1850s, demonstrates that even in the pre-Civil War South, the city of New Orleans held a reputation as a place of alleged permissiveness and perversion. It is a reputation that exists to this very day; indeed, the critic Angelia Wilson comments in *Below the Belt* that New Orleans is “the one Southern city in which moral decadence is the norm” (141). Given this widely held perception of the “laissez-faire” attitude of the city, New Orleans would seem to be an ideal place to explore the concept of challenging long-held social norms, such as those surrounding Southern notions of gender, religion, class, and sexuality, in an urban sphere. Wilson goes on to quote the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in New Orleans commenting that “the area north [of the city] . . . is part of the Bible Belt; the area south is almost entirely Arcadian/French (sic) influenced by the Catholic Church; then New Orleans is just like a place all unto itself” (141). And so, completely encircled by powerful, traditional religious forces, yet at the same time seemingly resisting or challenging their influence, New Orleans, due to its decadent reputation, appears as an ideal space in which to examine the conflict and interaction between conservative southern values and a burgeoning gay community.

This idea of it being “a place all unto itself” has permitted a gay community to exist, either secretly or openly, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, as Antony’s flight from his father’s plantation attests. It is therefore not surprising that a city reputed to be “Sodom of the south” as far back as the 1850s would surely lure young people either uncertain of their heterosexuality or certain of their non-heterosexuality during the late 1970s, when Jim

Grimsley's novel *Boulevard* takes place. Upon initial observation, Grimsley's novel seems to fit easily into the notion that cities "harbor sexual fugitives from rural morality" (Wilson 6), for the protagonist, a young gay man named Newell, flees rural Alabama for the freedom and tolerance of New Orleans' French Quarter. Upon closer observation, however, as will be outlined in this chapter, the liberation that Newell hopes to find actually comes with many conditions and limitations.

It is this same French Quarter that Christopher Rice's main character, Stephen Conlin, will discover and explore in *A Density of Souls* in the late 1990s. The twenty-year gap between the two novels permits the careful reader to see the progress that has been made within the gay community in New Orleans; however, this twenty-year gap also demonstrates that this progress and heightened visibility can also have a somewhat negative impact on this urban enclave. The gay world of the 1970s that was secretive and isolated has become, by the mid-90s, a more open, vocal, and organized community. This visibility, however, unfortunately permits for a more focused and purposeful response from conservative factions within New Orleans society. I believe that a close reading of *Boulevard* and *A Density of Souls* will reveal that the reputation that New Orleans enjoys as a haven of tolerance and diversity is, upon careful examination, more of a popular perception (or misconception) than a reality. Despite its nicknames "The Big Easy" and "Sodom of the south" it must not be forgotten that New Orleans is nevertheless a southern city, highly influenced by the powerful social and religious forces that, as previously mentioned, literally encircle it on all sides.

Boulevard is the story of a young gay man from the rural South in search of a gay community in the 1970s. Once there, he moves into a tiny apartment in the French Quarter and begins work as a waiter and, later, as a cashier in an adult bookstore. Through his interaction with the men he meets in the restaurants, stores, and bars, he begins to formulate a "gay

identity”, though it oddly resembles that of every other gay man that he meets in the Vieux Carré: an identity which involves a near endless pursuit of sex and temporary companionship. Newell eventually becomes dissatisfied with his life in the French Quarter and the enormous financial expense required to live in the gay enclave of New Orleans. The novel ends with Newell either being murdered by a sadistic lover or fleeing the city on a Greyhound bus. While Grimsley leaves the ending up to the readers’ interpretation, it seems more likely that Newell actually does escape the city and head off in search of a gay community more to his liking elsewhere.

Christopher Rice’s *A Density of Souls* takes place on the same streets of the Vieux Carré in the mid-1990s as seen through the eyes of a young, local gay man, Stephen Conlin. Stephen’s discovery of his homosexuality has cost him the friendship of his three childhood playmates, Brandon Charbonnet, Greg Darby, and Meredith Ducote, who fear becoming social outcasts at their high school if they associate with a gay man. Stephen quickly becomes proud and fiercely defiant with regards to his sexual identity, causing problems with Greg and Brandon. Stephen’s two male friends expect him to be humble and ashamed of his sexuality despite the fact that both of them have been secretly sexually involved with Stephen in the past. When Greg commits suicide after luring Stephen away from his house and raping him, Brandon blames Stephen for Greg’s death and drops out of school. He disappears from New Orleans and joins a vicious, homophobic religious cult, The Army of God. Three years later, Stephen is dating one of Greg and Brandon’s football teammates, Jeff Haugh, who is killed when The Army of God, now led by Brandon, begins bombing gay bars in the French Quarter. Around the same time, Jordan Charbonnet, Brandon’s older brother, returns to New Orleans to investigate his brother’s disappearance. As Jordan begins to try to piece together the story that led to Greg’s suicide and Brandon’s vanishing, he slowly falls in love with Stephen Conlin. In the confusion that occurs

when a hurricane hits New Orleans, Brandon returns to try to kill Stephen, but Meredith arrives in time and saves Stephen before Brandon is killed by the storm. The end of the novel has Stephen and Jordan moving into the Conlin residence together with Stephen's mother, Monica, as New Orleans tries to rebuild itself in the hurricane's aftermath.

To say, however, that New Orleans is in no way a welcoming place for gays and lesbians would be false; as far as major Southern cities with active and established queer communities, its only real rival is Atlanta, Georgia (Grimsley, *Out* 233). Both Grimsley and Rice evoke a vibrant and self-reliant gay community within the cobblestone streets of the French Quarter, yet in Grimsley's case it seems very insular and distinct from the rest of the city. In her essay "Same Difference: My Southern Queer Stories", Donna Smith writes about the "open secret of queerness I witnessed in New Orleans. There, a strong gay presence was treated as local color and tolerated as long as it contributed to the exoticism of a city that existed on tourism. Normal conventions could be suspended, but they weren't ever fundamentally challenged in this party town" (*Out* 128-129). Smith's impressions of the city are based upon her experiences in the city in 1982, which places her personal interpretation of gay life in New Orleans five years after the conclusion of Grimsley's novel and a decade before the beginning of Rice's.

As the encompassing focus of this research is the challenging of Southern social norms, I believe it is important to describe and establish a precise view of both the perception and self-perception of the gay community that is pitted against these binding religious, social, and gender mores. The self-perception of gay men, for they are the near-exclusive focus of both of these novels, in terms of how they view themselves, their sexuality, and their community is closely linked to the way in which they interact with/react to the world beyond their gay enclave. Grimsley's characters appear to have little (if any) connection to their families and display virtually no interest in connecting their community or their experiences with those of

heterosexual society; Rice's characters are far more willing to move themselves beyond the limits of the traditional gay community base in the Vieux Carré and interact with a wider cross-section of New Orleans that includes both biological family members and non-gay friends..

Grimsley has his characters deal with homophobia and an oppressive social code by disassociating themselves completely from the larger heterosexual community. They do not challenge their isolation, but rather seem to accept it and construct a small society within this segregation. This acceptance of a liminal position seems a realistic portrayal of the gay male community in the 1970s, for Grimsley describes an identical scenario when describing his own experiences in New Orleans in the essay "Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South." He writes:

We came to the city for shelter, for a place where we could escape our families, many of us; . . . we left home in order to find someplace for ourselves . . . We moved to places where gay people were said to have congregated . . . In New Orleans I had lived near many gay men in the French Quarter and had pursued a life much like that pursued by those around me: I cruised the bars as often as I could, seeking companionship in the era when companionship meant sex, and cruising meant looking for sex, and going to the bars meant wishing for sex, or at least placing yourself somewhat closer to the possibility of sex. . . I had no notion of what being a gay man meant, I had no idea of sexual freedom. (*Out* 233)

This experience is a perfect mirroring of Newell's experiences in the French Quarter throughout *Boulevard*, where the newly-minted young gay man from the rural south arrives in the big city in order to begin to explore his homosexuality. And yet, Newell's story is one where

a young man frees himself from the constraints and limitations of southern, mainstream society, only to stumble into the fledgling gay community and immediately define himself by its expectations and social codes. The expectations of heterosexuality and marriage have been replaced by an oddly strict adherence to a life of eternal bachelorhood and promiscuity. As Grimsley comments in his essay, it is a world focused almost exclusively on the pursuit of sex within the confines of the Vieux Carré. Indeed, Newell never again sets foot beyond the French Quarter once he has taken an apartment there. The gay community is so thoroughly self-contained, with bars, restaurants, stores, and housing, that Newell never sees or experiences anything of the city of New Orleans beyond that: his liberation from his small Alabama town lands him in a small district of roughly 8 blocks by 14 blocks (Zibart and Sehlinger 12) from which he never ventures.

In this sense, no characters in *Boulevard* ever challenge the religious, social and class norms that Rice will attempt to expose and destabilize in *A Density of Souls*. Newell's arrival in the gay community is liberating to him, but the community to which he attaches himself is merely defying traditional social conventions rather than challenging them. By this I mean that Newell and his circle of gay male friends are reacting in opposition to the traditional gender codings that southern society has told them they should adopt in order to be a "good southern gentleman" with the requisite relationships with his God, his wife, and his children (in that order) (Wilson 161). To be specific, Grimsley's characters adamantly refuse to be the traditionally monogamous, Christian family man, but rather than questioning what those expectations actually mean to them, not only as gay men but also as residents of the South, male or female, they simply reinvent themselves as the complete opposite of the supposed gentlemanly ideal and define themselves by their promiscuity and carefree independence. Due to the strong socially-perceived inseparability of heterosexuality and Christianity in the notion of

being a “southern gentleman,” to reject monogamy and marriage thus seems to require an equally forceful rejection of Christianity.

It must be understood that southern masculinity (and, by extension, femininity) cannot be separated from the powerful influence of conservative southern Christianity. Angelia Wilson describes their intertwined power in the following way:

The proliferation of conservative Christian morality distinguishes the South as the Bible Belt. Combine that with the legacy of Southern genteel society and the resulting social atmosphere becomes imbued with gender, and sexual, clarity -- Southern boys know what it means to be a man, and Southern girls know what it means to be a lady. It is as “natural as the air they breathe . . . [challenging this expectation causes] all sorts of upsets to Southern sexual, and moral, certainty. . . . What the Bible tells us, according to the “Right” interpretation, is that men and women have different roles based on gender and on, quite frankly, the way God meant it to be. No Godly woman’s life, certainly no Godly family is complete -- as God intended -- without the presence of a man -- “made in His image.” . . . Once these men are present in family life they must fulfill particular expectations as the “head of the household.” Their God-given right, even duty, to lead women and children is the ultimate trump-card against any worldly questioning of their decisions or actions. (3, 42-43)

Since moral and sexual norms seem so firmly established and entrenched in Southern society, “it is in a space where sameness is fairly certain and values are relatively clear, that one can begin to see the cost of difference” (Wilson 7).

It is also quite telling that Wilson uses the words “man” and “*lady*” rather than “man” and “woman” in her commentary on sexual certainty. Webster’s New Riverside Dictionary defines a “woman” as “an adult human female” (794), whereas it explains “lady” as “a woman of breeding, cultivation, and often of high social position” (393). This notion that women should aspire to be true ladies rather than just women seems to be especially prevalent and powerful in the Bible Belt. The maternal figures in *A Density of Souls* fall on both sides of the woman/lady divide, and it will wholly define the social position they hold and the opportunities open to them within that society. For example, Stephen’s mother, Monica Conlin, was born on “the wrong side of Magazine Street across from the [far wealthier] Garden District” (Rice 20). She is therefore never truly accepted by the local society ladies and is always referred to as “that woman” (Rice 73).

In order truly to understand this division between a woman and a lady, however, an understanding of what it means to be a man within Southern society must first be established.. Before any of the notions of gender, religion, class, and sexuality can be investigated and dissected, one must comprehend the primacy of the concept of masculinity in the American South. It is this singular concept that defines and shapes all the other aspects of southern culture that are herein under scrutiny. Masculinity cannot be separated from the ideas of gender, class, and religion for all of these intermingle to form southern society as it exists at the turn of the millennium.⁵ To challenge or question any one specific above-mentioned aspect immediately sends tremors through all the others as well. I have, up to this point, made reference to the fact that the men in Grimsley’s novel ascribe to a very static notion of masculinity, and more specifically to Southern notions of masculinity. It is probably wise to lay out these concepts for examination, in order to understand fully how both influence and affect so much of everyday life and how Rice chooses to write against these entrenched ideas. With these wide-reaching

concepts clarified, it will be far easier to later examine their all-encompassing influences on class, gender, and religion.

And yet, this counterculture that gay men invent and forge for themselves among the cobblestone streets is so static and unyielding that Grimsley himself seems consciously to make the world that Newell inhabits seem wholly unpleasant. It is “a new world, for sure” (Grimsley *Boulevard* 19), yet it is still a world that exists with a precise and inviolable notion of masculinity. At the root of everything in both of these novels, though it will be especially obvious through the male characters in Rice’s novel, is the concept of rigidly conforming to this above-established and unquestioned notion of masculinity. Angelia Wilson notes in *Below the Belt* that “while there is not a universal, essentialized ‘masculinity’ one can locate a normative concept of masculinity within a particular social context” (16). This is true of all elements of Southern society, for Grimsley and Rice’s novels both attest that southern men, both gay and straight, ascribe to very limiting and strongly defined notions of what it means to be a man within their specific social context. In these novels this means that the heterosexual, monogamous, conservative Christian men stand in stark contrast to the gay, promiscuous, liberal, and non-Christian gay men. Their identities seem dependent upon their ascribing to each and every one of the tenets mentioned in order for them to be considered true members of their social sphere, whether it be straight or gay. Thus, Newell’s (failed) and Stephen’s (successful) quests for monogamous gay relationships set them both apart from the heterosexual *and* the homosexual “normative concept of masculinity” found in New Orleans society.

As previously mentioned, this adherence to a static masculine ideal shapes and influences many other aspects of Southern culture, such as class, religion, and sexuality. These different aspects of Southern culture presented within Grimsley’s novel will be considered in relation to how Rice writes against both mainstream “heterosexual” society and the gay world presented in

Boulevard in his own novel *A Density of Souls*. It should be clearly stated that while the world that Grimsley describes as existing in New Orleans in the 1970s seems superficially liberating, it is by no means an ideal space. As Wilson further comments, “Frankly, the city ain’t always a harmonious place to live; different people often get unjustly ghettoized in different sections of town” (7). It is all the more disturbing when this ghettoization appears consciously self-imposed.

The world that Grimsley presents to his audience, while seemingly accurate and honest, is by no means a flattering view of gay life in the 1970s. Newell and his friends have simply replaced the heterosexual standard of behavior with a seemingly inviolable code of gay conduct which appears equally restrictive. If our focus shifts temporarily to consider Christopher Rice’s *A Density of Souls*, it is worth pointing out that there exists in both novels an almost perfectly identical scene on Bourbon Street where the gay and straight worlds intermingle, if only momentarily. In *Boulevard*, Newell describes it as “At a certain point on Bourbon Street the streets were no longer barricaded and the tourists no longer wandered, but there were still a lot of people walking on the street, nearly all of them men” (28). In Rice’s novel, the scene is described in the following way:

On most Saturday nights, unsuspecting male tourists would wander too far down Bourbon Street, past the crowded stretch of jazz clubs and strip bars where the music was either karaoke or belching rock. As the bass pulse of synthesized dance music wafted out of Sanctuary, the young men would quickly turn around, realizing what lay ahead, grabbing the hands of their girlfriends who would laughingly pull their boyfriends toward the bar on the excuse that it looked like fun. (113)

The otherness that seems so isolated and invisible in Grimsley's novel suddenly becomes, as Donna Smith commented, part of the local color of New Orleans, something of a conscious reality that exists side by side with all the other aspects of the giddy decadence of the French Quarter.

There is an enormous amount of gay visibility within *A Density of Souls* which seems to speak to the mainstreaming of gay culture in the 1990s. This visibility comes with a price, however, for the above-referenced bar, Sanctuary, will eventually be destroyed by a bomb resulting in the deaths of 71 men (Rice 178). When the announcement of the bombing is made on television and radio, various characters in the novel who have no contact with the gay community immediately recognize it as being a gay bar in the Vieux Carré (Rice 170). This is the incident of homophobia in the novel that has the greatest impact and effect on both the gay community of New Orleans as a whole, as well as on a personal level for Stephen Conlin whose first boyfriend, Jeff Haugh, dies in the blast (Rice 167). The invisibility that surrounded the characters in *Boulevard* and the world that they inhabited is no longer a politely ignored secret within Southern society.

The appearance of a vocal and identifiable gay community not only creates an alternative to heterosexuality, but also an alternative view of traditional masculinity and femininity for everyone, straight or gay. It is this refusal to conform to the traditional attributes and behaviors of the "southern belle" and the "southern gentleman" that causes so many of the problems faced by the gay and gay-friendly characters in Rice's novel, for, as the critic John Howard writes, "to upset notions of past sexualities has the potential to destabilize present ones" (*Men* 29). As these traditional ideals of male and female sexuality are so primary in supporting and justifying the accepted notions of class, gender and religion, to challenge and undermine these long-held

concepts of sexuality may well have a devastating effect on all other aspects of southern life. Those characters in Rice's novel who are sheltered and protected by these ideals, mostly everyone in the Garden District other than Stephen, Monica, and Jordan, do not want to see them questioned or dismantled.

If both gentlemen and ladies of privilege and wealth are held in their position of power (men through "sexual" power, women by "class" power) by these rather restrictive, Christian-influenced notions of appropriate gender behavior, then it would be expected that those people, both male and female, who do not conform to these ideas must be ostracized in order to stabilize the status quo. It is only through uniformity and unquestioning focus on maintaining these concepts that they can survive intact, for to question or examine them with a critical eye is the first step in beginning to doubt or challenge them. It is therefore unsurprising that those characters in Rice's novel who do begin to challenge these long-standing ideas of gender-appropriate behavior are "isolated for their insubordination" (Wilson 162). As will be shown, it requires only one person, Stephen Conlin, to defy this male-dominated hierarchical tradition. His challenge will effect an enormous amount of change in many characters' lives, including Jordan's and Meredith's, thus demonstrating the fear and apprehension about dissent and the quest for stability and stasis sought by the other parents and by Brandon Charbonnet who all enjoy their simple, privileged lives of financial and social ease.

The fear of disruptive change and progress is nicely, though probably unintentionally on her part, described by Brandon and Jordan Charbonnet's grandmother, Nanine, while on a social call to Monica Conlin's house. The visitor states that "the traditional landscape of our neighborhood (. . .) must be preserved. And that is a job best done by those who gained an appreciation for this neighborhood from the day of their birth" (Rice 75). It is apparent that Nanine is speaking of more than just the architecture; she means an entire way of life that exists

statically behind the “high wrought-iron fences beyond which Doric and Ionic columns held up the façades of Greek Revival mansions, their screened porches shrouded in a tangle of vines” (Rice 3). This way of life, however, is, like the houses that its adherents inhabit, an antiquated façade shrouded in mystery and rooted in tradition.

Having previously ascertained that heterosexual men subscribe to strict gender rules for reasons of status and of religion within southern society, it is curious to see that, in Grimsley’s presentation of gay life in the 1970s, the male characters mostly create their new counterculture identities in equally rigid ways. Grimsley comments in his essay “Myth and Reality” that in New Orleans at the time of *Boulevard* that

Most of the time we find the ones who are most like us . . . We rich sit down with the rich and we poor sit down with the poor. We men talk to the men and we women talk to the women . . . In the South, the social hierarchy has remained strong, and distinctions of every kind have kept one category of person from dealing with another. (231)

His perception certainly is reflected in his novel, where the social sphere that Newell moves within is almost exclusively comprised of young gay men obsessed with bar culture who slavishly adhere to the notion of the 70s clone.⁶ This image is nicely evoked when Grimsley describes the men that Newell sees in the Quarter, and he invariably describes images of “Young men in flannel shirts and tight jeans. In tight T-shirts with the sleeves cut away. Young men with beards, sideburns, moustaches, chest hair bristling out of their shirts . . . He had come to a new world, for sure” (19). This image perfectly mirrors the description of the gay clone given in the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Center’s *The Gay Almanac*, which details the

look as “a gay man of standardized appearance. In the 1970s, when “clone” was first used, the look included very short hair, a mustache, good muscle definition, a flannel shirt, and Levi’s” (84). While this certainly gives gay men an opportunity to identify one another easily, it also sets up an odd notion of how to be a “proper” gay man.

Furthermore, those characters who are gay who do not follow this prescribed model of masculinity suffer enormous social ostracism at the hands of the majority of their gay brothers. One of Newell’s friends in the novel, Henry, is so isolated that he only feels like a “fully engaged human being” when he is having anonymous sex in the backroom of a pornographic bookstore (*Boulevard* 244). Neither Henry, described as “flabby, pale, ..., with big eyes made bigger by makeup, a line along the eyelid and mascara, but he was a man, needing to shave” (*Boulevard* 75), nor Miss Sophia, the transsexual who cleans the bookstore, fit the clone image and are therefore cast aside by the majority of gay society, just as they are by mainstream, heterosexual society. The power of religion is certainly not lost on the latter character, for she states that it is “Fine to parade the streets in a dress but for mass she wore a suit, no wig, dark socks, a neatly tied silk tie, and a white starched shirt perfectly pressed . . . [for] Sunday was God’s day, when God’s eye was most watchful” (*Boulevard* 155-156). Her fears and concerns are mirrored in “Myth and Reality” when Grimsley admits that “I found myself terrified most of the time, awaiting the wrath of God. I had taken the lies about Jesus too far into my bones and smelled sin everywhere” (*Out* 233). Indeed, Miss Sophia seems to have never once made love to a man, for when she watches the handsome young men disappear into the booths at the bookstore she comments that she is “standing at the doorway studying what she had not yet reached to touch” (*Boulevard* 165). Apparently the wrath and watchful eye of God still remain an inescapable reality for some residents of the French Quarter who have, by all outward appearances, committed themselves to blurring sexual and gender boundaries.

The fact that at the end of the novel Newell is nearly murdered after a brutal sexual encounter with one of the clones, whose concept of gay love is something based solely on power and control, hearkens back to the southern notion of the man having all the sexual power in a relationship. Jack's treatment of Newell shows a disturbing willingness on the part of a gay man to adopt a dominant, hyper-masculine role that places the "man" in total control over someone else (here male rather than female) who is perceived to be weaker and therefore, somehow, inferior. The idea of male mastery should not be any less disturbing merely because it is being wielded over another man as opposed to a woman.

It is also unsettling that once Newell has fled back to Alabama, none of his friends in New Orleans seem overly concerned about his disappearance, calling into question the notion of a caring and supportive gay community within the Vieux Carré. Even Henry simply "cleaned Newell's room out, had Newell's phone turned off, drank himself silly afterward, never saying much about what he thought, and soon sickened and died of Kaposi's sarcoma, one of the earliest deaths from that disease in New Orleans" (280). Newell quickly fades from everyone's memory once he vanishes. Henry "fades" from a disease immediately recognizable to the reader as symptomatic of AIDS, yet it remains unnamed, for there is no concept in 1977 of the medical holocaust that approaches. This slow withering to nothingness gives the entirety of Grimsley's novel a feeling of transience where youth, love, sex, even life itself, are all fraught with danger and impermanence.

This sense of danger, fear, and defeat is far less obvious in *A Density of Souls*; indeed, the scene in the novel in which Stephen rather suddenly comes to terms with his sexuality is a passage filled with resilience and certainty. It is quite a long passage, but I will quote it in almost its entirety to show the degree of self-affirmation with which Rice imbues his protagonist.

Dread left Stephen. As he gazed up at Jordan Charbonnet, he felt a sudden quiet pass over his soul. (. . .) On that November day, Jordan Charbonnet stood before Stephen Conlin smiling with a pride that Stephen felt had been stolen from him. The purity of desire filled him for the first time with sustenance rather than envy. Jordan Charbonnet's beauty spoke to Stephen louder than the whispers of the three friends who had abandoned and branded him. And Stephen knew that a feeling so strong and so immediate could not be destroyed by the cruelty of others. His desire offered him promise. It would, he hoped, armor his soul, protecting the most vital parts of who he might someday be allowed to be. I must dream about you, Stephen thought, I must take you from this picture and place you firmly in my soul. (32)

Rice's willingness to allow a picture on a wall to be sufficient to inspire Stephen to withstand and endure the "cruelty of others" due to the "promise" and "sustaining" force of his desire demonstrates his protagonist's resiliency and independence. Stephen's acknowledgment of his sexual attraction to another man thereby supplies him with the inner strength needed to survive the taunts of his former friends.

This passage should not imply that Stephen's strong sense of fidelity to his sexual orientation will grant him an easy journey through the regimented world of a southern high school. His willingness to defy convention will make him the enemy of most of his classmates, especially those who are trying desperately to conform to the expected ideas of gender normativity. His old friends Greg Darby and Brandon Charbonnet viciously reject him under the logic that "Stephen was a fag; he broke the rules; he betrayed the world that they now lived in, and had never even apologized for doing it" (Rice 36). This undefined "world" that Stephen is

supposedly betraying could denote his wealthy neighborhood, the world of adult masculine power, or the South as a whole. It could easily be a combination of all three. The action of one person challenging or questioning the necessity of blind acceptance of the tenets of wealthy southern society is, as previously mentioned, sufficient to bring about harsh ostracism. If Stephen can question masculinity and defy it, then what is stopping others from also challenging both it and other stable notions of gender, religion, and class? The concept of possibility and free-thought seems to terrify those around Stephen rather than inspire them to do the same.

Stephen's most radical act is his willingness to live his life openly and proudly, thus permitting those around him to witness the possibility of existing and living beyond the prescribed tenets of Southern behavior. It is seemingly this decision to live openly and unashamedly that causes so much of the death and destruction that pervades the novel, yet, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that it is more the refusal of the South to grow and progress socially that is the root cause of the strife and sadness in *A Density of Souls*.

When the gay bar Sanctuary is blown up by a group of radical Christian fundamentalists called The Army of God, led by Brandon Charbonnet, the concepts of southern Christianity and southern masculinity come together in that instant and their combination proves to be a highly destructive force. If "Southern boys know what it means to be a man", and that ideal image is undoubtedly heterosexual, then being gay can be "[c]onstructed as behavior rather than identity, homosexuality is a sin, and homosexuals are the devil incarnate" (Wilson 3-4). Wilson further goes on to state that "[p]erceived as a choice, homosexuality as sin threatens the individual's soul as well as the collective values of Southern Christian society" (125). If being gay or lesbian can be reduced to a mere set of acts performed without emotion, rather than as an encompassing and fully-rounded identity, it is far easier to cast people aside as "other."

As will be seen in Julia Watts' novel in Chapter Three, religion can be a powerful and positive force in a young gay person's life, but in Rice's work it is mostly perceived as a force that can lead people astray through hatred and blind, unquestioning faith. This unwavering adherence to the standardized beliefs of what it means to be a man is what allows Brandon to corrupt religion into a justification for his own homophobia. Both Brandon and Greg's inability to challenge the expectations of what it means to be a man in the South at the turn of the millennium is what makes Stephen Conlin so threatening to them. Greg's latent homosexuality drives him to violence and death, thus prompting Brandon to set out on his quest to kill Stephen, for Brandon perceives him to have tempted and seduced Greg. Brandon does not realize that it is society's homophobia, rather than Stephen's affirmation of his own homosexuality, that has driven Greg to despair. It is Stephen's willingness to confront this homophobia and defy convention by coming out of the closet that gives him the power to survive, like the strength that he draws from his sexual attraction to Jordan Charbonnet's picture: his otherness gives him resilience.

As Meredith puts it, "Stephen got to keep [his individuality]. He paid the price. But no matter how hard Brandon and Greg tried to, and no matter how many times I stood back and let them, they couldn't kill that part of Stephen" (Rice 265). What is especially interesting in this novel is the way that Rice plays with the notions of sexual fluidity, which makes Greg and Brandon's mutual urge to "kill that part of Stephen" all the more disturbing to the reader: both Greg and Brandon are quite possibly homosexual or bisexual themselves.

While the adolescent fumbling that Greg, Brandon and Stephen share can simply be dismissed as adolescent experimentation and exploration, the violence with which Greg and Brandon later reject their past actions with Stephen seems to be rooted entirely in fear and sexual uncertainty. Greg and Brandon seem to wonder that if Stephen participated in those same sexual

activities, enjoyed them, and now considers himself a gay man, what does that say about them? Their perception of adolescent experimentation being representative of true sexual identity so threatens their sense of manhood that they both begin to engage in overt forms of hypermasculine behavior to compensate for their past explorations. In the realm of high school life the most flagrantly macho thing they can do to express and reinforce their heterosexuality is to join the football team, as Brandon's older brother Jordan did, and thereby create an image of the traditional masculine ideal.

What is fascinating about their quest for this masculine image is that Rice makes clear that what they seek is merely a mask to demonstrate their conformity. Their pursuit of athletics has little to do with either their aptitude or their personal enjoyment of the sport. Greg and Brandon merely desire the image of the football player and all the presumptions, especially heterosexuality, that society attaches to that figure. Wilson comments in her book on "the ease of invoking an image and the difficulty of living the reality" (16-17), which is precisely the problem that Greg and Brandon encounter when their internal insecurities and desires begin to conflict with the external image they have fashioned for themselves.

Rice writes of this disjuncture by permitting Greg's girlfriend, Meredith, who knows of her boyfriend's sexual explorations with Stephen, to comment on Greg and Brandon's newfound masculine image upon their joining the football team. She initially comments that their physical training "had made them men. Or at least look like what [she] thought men should be", but once their harassment of Stephen begins and Meredith realizes she's merely a human accessory to Greg's image, she perceives his sexual uncertainty as a "fucked-up madness that [he's] trying to coat with muscles" (Rice 14, 39).

Wilson goes on to comment that frequently the image that men try to adopt to affirm their masculinity often does not have any meaning beneath the image that they "invoke through

attitude” to represent themselves to society (27). This idea of “invoking” an image holds true for the football uniforms Brandon and Greg wear, for “[they] warmed the bench all year, neither of them having the necessary skill to move the ball with grace and panache” (Rice 41). Rice’s choice of words is unusual, for the use of grace and panache are not typically masculine words that one would immediately associate with football players.

It is also quite subversive that Rice makes Jordan Charbonnet, the iconic jock whom Brandon and Greg are trying desperately to emulate, very comfortable with the fluidity of his sexuality when he finds himself slowly falling in love with Stephen Conlin. Therefore, the “ideal Southern man”, in Rice’s novel at least, embraces both his true talents, athletic or otherwise, and his ability to experience his sexuality fearlessly. Also, Jordan’s previous relationships with women denote the potential for bisexuality, thus enabling Rice to explore different notions of non-heterosexuality within his novel. Neither Greg nor Brandon can perceive living a life not regimented by traditional southern notions of gender and sexuality, and this inability to embrace growth and the potential for change leads, in a roundabout way, to their deaths.

To push this notion of being trapped by traditional concepts of sexuality a little bit further, neither Brandon nor Greg seems able to connect with another man on anything more than a purely physical level. They seem to desire an emotional connection similar to the ones that Stephen forms with men in the novel, but won’t permit themselves to embrace either the homosocial or homoerotic aspects of their personalities. Both can only wrestle each other in public, masturbate together in private, or brawl with their teammates on the sidelines in seemingly “permissible” forms of male physical connection. When Greg attempts to be physically intimate with Brandon by kissing him, he is physically attacked by his friend and then, distraught by his actions, appears to commit suicide (Rice 235). When the critic John Howard

asks in *Men Like That* the question whether “nongenital romantic relations between men, such as kissing, [are]often more culpable than genital relations?” (*Men* 306), the answer certainly seems to be yes in *A Density of Souls*. The desperate desire to force unanimous adherence to the traditional concepts of heterosexuality and masculinity as defined by religion and social class has now led to violence and death.

Despite Greg’s life ending in violence and death, Rice seems far more interested in the notion that truly coming to terms with one’s homosexuality or bisexuality is something admirable and liberating. We have seen this in the way that Stephen draws strength from Jordan’s photograph. Brandon’s older brother, however, will also find himself questioning his sexuality when he himself catches sight of a picture of Stephen in an old high school yearbook. This experience also serves as a commentary on the curious mutability of sexuality:

Jordan had messed around with two guys in high school. Neither of them had looked like Stephen; both of them had been teammates, stocky and well-muscled. The shared blow jobs were drunken and almost utilitarian, defining Jordan’s opinion of sex between men as a natural but emotionless act. Boys like Stephen stood in contradiction to Jordan’s experience. Prettiness in males could lure a person into thinking sex between men was something other than simply letting off steam. (Rice 136)

The casualness with which Jordan recounts his same-sex experiences reveals him as someone who, though recently dating a woman at college (Rice 102), does not seem at all fazed by the growing attraction he feels towards Stephen. This attraction seems simply to grow and deepen into a romantic relationship defined by both physicality and emotion. It is this sensuality that

Brandon and Greg denied themselves for fear of risking their social position that becomes so apparent in the interaction between Jordan and Stephen. Their willingness to explore their relationship as simply two people in love who happen to both be male is enlightening. By granting Jordan the ability to fall in love with another man because of who Stephen is for reasons beyond simply his sex, such as his intellect and his kindness--by this means, Rice permits his protagonists to enter a queer space of "permanent becoming" (Jagose 131).

Indeed, Jordan never once tries to define himself in terms of an absolute position on the sexual spectrum. There is apparently no need, for Rice seems to perceive his characters as existing in a place that is slightly beyond simple explanation. To define Jordan's sexuality would be to take away from the complexity of sexuality, from the "sense of potentiality" that exists within Queer Theory (Jagose 2). Stephen and Jordan's physical and emotional connection, defying the traditional southern social norms of both heterosexual monogamy and gay promiscuity that permeate the society in which they live, is nicely defined by the quote from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* that both young men admire. It reads: "For passion, like crime, does not sit well with the sure order and even course of everyday life. It welcomes every loosening of the social fabric, every confusion and affliction visited upon the world, for passion sees in such disorder a vague hope of finding advantage for itself" (qtd. in Rice 198). The young lovers are thus willing to use their passion to "loosen" not only the social fabric of heterosexual society, but that of the gay world as well.

Their love does indeed have the potential in some small way to cause a positive "disorder" within the community in which they live, and this realization is powerful, though seemingly too powerful for either Brandon and Greg to contemplate. For them the comfort and stability of the status quo had a far more alluring appearance for it does not require free-thought,

risk, or the bravery to face ostracism and dissent. Jordan and Stephen are willing to be “freaks,” though, and this label is one that they seem to wear with a great deal of pride.

Jordan is first labeled a “freak” by an ex-girlfriend whom Jordan describes as someone who had “no trace of the Southern belle behavior he was used to” and he therefore considers her “the first real woman he had ever met” (Rice 102). Her own outsider status with relation to the South permits her to comment to her former boyfriend that “[f]reaks have a better vantage point from which to view the world . . . People who live outside society are the ones who can see how it works” (Rice 136). These thoughts are echoed by Allan Gurganus in R. Bruce Brasell’s essay “Greetings From Out Here” when he states the following:

One of the many advantages of being a gay person is precisely that you’re not so defined in terms of gender that you’re fearful of communicating across the boundary of gender. And if you have that other capacity, it gives you a kind of power. It’s a kind of passport. It lets you travel across boundaries and borders, and it encourages you, and it even insists that you identify with people who are unlike yourself. (166)

Jordan and Stephen’s (and Monica’s) position beyond society enables them to witness and challenge that which seems unjust and stifling around them. Their living their love openly and proudly is rebellion enough in a society as conservative as that of the Garden District.

The freedom that their gayness gives them permits them to evaluate the rules and mores with which they were raised and then adapt them in order to best suit their own personal experience as human beings. Examples of this adaptation would be that while Jordan does seem to be outwardly the ideal southern gentleman, he has no desire to be that, and willfully gives up

the position in New Orleans society that could be his if he were to play along and fulfill the role that is expected of him by his social sphere. The same can be said of Monica and Stephen, who seem content to exist without people like Nanine Charbonnet and their approval. It is their common desire to risk ostracism from everything that makes their lives safe and secure in order fully to experience life and love that makes these characters so engaging.

All the other characters in the novel can only look back to tradition and stability, despite the fact that these seem to be decaying and becoming increasingly useless in modern society. This sense of duty to the past is extremely powerful, though, for it does lead to Brandon and Greg's deaths. When Brandon returns at the end of the novel and tries to kill Stephen he screams that the latter is "a monster" and that his homosexuality is like a "snake" that he wanted to "bite [them] both (Greg and Brandon)" and that by killing Stephen he will "cleanse the earth" (Rice 255). Stephen, refusing to be cowed by this rather traditional and bigoted version of Christianity, retorts that "[t]he real monsters are the ones who think they see God" (Rice 255). Like the younger authors of the novels explored in the two subsequent chapters, Rice understands the true power to elicit progress lies in the ability to question and challenge traditional social conventions, whether this be with regards to sexuality, religion, or gender.

As Rice seems so excited about writing against the past and looking to the future for potential and possibility of social expansiveness, it is odd that he seems to include a character, Greg Darby, who commits suicide when he cannot deal with his homosexuality. By the end of the novel, however, it is revealed that Meredith Ducote comes upon Greg raping Stephen and it is she who kills Greg with his own gun (Rice 265). Though the fact that Greg brought a gun with him still suggests suicide, Jordan offers a different and far more interesting explanation. He tells Stephen "[y]ou had power over him. You suggested something else . . . this other world outside the boundaries of what he knew . . ." and then tells him that Stephen has done the same to him

(Rice 210-211). Jordan's interaction with Stephen has shown the former that loving another man truly is a viable alternative to the predictable, established life subscribed to by his parents, Elise and Roger Charbonnet.

The reason for which Greg would therefore have committed suicide would not merely arise from his sense of desperation and isolation, but from the fact that he lived in a society that was so regimented and unwavering in its tenets of appropriate behavior that he would feel powerless to confront and challenge them, even with someone like Stephen around who could exist as a friend and resource. The self-loathing is forced upon him by his Garden District surroundings. The society itself has so perfectly inculcated the resulting static image that Greg feels incapable of openly questioning or challenging its tenets. When he begins to realize that he cannot fulfill that image without forever repressing his sexuality, he is driven to violence and despair.

At the very end of the novel, Meredith writes to say goodbye to Stephen and states that "[t]here are some people in this world who are worth saving when other people decide they shine the wrong kind of light on the wrong kind of things. You have been and will always be my light in the darkness" (Rice 267). In a sense, she is stating the reality of the situation in which Stephen and Jordan both find themselves when they challenge the long-standing notions of the proper way to behave as a resident of the Garden District. By living their lives openly and freely, they both shine a light of potential and possibility on the decaying social norms that bind everyone else in the novel. To shed a revelatory light on the status quo and thereby call it into question is for the vast majority of wealthy southerners the "wrong kind of light," for it destabilizes everything that makes their superiority and moral certainty secure. They seem to look to their social sphere and to their churches to ensure stability, though they cannot see that these two traditional influences appear to be destroying their children in the process.

Angelia Wilson, who now lives in Manchester, England, writes that when looking back on her childhood and adolescence in the South she wonders if her life would have been simpler if she'd stayed in her small town and married a cowboy:

... I can't help wishing that life was that easy. That sexuality was that easy. But it isn't. And the responsibility of deluding men and women that it is -- that it should be, that if it isn't there is something wrong with you, sinful in you -- rests solidly on the shoulders of the Christian church . . . this responsibility is in the hands of a few conservative preachers, followed by millions, devoted to imposing such illusory gender norms. (48)

The randomly destructive force of not only established, conservative Christianity, but also the notions of gender normativity and sexual propriety implicated in such ideology all seem wholly deserving of having a light shone upon them, if only to permit those brave enough to challenge and question such ideology, and to perceive it in a new and potentially liberating light. Until more people like Stephen and Jordan openly reject the accepted tenets of normality, there will continue to be casualties like Greg and Brandon, victims of something far more complex and far-reaching than simple self-hatred. There has been progress since the days of Newell and Henry in *Boulevard*, but the body-count of Rice's novel shows that there is still more progress to be made, even in as free-wheeling a city once notoriously known as the Sodom of the South.

As both Poppy Z. Brite's *Drawing Blood* and Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.* deal with the challenging of traditional gender, social, and sexual norms in the rural sphere, it is, I believe, important to mention the two occasions that Rice leaves the urban sprawl of New Orleans as a bridge to the next two chapters. When Greg and Brandon's football team go to play a game in

Thibodaux, a small town in the bayou country of Louisiana, it is quickly dismissed as “your standard, hick bayou town” (Rice 105). The other occasion, more telling in regards to the issues of rural gay life that will arise in Brite and Watts’ novels, occurs when Brandon, on his way back to New Orleans to try to kill Stephen, stumbles across a man, Warner Doutrie, living alone in the swamp. Rice describes Warner catching sight of Brandon emerging from the bayou as follows:

The mud was moving. Warner Doutrie watched from the porch of his shack. He had built the house with his friend Earl, who’d been in his squadron in Vietnam Warner and Earl had shared a desire to live far down pitted roads, away from civilization. They were both Louisiana boys, from Lafourche Parish, south of New Orleans, assigned to the same platoon by coincidence. After the war, they had built the shack together. Earl had died two years earlier and until the day the strange half-naked body stumbled out of the swamp, Warner had lived alone. (234)

This image of a rural gay man and his now-deceased lover living “away from civilization” shows the reader a glimpse of what gay life may have been like in the rural areas outside of New Orleans for the quarter-century spanning both Grimsley and Rice’s novels (roughly 1972-1997). Though the reputation of the “Sodom of the South” would almost assuredly have been known to Warner and Earl, they nevertheless chose to live their lives quietly in the bayou, providing an alternative to the need for a centralized community to establish a gay relationship or identity. Their lives bear no resemblance to the gay characters found in either of the novels under examination in this chapter, yet their (Warner and Earl’s) quietly-lived lives are just, if not more, fascinating as examples of the gay experience in the contemporary South. Their relationship’s

rural locale makes it unusual but, as the remaining two chapters will show, its very existence reveals that gay and lesbian life can exist beyond the limits of large urban centres.

NOTES

5. Angelia Wilson examines contemporary straight and gay men of the rural South through personal interviews recorded while on a road trip across the South in Chapter 2 “Southern Born and Southern Bred” of her book *Below the Belt*. This chapter provides even more in-depth analysis of the power of class, gender roles, and religion on southern men at the turn of the millennium.

6. *The Gay Almanac* provides more details on the concept of the 70s (and 90s) clone with a quote from social commentator Michelangelo Signorile about the unifying “identity” of the image, as well as a short listing of the visual clues of the clone with regards to “hair, clothes, and accoutrements” (172-174).

Chapter Two:

“A Wander by the Creek”

“If you’re fishing for plain old bass, you don’t go
to an exotic pond, you go down to the creek.” (6)

This quote from Angelia Wilson’s *Below the Belt* comments on the fact that in order to understand the variety and reality of gay and lesbian life in the American South, one must learn to look beyond the large cities. These “exotic ponds” that are cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta support her assertion that “Southern cities attract all kinds of weird folk, even Yankees. They also harbour fugitives from rural morality” (Wilson 6). Yet, the experience of gay men and lesbians beyond the city limits of an urban metropolis is just as worthy of exploration; indeed, the dearth of writing about the rural gay experience in the South makes this exploration all the more challenging and enlightening.

Having examined the Nineties urban gay experience in *A Density of Souls*, it is interesting to see how two other Southern writers, Poppy Z. Brite in this chapter and Julia Watts in the next, write against the traditional notion of leaving the rural South to find acceptance and fulfillment solely in the anonymity of a large city. Theorist Gayle S. Rubin comments in her essay “Thinking Sex” that “[d]issident sexuality is rarer and more closely monitored in small towns and rural areas. Consequently, metropolitan life continually beckons to young perverts, [who become] sexual migrants . . . instead of being isolated and invisible in rural settings. . . .” (23-24, qtd. in Howard, *Men* xiii). This may be common or even expected behavior for young gays and lesbians of the rural South, but by focusing exclusively on the perceived Meccas of large cities, an entire sphere of experience is left invisible and silent. If the rural countryside is seen merely “as hinterland, as a geopolitical closet from which sexual migrants flee” (Howard,

Men xix), how can the lives of those men and women who never leave the rural space be properly explored and understood?

In this chapter, therefore, I propose to leave the “exotic ponds” and to take a wander “down to the creek” in order to investigate how Ms. Brite expresses her perceptions of gay life in the rural South in the 1990s. It must be made clear early on in this chapter that Poppy Brite’s views of rural life are not exclusively positive, for she does not ignore the narrow-mindedness and homophobia that can exist within a non-urban space. Her view of Missing Mile, North Carolina, where the majority of the novel unfolds, is one where a thriving “queer” subculture can and does exist amidst the tobacco fields of the Bible Belt. She takes her readers on a journey through Southern rurality, giving a glimpse of what can exist when people consciously choose to live their lives openly and unashamedly. Nevertheless, the journey that her main characters take is still just a wander down by the creek, for they do not remain in Missing Mile at the end of the novel; it is only in the next chapter, in Julia Watts’ *Finding H.F.*, that the main characters of a novel will return to live in a rural part of the American South.

Brite’s protagonists, Trevor and Zach, can be seen as witnesses to the small gay world that exists in Missing Mile as they both wander through the town over the course of approximately a week. Thus, in this novel you have the interaction of a bisexual man from a big city, Zach from New Orleans, with Trevor, a young drifter with “no sexual awareness at all” (Brite 166), and with the “queer” inhabitants of a small North Carolina town. Brite gives her audience an enlightening view of what happens when a non-heterosexual man from New Orleans encounters and experiences, if only briefly, gay life in rural North Carolina.

Although there is a scarcity of fiction on the rural gay and lesbian experience, there still exists some earlier novels whose themes and ideas Poppy Brite appears to be writing against. In the case of the gay male experience, which will be specifically explored in this chapter, the

novel that best represents the experience of one gay man who comes of age in the rural countryside of North Carolina is Jim Grimsley's *Comfort and Joy*. This novel is especially useful for comparing a novel by an older, established gay author with the work of a younger counterpart as both novels take place within the same small, south-central region of the state.⁷

Grimsley's *Comfort and Joy* is the continuation of the story of Danny Crell, whom the author introduced as a poverty-stricken and abused eight-year old in his novel *Winter Birds*.⁸ Danny is now 31, living in Atlanta, and entering cautiously into a relationship with a younger man still coming to terms with his homosexuality, Dr. Ford McKinney, who comes from a wealthy Savannah family. Their relationship is tested by both Ford's meddling family and the young pediatrician's struggle to question and challenge the traditional tenets of expected social behavior of upper-class Southern men. His background is set in stark contrast to Danny's family which lives on a cemetery in rural North Carolina, where Ford and Danny spend their first Christmas together as a couple. The concern and love that Ellen Burley (formerly Crell) demonstrates for her son focuses on his personal happiness and supersedes her need to play a prescribed social role simply for the image it displays to the rest of society. In the end, it is this support and affection that Ford witnesses that enables him to come out to his parents, though their reaction is to distance themselves immediately from their son and ignore his relationship with Danny. The novel ends with Danny and Ford at the latter's beach house hoping that the McKinneys will call and begin to heal the emotional rift with their son.

Grimsley refuses to give his audience a specific ending, preferring instead to let the reader form his or her own ultimate conclusion to the novel. As will be shown, though, Danny's rural youth and the urban life he leads as an adult are very disconnected from one another to such a degree that his rural past is a place that he is running away from both physically and emotionally. Danny is afraid to deal with his rurality even now that he has become an adult. As

Grimsley states in his essay "Myth and Reality", "We came to the city for shelter, for a place where we could escape our families, many of us" (*Out* 233). Grimsley's view of the necessity of abandoning the rural space to lead an openly gay life is mirrored in Danny's refusal to confront and address the pain he suffered as a child in North Carolina. By moving to Atlanta, he wishes to create a new life by leaving all aspects of rurality behind in the locales he frequented as a child, thereby permitting his past pain and suffering to remain unresolved. Even when he does return physically to his mother's house in North Carolina, he stays emotionally distant from his own history. This is seen in the passage in which he wanders down to his brother's grave and says, "I'm not going to talk to you. You're dead" (Grimsley, *Comfort* 178). Danny refuses to permit his painful past to influence his present life. This active denial of these past experiences, however, does indeed affect his relationship with his lover, for there is much left unsaid and unexplained about the rural life Danny lived before he met Ford.

Much of the dramatic flow of Brite's novel deals with Trevor's determination to confront his own painful history in order to free himself from it and thereby progress to a healthier, independent life with his lover, Zach. In this novel, the rural past must be understood, examined, and explored in order for Trevor to move beyond its power and influence, and live a happy and healthy life. This need to deal and confront the reality of one's past as well as the reality of living an openly gay life in the rural South are both concerns for Ms. Brite over the course of the novel. Seeing the tendency of older, established authors, such as Jim Grimsley, to send their gay characters away from their rural roots to find acceptance and anonymity in large cities, she aggressively challenges this by crafting a novel where running from the past is not a valid option.

In the rural space that she creates within the novel, she permits her characters and her readers to ponder the possibility of gay life in a small Southern town that appears on some levels

to be just as viable as life in a large city. In this imaginary town, Brite challenges the assumptions made about both the perceived repression of a small town and the expected freedom and openness of a large city such as New Orleans. Using the character of Zach and his experiences in New Orleans in the opening chapters of *Drawing Blood*, Brite is willing to question and expose the same notions of prescribed behaviour within the gay communities in large cities that Rice was commenting upon in *A Density of Souls*. For example, before he leaves New Orleans, Zach is all too willing to engage in one-night stands that always separate sex and affection from his own everyday life and thus make him emotionally isolated. This is true to such an extent that Brite writes that Zach never takes his lovers back to his “sanctuary of an apartment, [he] would not share his nest with his bimbos” (83-84). Soon after, while on his journey to Missing Mile, Zach stops along the way for an unexpected sexual encounter with a convenience store employee, Leaf, though Zach insists on being locked away in a windowless backroom away from the “unmerciful brightness” of the exterior world (97). This scene stands in direct opposition to one that appears quite late in the novel when Zach and Trevor “st[and] on the sidewalk [in Missing Mile] embracing in the hot afternoon” (263). Zach’s isolated, emotionless nighttime trysts in New Orleans have been replaced by a far more satisfying relationship with Trevor that unfolds both in public and in the daylight. Yet, Zach does not fully see the willing conformity of his rather emotionless urban encounters until he arrives in Missing Mile and finds himself removed from a thriving and established gay social world.

This is not to imply that living in a city with a large gay population is wholly detrimental or undesirable; indeed, Danny Crell finds happiness in Atlanta with Ford, but he is still haunted by the past he left behind in North Carolina. Grimsley’s novels show that gay men traditionally flee to large cities to escape the rural closet, but Brite seems far more interested in investigating those who never leave the small towns and farms of the Bible Belt. It is these people who

inhabit the pages of her novel, thereby bringing to life a new view of gay Southern life not addressed in Grimsley's fiction. She provides her readers with a view of what might have happened to men like Danny Crell had they never left North Carolina (or any other region of the rural South) for an urban area through her descriptions of the various inhabitants of Missing Mile.

Poppy Brite, writing against Grimsley's notion of the absolute necessity of leaving rural space in order to lead an openly gay lifestyle, unsurprisingly peoples *Drawing Blood's* fictional town with primarily gay and gay-friendly people. It is the tale of two young men, Trevor McGee and Zachary Bosch, who are both on the run from their pasts. Trevor, who was orphaned at five by the murder/suicide of his entire family at the hands of his father, has returned, twenty years later, to the town where the crimes took place to gain some insight into what led his father to kill the rest of his family and why his father left him alive. Zach is a computer hacker from New Orleans on the run from the Secret Service who are investigating his tendency of siphoning money from strangers' bank accounts. Trevor, now twenty-five, spent the previous twenty years as a ward of the state and as a drifter, while Zach, now nineteen, escaped parental physical and emotional abuse at the age of fourteen to survive alone on the streets of the Vieux Carré. They meet on the outskirts of Missing Mile, in the house where the murders in Trevor's family took place, and quickly fall in love. Their love is soon tested by issues of fidelity and their respective dark pasts. The need to confront their personal histories of pain and suffering at the hands of their respective parents is faced head-on, though, and the conclusion of the novel whisks them away to sunny Jamaica where they are free to invent a new life together. Unlike the uncertain conclusion of *Comfort and Joy*, in which Danny and Ford are left standing on a beach tentatively "hoping the phone would ring and a happy ending come" (Grimsley, *Comfort* 291), Brite is insistent upon giving her novel an unquestionably happy ending, even if it takes place outside the

rural South. It is important to point out here that the decision to flee the rural space is based entirely upon Zach's legal troubles rather than Zach and Trevor's inability to lead openly gay lives in a small town.

The notion of living as an openly gay couple in a small town is one that Grimsley and Brite approach in very different ways. Danny and Ford are always very conscious of themselves appearing as a couple when they are outside of Atlanta; indeed, Ford considers it quite a daring act when he requests a one-bedded room in a hotel outside of Raleigh, North Carolina, and then asks Danny, "Are you proud of me?" (*Comfort* 12). This is in stark contrast to Zach and Trevor sitting in the local diner in Missing Mile where Zach thinks nothing of "plant[ing] a warm, none-too-hasty kiss on Trevor's mouth" (Brite 281). The authors' divergence of opinion on this subject can be attributed initially to their simply belonging to two different generations and their respective comfort levels with public displays of affection. Upon closer examination, however, their difference of opinion can equally be attributed to their purpose for writing their novels. Grimsley is writing his book so that it reflects his experience as a gay man in the American South. In a 2001 "HERO" magazine interview he comments that his novels are "pretty directly autobiographical" and that his "first job as a writer" is "to draw a picture of my life" ("HERO" 57). He is therefore creating through his novels an accurate view of what his experience was as a gay man coming of age in the rural South during the mid-1970s and of his need to move to a large city in order to come to terms with his sexuality. In this sense, Jim Grimsley's need to flee to a big city is reflected in Danny Crell's journey to Atlanta. The author has no concept of what his life would have been like had he stayed in the rural space, and therefore seems content to reflect his experience in his fiction.

Poppy Brite, on the other hand, is less concerned with reflecting the South exactly as it is, but focuses rather upon life as it could be. Grimsley creates an obvious distance between the life

Danny once led in the country and the life he now leads in the city, as if the gay man he has become cannot exist in the rural space of his youth. Brite's insistence on making the physical and romantic aspect of Trevor and Zach's relationship a major focus of her novel, by using the kiss in the diner and by showing, as previously mentioned, how they frequently "[stand] on the sidewalk embracing in the hot afternoon" (Brite 263)--such incidents display to the reader Brite's willingness to place behaviour that Ford and Danny would only permit themselves to indulge in behind closed doors, even in a metropolis such as Atlanta, to take place in public on the main street of a small Southern town. It is undeniable that age and generation influence what the novelists permit their characters to experience within the pages of their books. But Poppy Brite is far more willing to challenge convention by placing displays of gay affection into a very public sphere. She is mixing what may be acceptable in an urban metropolis with a rural space and thereby altering the reality of the gay experience in the little town of Missing Mile. In a sense, Grimsley's novels can be seen as statically reflecting his own singular experience, rather than challenging, questioning, or rejecting the limitations imposed upon him and his generation by the heterosexual majority. Brite's willingness to challenge the conventions that restricted Grimsley, such as the fear of showing same-sex affection and the insistence upon the need to flee to a large city, and then to have this challenge take place in a small town, shows an insistence upon questioning and rejecting the rules that Grimsley's characters seem happy to live by in their cities.

While Danny and Ford seem content to work within certain social and societal boundaries of permitted behaviour, Brite frequently prefers to reject much of anything established or expected by setting her novel amidst "scrap[s] of bohemian [New Orleans] flotsam" who "[believe] in trying to undermine, subvert and chivvy away the vast American power structure in as many tiny ways as possible . . . or simply slip through the cracks and ignore

the system altogether” (Brite 224, 246). For her there is no kindly bargaining with established society with the hopes of progressive social change. There is instead simply rejection of that hierarchy. It is telling that Brite chooses “bohemian flotsam” from a large Southern city to question and challenge the social structure that exists both within those cities and the outlying rural areas. Unlike Christopher Rice’s characters, Zach is certainly not a member of the local ruling elite, and therefore has little invested in pleasing polite society.

His distance from established society is not surprising to the reader, but his willful separation from much of the gay community that exists within the French Quarter of New Orleans does come as somewhat of a surprising revelation. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Brite is willing to examine the strictures and tenets of the gay community within a large urban centre with the same critical eye that she later turns on certain aspects of the rural South. She is perfectly willing to present New Orleans’ gay village as a world rife with an obsession for sex, youth, drugs and beauty, a world that is but “a tawdry carnival” implying that the image and spectacle is more important and impressive than the reality (Brite 75). It is this dismissal of the gay bars and clubs in the Vieux Carré as a spectacle that permits her to examine life beyond the “carnival”. By questioning the freedom and liberty of the gay community in a city and perceiving it as place with both advantages and flaws, she allows the reader to follow her lead and consider the country as somewhat of a curious and unknown space potentially more worthy of exploration. If the urban gay community is thereby seen as a place of stasis existing within prescribed limits of beauty, youth, sex and drugs, then the queer community is not very “queer” at all, for it is then not a “site of becoming” that is forever growing, changing, and expanding (Jagose 131). It has become instead a place of stagnancy, where established rules dictate behaviour and isolate those who do not conform to the will of the majority. This is not very

detached from heterosexual society expecting or demanding that men and women become gentlemen and ladies or at least play the role.

The gay community certainly has permitted a challenging of traditional sexual and social mores, which inspires Zach to be open to the fluidity of his own sexuality and gives him the strength to carry that self-confidence with him to Missing Mile. At the same time, however, it also limits Zach in some ways by encouraging him to adapt himself entirely to the newly established limits of an urban gay experience as presented in Rice, Grimsley's *Boulevard*, and now *Drawing Blood*. It is only when Zach leaves New Orleans and wanders out into the rural South that he experiences a new and different way of being "queer" by defying both the social expectation of gay invisibility in a small town and the tenets of self-imposed isolation from heterosexual society and the promiscuity of established gay communities in large cities. It is this wholly personal notion of a gay identity that Brite is exploring when Trevor and Zach begin to fall in love in Missing Mile: they are completely free to explore their feelings and sexuality in Trevor's old house for it is a place belonging to neither the small town nor the big city. From this physically secluded house, the young lovers can exist in a sphere of relative freedom and independence while still remaining socially connected to the nearby freak subculture in Missing Mile. Their isolation is neither permanent nor in any way externally imposed, thus making it a far more ideal version of the "sanctuary" that Zach once thought he inhabited and possessed in New Orleans. The house on Violin Road is truly rural and undefined.

This potential for openness and possibility with which Brite endows this small town is not immediately embraced by Zach, however, for upon his arrival he still clings to widely held urban notions of the backwardness of rural life. As someone who openly embraces his non-heterosexuality, it is not surprising that Zach seems to agree with the notion that the critic John Howard puts forth in *Men Like That* when he writes that "the South--rural space

generally--functions as gay America's closet" (63). Just as some people have long considered New Orleans to be a sort of "Sodom of the South", thereby blindly thrusting blanket misconceptions onto urban life from their rural towns, so can the city-dwellers adhere to the all-encompassing stereotypes about the lives of people in the rural parts of the American South. Zach certainly does arrive in Missing Mile with these notions firmly in place and quickly begins to mock the townsfolk as "trigger-happy rednecks" and "Goddamn John-Wayne-loving John-Birch-worshipping good country people" (Brite 219, 228). He is so caught up in his preconceived notions of how people will react and behave that he initially is unable to approach people merely as human beings. As an example, when Trevor and Zach go shopping at the local thrift shop, Potter's Store, Zach immediately brands the owners and employees with an angry, "Hell these people weren't just Christians, they were probably Republicans" (Brite 228) thereby completely dismissing any possibility of their being socially progressive merely on the basis of their religious affiliation. This is a presumption that Julia Watts will take great delight in dismantling in *Finding H.F.*, in which gays and Christians do manage to find some common ground. Brite, however, keeps such quick judgments from the mouth and mind of Trevor McGee, who seems quite happy to make friends with nearly anyone in town, leading the more jaded Zach to comment that Trevor seems to be "the most weirdly socialized person he had ever met" (Brite 227) due to his guilelessness.

Brite is far more complimentary in her treatment of Trevor for his willingness to be open to anything and anyone who approaches him or catches his interest. His "weird socialization" has enabled him to escape the way that Zach initially looks down on the residents of Missing Mile due to his urban socialization. Zach is conscious of his being "other" and different in New Orleans in relation to the inhabitants of the city at large, yet he carries an odd sense of superiority with him to North Carolina and simply continues to stereotype people who do not

think or act like him when he arrives in the small town. What is especially telling about the novel, and thus part of Brite's project, is that she wholly defies her readers' expectations and makes the majority of the residents of Missing Mile completely supportive of Zach and Trevor's relationship.

Of all the male characters with whom Trevor and Zach interact, there is only one who Brite labels as heterosexual, Terry Buckett, when Zach comments that "Terry gave off the wrong kind of pheromones" (Brite 166). All the other male characters' sexualities are left mostly undefined, with the notable exception of Calvin, whose crush on Zach makes it highly likely that he is gay. It should be noted that none of the characters have any problems with Zach and Trevor's very physical relationship. There are two major examples of the general nonchalance that many townspeople feel regarding homosexuality that occur in the Missing Mile section of the novel. The first is when Kinsey tries to comfort Trevor when the young man first arrives in town to research his parents' deaths and comments that Trevor might think he "was hitting on him, but that was just too bad" (Brite 67-68), thus demonstrating Kinsey to be completely untroubled by the idea that Trevor might doubt the local man's heterosexuality. The other instance occurs when the men at the local bar, who are all aware of Zach and Trevor's blossoming relationship, band together to tell Calvin to stay away from Zach with a scolding "You leave him alone" (Brite 257). They are therefore not only accepting and open to a romantic relationship between two young men, but are actually fiercely protective of it at the same time.

This is not to say that everyone in the town would be equally approving of a passionate gay romance going on in Missing Mile, though homophobia only appears once very briefly in the unfolding of the novel. One night after dinner at Terry's, Zach and Trevor encounter a "pick-up or a four wheel drive" filled with "hairy limbs and big bullish heads with John Deere or Red

Man caps pulled down over their brow ridge. ‘FUCKIN’ QUAAAAAARES,’ they heard. . . . The truck was already disappearing over the next hill” (Brite 233). The notion of violent homophobia seems distant and unthreatening, simply the drunken words of ignorant rednecks who never reappear and seem to intrude only momentarily on the narrative of the book. This experience, though, is in no way distinctly rural, for the very same thing could happen to anyone walking along a downtown street in Atlanta or New Orleans on any given night. Terry, while openly supportive of Trevor and Zach’s romance, nevertheless thinks to himself while driving through the shuttered downtown on a rainy Sunday morning that “Freak subculture or not, Missing Mile was still in the heart of the Bible Belt. The thought of his lambs being able to buy a tube of toothpaste or get a cup of coffee on a Sunday was surely a terrible affront to the Lord” (Brite 134). Terry is thus well-aware that the open-mindedness that pervades the town of Missing Mile is probably not representative of many small, southern towns. Conservative Christianity, though rarely seen or mentioned in Brite’s novel, is still an undeniably powerful and ever-present force in the daily life of the South, as represented by the closed stores in the downtown.

The power of religion as a potentially negative force has been discussed in relation to Rice’s *A Density of Souls* and will be examined in much greater detail as a positive force in *Finding H.F.*, but I feel it is important to mention the impact of religion in both *Comfort and Joy* and *Drawing Blood*. Grimsley never mentions religion in relation to Ford and Danny’s relationship while they are in Atlanta, but when the couple arrives back in North Carolina for Christmas, there is one instance of mild homophobia connected to religion. Immediately following Christmas dinner when both Danny and Ford are out of earshot, Danny’s sister-in-law Cherise implies that Ford isn’t really part of “the family” and comments on Ford and Danny’s relationship with a curt, “Well, it’s not in the Bible”, which Danny’s mother dismisses as merely

a “slight irritation” (*Comfort* 176-177). Danny and Ford seem to eliminate religion from their urban lives, while the polite tolerance and disapproval that is directed towards them during their visit to the rural space is presented as something that must be endured due to the locality. Grimsley thus never allows Danny to confront his relatives and challenge their religious convictions, preferring to let Ellen Crell comment on these particular opinions as “beyond anyone’s control, as far as she could see” (Grimsley, *Comfort* 177). This willingness to be politely tolerated by conservative Christianity is not something that neither Brite nor her characters is willing quietly to endure in either the rural or the urban sphere.

Zach’s childhood experience with a Catholic priest who refuses to help him avoid the abuse he suffers at the hands of his parents, telling the battered boy “If they punish you, it is because you have sinned” (Brite 40), causes Zach to reject organized religion and belittle it, as seen in his John Birch comment earlier in this chapter, and at every opportunity throughout the novel. Yet, for all of Zach’s vitriolic outbursts at the power that religion wields over the lives of people in the rural South, the most memorable testament in the novel to the influence of the church over an individual belongs to a character, Mr. Henry, who takes up less than two pages in the narrative. He is an elderly man who witnesses the “warm, none-too-hasty kiss” that Zach gives Trevor in the diner. Brite writes:

. . . that kiss reminded [Mr. Henry] of a summer’s day he had hardly let himself think of in seventy years . . . a local boy he had met on the beach, his own age, twelve or thirteen. (. . .) Far from the ordinary fare of school and families, they became what they wanted to be; they were unimaginably exotic to each other. They were only lying in the sand embracing when his father found them. But his father had been a deacon of the Baptist church, a self-styled Old Testament

patriarch who, finding himself trapped in the immoral whirlwind of the early twentieth century, had become a domestic tyrant. His father had beat him so badly he could not walk for five days, could not stand upright for a week. And his father had told him that he never deserved to stand upright, for he was no man. Mr. Henry had been believing that for seventy years. But seeing the two beautiful boys' lips meet and the tips of their tongues press quickly together reminded him how sweet it had been to kiss the briny mouth of that golden-skinned creature in the dunes, though he knew if his father had caught them kissing he would have killed them both. Now they could do it in public if they wanted to, with the nonchalance of any young couple in love. He wished he had been born in such a time, or had been brave enough to make such a time come. (Brite 282)

By introducing the character of Mr. Henry into the novel, Brite contemplates the life of a gay man who came of age in the early 1920s, more than half a century before Danny/Jim Grimsley ever set foot in Atlanta. It is obvious that Mr. Henry would not have had the gay resources to fall back upon that Zach and Trevor now enjoy in the mid-1990s, but their experiences are highly similar. This experience of yearning for connection with another human being has not changed in those seventy years that separate the two meetings. The only difference is that in those seven decades gays and lesbians have struggled so that Zach and Trevor can kiss in a diner in a small Southern town. Brite is also very clear that Mr. Henry was not one of the people who was part of this struggle for change, though she hints that had he only seen two men kissing, he might not have believed his father's words for the entirety of his adult life.

The world, both urban and rural, has changed too slowly for Mr. Henry to truly benefit from it, but this does not make him any less gay. His life is yet another example of a part of the

gay community whose existence is ignored and silenced even more so than that of people like Calvin in towns like Missing Mile. If Alex Haley reports that New Orleans was known as “Sodom of the South” as far back as the Civil War, then surely it would have been known as such in the 1920s in the time of such an “immoral whirlwind”.

In a sense, Mr. Henry’s isolation is rooted not solely in religion, but also in the isolation that would have existed in the rural South when he was young. His story seems tragic in relation to the giddy happiness that Zach and Trevor experience, but it does not in anyway lessen the impact and honesty that Brite brings to her representation of gay man who came of age in the rural space during the 1920s. Certainly the insistence and desire of conservative Christianity for “the state to paternalistically protect them from the complexities of the world” (Wilson 159) is irksome to Brite, for this isolates a group of people from the broad spectrum of humanity that exists to be explored and experienced. Though it is the Baptist patriarch who initially squelches his son’s burgeoning sexuality, it is equally the isolation that Mr. Henry feels from his own rural community where he apparently felt unprepared to be the first person to speak out independently against the status quo of compulsory heterosexuality. If he had known or met someone else in his town, or had even run away to New Orleans, his life might have been very different from the “chaste” existence he led in Missing Mile (Brite 281). In that era, his only viable option may well have been to flee to a big city. But Brite, however, shows through her novel that this is no longer the only option available to people who are “brave enough to make such a time come” (Brite 282). Zach and Trevor are brave enough to do so and are therefore rewarded by Brite with love and companionship.

Strangely, when Trevor acknowledges Mr. Henry with “a polite but sardonic nod as [Trevor] left the diner. To his surprise, the old man smiled and nodded back” (Brite 283). That sardonic nod is the one time that Trevor behaves in an impolite manner toward a stranger, for he

does not realize the reason why the elderly man has been staring so fixedly at him and Zach. Trevor has no idea that he has so deeply affected the man through the simple act of a kiss bestowed in a rural diner. It leaves the reader to ponder at both how easily gay men can miss each other under such circumstances of non-recognition in a rural sphere, as well as how a simple public display of affection within the rural sphere could possibly alter the entire course of someone's life.

As alluded to before, Poppy Z. Brite has no qualms about giving her novel a happily romantic ending. The potential and possibility that exists between Trevor and Zach is limited only by their own imagination and creativity. One of the author's most decidedly "queer" notions is her decision to place her two main characters in a homosexual relationship, and yet never once utter the word "gay" in relation to them or to their behaviour. Indeed, no resident of Missing Mile ever utters the word "gay" anywhere in the novel, despite the open relationship that is being pursued before them. The only time the word "gay" appears happens when Zach's best friend, Edwina, comments that Zach doesn't love her, even though "it wasn't as if Zach were celibate or gay, either" (Brite 83). The author continues this tendency of refusing to label her characters' sexuality when Trevor and Zach make love for the first time and Trevor never expresses anything but curiosity and amazement at the experience. He thinks to himself "'I don't mind being in bed with you,' . . . not really wanting Zach to hear it but perversely hoping he would. 'I don't mind being this close to you. I don't seem to mind at all'" (Brite 201). Through his interaction with Zach, Trevor seems to rediscover the possibility of life beyond the confines of his past, a life that slowly becomes filled with curiosity and the potential for the unknown and the unexplored beyond traditional limits and expectations. As Zach succinctly puts it, "Fuck *supposed to*. You make it up as you go along" (Brite 189, original emphasis). Indeed, Zach's influence on Trevor saves him from being haunted forever by his past in contrast

to Danny Crell in *Comfort and Joy*. The former's willingness to inhabit, if only temporarily, a rural space in order to confront and acknowledge the pain and suffering in his past permits him to enter into a place where his rural youth is explored in order to come to terms with his own history. This is something that Danny Crell never does, and he is therefore both physically removed *from* and emotionally tied *to* his former rural experience.

Zach inspires Trevor to consider a concept of living in a world that Brite defines as "supranatural": "outside the boundaries of most experience, but possible in a place where no boundaries are drawn" (Brite 143). This idea of the supranatural extends to the young men's sexual identities, and these can be better understood by delving into Queer Theory. In doing so, we find that Trevor's sexuality becomes something that does not have to be defined or labeled by anyone or even by Trevor himself, should he choose to do so. Zach's bisexuality can be viewed, as explained by Jan Clausen in her essay "My Interesting Condition", as "not a sexual identity at all, but a sort of anti-identity, a refusal (not, of course, conscious) to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving" (qtd. in Jagose 69). When Zach is in New Orleans at the beginning of the novel, he is highly influenced by the behaviour of the gay and bisexual men around him, and tries his best to emulate those "boys sweating in brazenly tight leather" (Brite 75) and therefore lets his sexual identity and personal needs be influenced by those around him. It is only when he arrives in the rural space of Missing Mile, a place with a far less predetermined or prescribed set of rules for gay men, that Zach questions his former "one way of loving" (qtd. in Jagose 69). If his bisexuality is truly a liberating and indefinable, then Zach should not allow himself to be constrained by permitting other people (whether individual lovers or the gay community as a whole) to define his sexual behaviour. His emotional and physical expressions of love should, if he is truly free of societal confines, therefore only be deemed appropriate or acceptable on a personal and individual level defined only by Zach himself.

In this sense, Zach truly loves Trevor for who he is as a human being with personal needs, interests, desires, and complexities rather than for what he is simply with regards to his sex. It is a relationship based on potential where nothing is forbidden and everything seems possible. They have the choice to create themselves and their relationship however they wish without having to answer to anyone's expectations but their own. If they wish to live in a world where two men can embrace on the main street of a small Southern town, then by actually embracing they do indeed live in such a world. "The realization was [for Trevor] like seeing infinity suddenly unfold before his eyes. . . . A million possibilities, and more branching out from each of those. He could leave this house and never see it again, and he would still be alive. And it was by his own hand: he had chosen to be with Zach. . . . It was up to him" (Brite 363).

The idea of these two young men living in a supranatural world of infinite possibilities continues all the way to the end of the text. Just as Trevor and Zach are about to leave Missing Mile, Zach explains his relationship with Trevor to his friend Eddy as "I just found the right person" (Brite 389), thus succinctly describing a love that transcends gender and embraces the full spectrum of human sexuality. Brite leaves the reader beside Zach and Trevor's bedside in Jamaica where Trevor realizes that "he could not be grateful to [his father] for leaving him alive. But he could be glad that he had not died in that house, with all those possibilities untapped, sights unseen, ideas unexplored. He could make that choice. He had made that choice. . . . Zach had shown him that anything was possible" (Brite 403).

Zach's bisexuality and his view of the world as a place of limitless possibilities, both sexually and otherwise, also permits him to reexamine his perception of his own sexuality and the fulfillment he now derives from it. One of the most unusual shifts that takes place in *Drawing Blood* is Zach's rapid transition from a promiscuous lifestyle to a monogamous one once he meets Trevor. The fact that the urban couple, Danny and Ford, and the rural couple,

Zach and Trevor, both end up in traditionally monogamous relationships seems to initially suggest that Poppy Brite is merely falling in line with her older counterpart Jim Grimsley with regards to sexual morality. John Howard writes in *Men Like That* that over time many gay Southerners have “clung to a belief in monogamy and to the values of a committed long-term relationship with a single life partner” (109). While this does not seem particularly shocking in the work of an older, established gay author such as Grimsley, it is unexpected flowing from the pen of Brite, who usually has no time for traditional notions of sexual behaviour and “the easy judgments of conventional morality” (Steele, “OUT” 50).

Grimsley’s characters coming from both a rural North Carolina hamlet and a small, coastal city would be expected by the reader to adhere to these traditional notions of monogamy, but the “weirdly socialized” Trevor and defiantly “queer” Zach would probably be expected to challenge and reject this notion as being too restrictive and antiquated. Indeed, when Brite first introduces her readers to Zach, he considers sex “a biological need on the order of going to the bathroom: you didn’t form an emotional bond with every toilet you took a crap in, and when you’re done, you flushed and walked away--feeling better, to be sure, but not really thinking about what you’d just done” (Brite 84). His opinion remains unchanged as he flees across the rural South and has near-anonymous sex with Leaf in the convenience store stockroom, an act which he dubs “the perfect relationship” (Brite 98).

Once Zach arrives in Missing Mile and meets Trevor, though, he begins to question the inviolable line he’s drawn between love and sex. He “suddenly . . . found himself wondering . . . if it mightn’t be possible after all to love someone and make love with them too [and he wondered] why he had always denied himself the physical pleasure of a person he truly cared for” (Brite 169). Once Trevor and he make love and move in together, Zach finds himself

sexually pursued by Calvin, which he finds initially flattering. When Calvin aggressively kisses him, though, Zach realizes that

when [he and Trevor] made love [Zach's] perceptions intensified and his consciousness seemed to expand. Before, fucking had always been like slamming a door on the world. With Trevor it was like opening a thousand doors. And that meant that he wasn't getting anything here that he couldn't get a thousand times better at home. . . . [H]e broke the kiss and pushed Calvin away. (Brite 299-300)

By pushing Calvin away and actively choosing Trevor's growing love over casual sex, Zach nevertheless challenges social expectations. By pursuing a monogamous relationship with Trevor he is actually rejecting all the urban notions that he once had about sex and love. Moving back for a moment to Clausen's previously-mentioned quote about "the refusal to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving" and the notion of "infinite possibilities", it must be stressed that monogamy is only of these infinite possibilities open to Zach and Trevor. It seems that "one object of desire" is best understood if it is taken to mean love that transcends sex or gender rather than necessarily limiting people exclusively to monogamy. It is in Missing Mile, away from the sway and influence of an established gay community that Zach truly rejects convention. While living in the Vieux Carré and being promiscuous like most of the people around him, he was adhering to the tenets and expectations of a faction of the urban gay community. It is only by wandering down by the creek that he becomes transgressive and challenges his own long-held notions about sex and love.

Zach and Trevor's meeting in a small town in rural North Carolina, the heart of the Bible Belt, shows that non-traditional love can thrive and survive beyond big cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta. It is true that neither Grimsley nor Brite's protagonists remain in the rural space at the end of the novel. Ford and Danny choose to live in Atlanta, far away from their much smaller hometowns; Trevor and Zach leave the United States for Jamaica, though, as mentioned earlier, their decision to do so is based on fleeing the law rather than fleeing prejudice or homophobia. Grimsley appears unwilling to contemplate the possibility of an openly gay couple in a small town, while Brite focuses on the need to find a space of peace and happiness in which to foster a community of friendship, love, and commitment. This does not have to be rural, but it is not necessarily urban either. Though Trevor and Zach leave Missing Mile, Kinsey, Calvin, and the whole freak subculture still remain strong and independent. Their openness and acceptance makes promise that no one else in Missing Mile has to end up ashamed and isolated like Mr. Henry.

This wander by the creek bridges the gap between the nearly exclusively urban *A Density of Souls* and the heavily rural *Finding H.F.* by permitting a queer inhabitant of a large Southern metropolis to experience various aspects of rural gay life. This voyage will be undertaken in reverse as we are about to see in Watts' novel, when a young lesbian and her gay best friend from a rural Kentucky town experience various aspects of urban gay life in Atlanta.

NOTES

7. It is curious to note that both of these novels, *Comfort and Joy* and *Drawing Blood*, take place in an area of the United States Bible Belt known as the Faerie Belt that "runs along

the 36th parallel from Virginia's Tidewater area, through North Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas, as far west as Taos, New Mexico.' [Barry Yeoman, "Faerie Culture," *Southern Exposure* 16, 3, (1988): 34] Along that latitude lie dozens of pagan sanctuaries . . . and lesbian separatist land cooperatives. Without doubt, the South is a very queer region in which extremes can coexist" (Law, *Out* 2). It is unclear whether either novelist was aware of the presence of this second Belt within the Bible Belt, though Brite's fictional Missing Mile, North Carolina, and its residents certainly seem to reflect the quirky tolerance of its supposedly queer location.

8. The other novel by Jim Grimsley (see #4 in Introduction) not examined in this chapter, *Winter Birds*, tells the story of the abusive childhood of Danny Crell as he first begins to experience homoerotic feelings and fantasies. Much of the mystery surrounding Danny's history in rural North Carolina in *Comfort and Joy* is explained in the unfolding of the plot of this earlier novel.

Chapter Three:

“The Promise of a Rainbow”

In the previous two chapters the novels examined have explored the journeys of young gay men from the South as they come to terms with their non-heterosexuality. Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.*, the focus novel for this chapter, follows a similar journey from a female perspective with the story of a teenager coming to terms with her romantic and sexual feelings for a beautiful female classmate. The book is, however, more than just the tale of the sexual awakening of the main character Heavenly Faith (H.F.) Simms; it is also the story of how a young lesbian and her gay best friend, Bo (Beauregard), adapt what they've learned about gay and lesbian life during a road trip to Atlanta to their everyday lives back in rural Kentucky. Whereas in the previous two chapters the terms "rural" and "urban" seemed mutually exclusive, Watts intends to bring these two formerly separate spheres together over the course of her novel. H.F. and Bo's experiences force them to question established southern notions of sexuality, religion, and family in both the urban and rural spheres⁹

What is of special interest to this queer project is the fact that H.F. returns to her small town at the end of the novel rather than remaining in Atlanta with its large, established lesbian and gay community. Unlike the protagonists found in Grimsley, Rice, and Brite, who either remain in large cities or reject and flee the small towns where they first became aware of their sexuality, Watts brings her characters *back* to Morgan, Kentucky, once they've acquired a sense of pride and empowerment from their visit to Atlanta. This notion of a small-town lesbian building a supportive circle of friends and family in a rural space is a complete departure from the presentation of rural lesbians in the fiction of Dorothy Allison and Jim Grimsley.

If Watts' novel can be seen as a witty snapshot of a young, rural lesbian coming of age at the beginning of the twenty-first century, then it is not at all difficult to accept Allison and Grimsley's views of lesbian life as closely reflective of what they both witnessed growing up in

the 1950s in the Carolinas. When Grimsley ponders his southern childhood in his essay “Myth and Reality” he writes that

Every family, at least of a certain class, has its story of Aunt Edna who lived forty years with that woman Miss Jane, because they were real good friends, in a little house in some town that had once seemed large, the women growing old together raising tomatoes and collards, one of them working as a schoolteacher, maybe, or in the library, or taking in washing, or cleaning somebody’s house. . . . Or that Elizabeth, Becky’s oldest girl, she’s a hard one alright, plays ball better than her brothers and runs like a little locomotive; she broke her cousin’s nose when he called her a girl. She’ll learn though, when she gets older and develops. She’ll learn that men don’t like it when a woman is tough like that. (*Out* 232)

Grimsley and Allison seem content to allow their lesbian characters to simply become like Aunt Edna and Miss Jane, living quietly and unobtrusively beyond polite society. Grimsley’s belief that Becky will soon “learn” through her interactions with men how she is expected to behave is not reflected in Watts’ fiction. As will be shown, H.F. is still well-aware of the gender expectations that are thrust upon her by the members of her small Kentucky community, but is nevertheless confident and self-assured enough to withstand the pressure to conform and “learn” her place. Her journey is neither one of repression nor of adaptation to the preconceived notions of others regarding sexuality or gender expression. H.F. is perfectly content to undermine and question the notion of the perfect “Southern Belle” while at the same time showing herself to be an intelligent and independent woman.

While the two previous chapters have focused on comparisons mainly between Grimsley and novels by younger, contemporary authors, for this chapter I propose to set Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.* specifically in contrast with two other well-established gay novels: Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Grimsley's *My Drowning*. While this may seem initially to be a large undertaking, it is important to stress that my decision to compare Watts' novel with two others is based on the fact that Grimsley and Allison's lesbian characters all occupy rather small-yet-pivotal supporting roles in the plots of their novels. The characters from these books are similarly depicted so that it is easy to consider them together while setting them in opposition to the journey undertaken by Heavenly Faith in Watts' novel.

In a sense, Julia Watts is using her novel to do what Carolyn Leste Law proposes in her introduction to *Out in the South*: the need to underscore the work to bridge the gap between the rural and urban gay worlds that exist in the American South. "In that work we learn that it is possible to be out in the South, to talk back to the good-book-style hatred and institutions that abhor gay men and lesbians, and ... to find others . . . who also love and struggle with their southern roots" (6). In order to understand how Julia Watts goes about defying and challenging the notions presented by Grimsley and Allison, it is important to give a description of both novels and explain how the lesbian characters fit into the progress and outcome of each of the respective plots. Considering that Allison writes in her book *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* that "In the world as I remade it, nothing was forbidden; everything was possible" (2), in *Bastard out of Carolina*, it is the lone lesbian character, Aunt Raylene, who eventually becomes the ideal maternal figure in the text, but is nevertheless emotionally and physically isolated from both her family and her community. It is possible to live as a lesbian in the rural South, Allison would appear to be saying in this novel, but there are certain rules of silence and detachment that must be observed in order to exist within this social space. As will be seen in Watts' novel,

H.F. will not accept this silence and detachment in order to live her life in rural Kentucky. She will transcend and expand the small queer space that Aunt Raylene occupies in Allison's novel.

Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* tells the tale of a young girl, Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright, who endures horrible sexual abuse at the hands of her step-father, Daddy Glen, which her mother, Anney, chooses to tolerate quietly rather than face life without a husband in rural Greenville County, South Carolina. Throughout all the abuse, though, there is always the familiar presence of Aunt Raylene to comfort and care for niece Bone over the course of the novel. Raylene is in many ways the warm, maternal figure that her sister, Anney, seems incapable of being to her own child. Aunt Raylene "had always lived out past the city limits" and Bone comments in the novel that "Raylene had always been different from her sisters; she was quieter, more private, living alone with her dogs and fishing lines, and seemingly happy that way" (*Bastard* 178).

Laura Milner comments in her essay "From Southern Baptist Belle to Butch (and Beyond)" that "Raylene's stability and success in taking care of herself and her family provide a much-needed positive role model for Bone and for southern lesbians who want to be 'good' but cannot fit the belle-shaped mold society has cut for [them]" (*Out* 198). This need to be 'good' while "living alone" and being "quiet" and "private," to use the words that Bone attributes to her aunt, appears to be a willing self-denial of love and affection in order to maintain both familial and societal stability. While her attachment to her family is admirable and helpful to others, there is still the sense that Raylene is actively participating in her own exclusion from the society that surrounds her. She does not slavishly pursue the image of the Southern Belle, preferring instead to have worked at "the mill [for] twenty years, [keeping] her gray hair cut short, and [wearing] trousers as often as skirts" (*Bastard* 179). Despite this refusal to recreate herself in the

image of the Southern Belle, Raylene still all-too-readily accepts her liminal position within both her family and Greenville County. Oddly, her insistence on being “good” by remaining isolated and invisible is at the same time both detrimental to Raylene and helpful to Bone and her family.

Indeed, Raylene confesses to Bone at the very end of the novel that while working at a carnival away from Greenville County she once had a relationship with a married woman and that she made this woman “choose between her baby and her lover I made the woman I loved choose. She stayed with her baby, and I came back here alone. It never should have come to that. It never should. It just about killed her. It just about killed me” (*Bastard* 300). Raylene therefore becomes someone who returns to her small town and becomes an all-around care-giver to her extended family at the cost of her own isolation and loneliness. While this may be beneficial to her family, and to Bone in particular, it comes at an enormous personal cost to Raylene. While Bone may be inspired by her aunt to remain independent and free from a marriage to a man like Daddy Glen, it seems to the reader as if the aunt must remain alone in order to foster this sense of self-reliance in her niece. Were Raylene to have a lover, she may be shunned by the rest of her family who politely tolerate her solitary eccentricity, thus potentially removing Raylene from a position where she can positively influence her niece. Indeed, the final three lines of the novel speak to Bone’s identification with her lesbian aunt Raylene as a sort of surrogate mother now that her mother has left South Carolina to follow Daddy Glen to “California. . . Or Florida, maybe” (*Bastard* 308):

When Raylene came to me, I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love. I was who I was going to be, someone like her, . . . , a Boatwright woman. I wrapped my fingers in Raylene’s and watched the night close in around us.” (309)

Thus, Raylene's stability and security permit Bone to see the kind of woman she herself can become, due to the fact that the young girl can now trust someone to love and protect her. Raylene also permits Bone to glimpse the potential for a life that transcends the strict social boundaries of sexual identity as well as the actual physical boundaries of Greenville County, South Carolina.

Raylene's admission of her relationship with another woman and of how her career in the carnival was made possible by her ability to pass as a man (*Bastard* 179) shows her willingness to temporarily blur and challenge both sexual and gender norms in the rural South. Her real role, however, seems to be that of a woman who shows Bone that there is the possibility of a better life than that of her mother and her other aunts who seem to suffer silently and dutifully in a futile attempt to embody the notion of a Southern Belle. One of Bone's other aunts, Carr, "wanted to be beautiful so much it made her mean. She used to talk so awful about Raylene it was a shame, insisting that Raylene had to learn to use makeup and fix her hair, start working on getting herself a man" (*Bastard* 88-89). This statement nicely shows the importance that many southern women place on beauty and marriage, rather than intellect and independence, in order to give themselves both social stature and an identity.

Raylene will have none of this. In fact, she tells Bone, "I am so tired of people whining about what might happen to them, never taking no chances or doing anything new. I'm glad you an't gonna be like that, Bone. I'm counting on you to get out there and do things, girl. Make people nervous and make your old aunt glad" (*Bastard* 182). She is the stable maternal core that Bone needs to survive her horrific childhood, yet this role of surrogate mother still leaves Raylene single and isolated. It is as if she will inspire Bone to transgress and challenge notions of femininity and proper female behaviour, while never considering doing the same thing for herself. It is in this willful transgression of traditional notions of femininity that H.F. will

surpass and depart from Raylene: she will openly question her isolation and go in search of a community and a chosen family.

It must be noted, however, that in the relationship between Raylene and her lover, the lover chose to stay with her baby. In that relationship, the parental connection that the lover felt for her child was stronger than the romantic attraction the woman felt for Raylene. This choice to make one's child the priority is the exact opposite of the decision that Anney makes by always forgiving Daddy Glen for his abuse, even after she witnesses him brutally raping Bone (*Bastard* 291). As previously mentioned, Raylene thus becomes the ideal maternal figure, but at a significant personal toll. It seems, therefore, that Raylene's strong devotion to her family precludes her forming another emotional attachment with a woman, as if she cannot have both at the same time. Raylene remains close to her family and is devoted to their needs, but feels she must do so by herself in the backwoods of South Carolina. Allison perceives the urban space as a place of true freedom and possibility, but in her fiction it seems impossible for her lesbian characters to bring sexual freedom and potential for growth back to the rural area.

Grimsley's novel, *My Drowning*, is highly similar in many ways to Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* in that it tells the story of the abusive childhood and adolescence of Ellen Tote (the mother of Danny Crell from Grimsley's *Comfort and Joy*) in rural North Carolina. As with Allison's novel, the young woman is eventually taken in by Addis, her lesbian aunt, and Jenny, the woman for whom, according to local gossip, Addis both murdered her babies and left her husband once "Jenny got hold of her" (*Drowning* 92). Addis and Jenny live off by themselves in the woods near Ellen's parents' house, though they very rarely interact with the rest of the family, despite their proximity. This distance is due in large part to the family's tendency to simply ignore Jenny when she's around them, acting as if Addis were caring for Ellen by herself. During the lone visit that Jenny actually makes to one of Addis' sisters' houses, Ellen's Aunt

Tula comments to her niece that “Addis’s chickens is some good layers” and “Addis feeds you pretty good, don’t she” while “stressing the word ‘Addis’ for effect” both times thereby dismissing both Jenny’s presence and the reality of the romantic relationship between the two women (*Drowning* 157-158).

The only person to acknowledge the relationship between the two women is Addis’ elderly mother, Nana Rose, whom Addis and Jenny also care for in their house. Nana Rose dismisses them both as being “wrapped up in Satan” observing that “a dog wouldn’t do what [they] do” (*Drowning* 171, 161). Despite the implicit or explicit disapproval of the Tote family, Addis and Jenny simply carry on living their lives. Though they seem happier than Aunt Raylene, there is nevertheless a feeling of isolation from both their families and the larger community in which they live. Indeed, the rumor that Addis murdered her children follows her so doggedly throughout the novel that even the senile Nana Rose makes reference to it on her deathbed, citing Addis’ relationship with Jenny as the reason “why God took your babies” (*Drowning* 161).

As with Aunt Raylene, there is also the disturbing acceptance with which the couple simply accepts the isolation and innuendo they suffer from their family and community. In both of these novels, the lesbian characters seem devoted to people (with the exception of Bone and Ellen) who abuse their position of heterosexual privilege and social acceptance to exploit the lesbian characters’ kindness and maternal skills while dismissing them at the same time. Their devotion to their families is certainly admirable. But it seems for the most part unwarranted and unappreciated by the heterosexual characters.

In this sense, their rural isolation is used against Raylene, Addis, and Jenny, for their families are aware of how the larger community gossips and disapproves of the three women. They are quietly tolerated, but this tolerance is not nearly enough for Julia Watts. It is this

notion of a true melding, in a rural space, of a romantic life with a sense of devotion to a truly worthy family that Watts will address in her novel.

Finding H.F., as previously mentioned, tells the story of a young lesbian, Heavenly Faith, and her gay best friend, Beauregard, as they come of age in the small mining community of Morgan, Kentucky. Raised by her grandmother, Memaw, after being abandoned by her teenage mother at birth, H.F. is suddenly coming to realize that she isn't like all the other girls at her high school as they begin to gossip about boys and cheerleading. When she finds herself beginning to fall in love with a new student, Wendy, this experience is far more thrilling than terrifying, especially when Wendy initially reciprocates H.F.'s affections. Wendy is quickly frightened by her new feelings, though, and soon rejects H.F. out of fear and confusion over the realization that she may be a lesbian.

It is interesting to note that H.F. never appears to be under any serious physical threat similar to the one that Stephen Conlin experienced in the halls of his high school in *A Density of Souls*. In fact, the only real verbal abuse that she receives is due almost exclusively to her friendship with Bo, a far more likely target for harassment from the other boys at their school. Her evasion from physical harm may be due to the odd accepted view of lesbianism, as opposed to that of male homosexuality, that pervades polite society in the South. Angelia Wilson describes this double-standard in *Below the Belt*, "A lesbian, i.e., one who sleeps with women, 'just ain't found the right man yet'" (7). In this sense, a lesbian may still be 'redeemed' and brought back into polite society once she meets the so-called "right man," for her relationship may be construed as more passive in nature than that of a gay man. As Jim Grimsley was quoted earlier from his essay "Myth and Reality", "[s]he'll learn though, when she gets older and develops. [The lesbian]'ll learn that [men] don't like it when a woman is tough like that" (*Out* 232). Thus, there is an expectation that society will somehow eventually push and prod the

lesbian back into an appropriate societal role. Since southern men, on the other hand, still hold the vast majority of power, both socially and financially, then it may seem more threatening to society as a whole when a man willingly surrenders his 'God-given' position of absolute authority by actively seeking love with another man. Men are thus granted much more agency and freedom of choice in their pursuit of a partner. The notion that a southern gay man "just hasn't found the right woman yet" doesn't seem to be as equally applicable in this parallel situation. This feeling may also go some ways to explaining the ability of Raylene, Addis and Jenny to live in the rural space without bringing down condemnation and wrath from the local townspeople. The sexual double-standard expressed above may explain why "Aunt Edna's" and "Miss Jane's" were seemingly more accepted than two men who would chose to live together as simply "old bachelors" (Wilson 136).

The concept of the progress of lesbian lives over time can certainly be seen in the way in which the two generations of writers present their characters to the readers. The characters found in Allison and Grimsley's fiction had virtually no contact with a larger gay or lesbian community beyond their little towns. It would have been especially enlightening if either writer had considered, if only momentarily, including a passage about how the women met each other and formed a relationship in the pre-Stonewall days when the two novels take place. Watts, on the other hand, is far more interested in exploring the discovery and self-acceptance of a newly-minted queer identity. This predisposition on the part of Watts may well be attributed to her post-Stonewall placement in which a wider variety of gay and lesbian experiences are expressed throughout the South thanks to the new prevalence of books and television. This wealth of information permits characters such as H.F. and Bo to be conscious of belonging to a larger gay and lesbian community before ever leaving their Kentucky hamlet. This journey to

self-discovery is seen in both H.F.'s rather sudden realization of her sexuality and in Wendy's slow meander to the possibility of loving another woman.

Soon after the break-up with Wendy, Heavenly Faith discovers that despite her grandmother's insistence that she has no idea where her daughter is, Memaw has actually been in correspondence with H.F.'s mother for most of the sixteen years that she has been gone. Angry at both her grandmother and Wendy, H.F. sets off, with Beau in tow, to Tippalula, Florida, to find her mother who fled only days after her daughter was born. It is this journey across the American South that takes up most of the novel as the two young people experience gay life beyond the town limits of rural Morgan, Kentucky. En route, they will meet lesbian street-kids, gay pastors, and a variety of Southern homophobes, but all the people they encounter will serve to educate the two teenagers about the spectrum of meanings concerning being gay or lesbian in the South at the beginning of the new millennium.

The novel is told exclusively from H.F.'s point-of-view, permitting the narrator to give the reader witty and pithy insight with everything that she says and thinks throughout the unfolding of her story. From the first pages of the novel she is open and confident about both her sexuality and how it fits into her rural life when she states "[Memaw]'d never understand it, and neither would most people in Morgan, Kentucky, which ain't exactly San Francisco, if you know what I mean" (Watts 4-5). Like Zach Bosch in *Drawing Blood*, H.F. possesses a sense of humour that endears her to the reader, while also making it apparent that she is well-aware of gay communities in large, faraway cities, such as San Francisco, far beyond the confines of her small town. It should be noted, however, that San Francisco is obviously not a southern city, thus referring back to the notion of the prevalence of "coastal bias" that exists in representations of gay and lesbian life. Though H.F. is aware of places like San Francisco, she will be shocked to discover that a thriving gay community exists in a southern city such as Atlanta.

Along with this knowledge of a distant gay and lesbian world is the awareness of the expectations that her name, Heavenly Faith, carries since “Memaw hopes I’ll grow into my name the same way I grew into [hand-me-downs], but I’ll tell you right now, it ain’t gonna happen” (Watts 3). Less than three pages into the novel and readers have already witnessed the fact that H.F. is not about to repress and destroy herself in the quest to become the perfect Southern Belle. She is fully aware of how the other girls at her high school look down on her, but she isn’t “a lonely gazelle limping along while the lions stalk me. I’ve got Bo for a friend, and bless his heart, he’s got it a lot rougher than I do. . . If you’re a boyish girl, the other girls just snub you, but if you’re a girlish boy, other boys beat the living hell out of you” (Watts 8).

Even in this rural high school, these two social outcasts have managed to find each other and cling to each other for support. The supportive connection between gay and lesbian youth is completely unlike the world that Rice presented in his novel where all the girls were staunchly heterosexual and all the boys were decidedly not. Watts’ willingness to consider rural life from the point-of-view of a young lesbian while including the story of her gay best friend thereby covers both sexes, giving a more balanced view of rural gay and lesbian life than the novels in the previous two chapters dealing (as we have seen) exclusively with the gay male experience.

An especially fascinating aspect of Watts’ novel is the way in which she provides not only an astute snapshot of both the rural gay and lesbian adolescent experience in 165 pages, but how she intelligently tackles the question of religion in the American South. It has already been mentioned that Memaw is a Southern Baptist, and it would therefore be likely that she would be concerned and upset about her granddaughter’s sexual orientation. Laura Milner comments in her essay “From Southern Baptist Belle to Butch (and Beyond)” that “There is no place for non-conformists in the Southern Baptist Church and no legitimate place for women, so it’s no

wonder that I and others like me have fallen away. Perhaps fled is more honest”, but then goes on to state that “When history ignores us and religion shames us, we must create our own” (*Out* 185).

This openness to “creat[ing] our own” is unlike the suspicion and dismissiveness with which Rice and Brite treated religion in their novels, for Watts appears to be agree with Milner’s arguments that “it is not enough to walk away” (188) and that it is important to “[tell] the stories of those who search for a new path through the sexual-religious maze” (Wilson 4). This is not to suggest that Watts makes her quest to display her “new path” in “melding queer sexuality with Christian spirituality” (Howard, *Men* xvi) a wholly solemn and serious journey. While still in Morgan, H.F. and Beau stumble across “The Church of the Living God In Jesus’ Holy Name, The One True Way Without Argument” (Watts 12), thereby poking gentle fun at the divisions that exist within the different rural denominations of the Protestant Church. H.F. goes on to comment that it’s similar to calling the church “The One True Church of Jesus Christ, Not to Be Confused With That Other Church of Jesus Christ, Because All the People Who Go There Are Gonna Burn in Hell” and how these divisions come about over some small argument over scriptural interpretation (Watts 13). It also goes to show that differing opinions on scripture enable like-minded people to create congregations of their own in order to form places of unity and support. This unity will be seen at the Metropolitan Community Church that H.F. and Bo discover upon their arrival in Atlanta.

It is not surprising that one of the reasons for scriptural feuding comes from the discussion of the supposed condemnation of homosexuality in the Bible. From this divergence of opinion came the founding of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which H.F. and Beau come across when they arrive in Atlanta (Wilson 139). They are both amazed that such a place exists after having heard nothing in their Baptist Church other than brimstone and hellfire

when discussing homosexuality. As Angelia Wilson comments in *Below the Belt* while reflecting on her own Southern childhood:

Whether or not we grew up in the church, the gender norms of Christianity affected our lives. For some who believed in the Christian Right's interpretation, homosexuality was to be hated, even if it meant self-hatred. For some who heard only hatred, Christianity, and maybe all spirituality, was to be rejected. For some, spiritual fulfillment was sought outside of organized religion. Still others have chosen not to give up on Christianity, just yet. Instead they chose to build churches on unconditional love. (139)

Through her inclusion of H.F. and Beau's visit to the MCC in Atlanta, Watts appears to be suggesting that Christianity is still a viable spiritual option through its potential for unconditional love.

The MCC comes as a complete revelation to Bo and H.F. from the juxtaposed "rainbow-striped triangle" and "big gold cross" and the "woman preacher" who makes H.F. think "she's a woman, she's a preacher, and she likes girls just the same as me" and how nothing that the preacher says "makes [her] mad or hurts [her] feelings" (Watts 118-119). The entire experience truly fascinates the two young Kentuckians, who were so used to condemnation that they find themselves dumbstruck by the notion of church created nearly exclusively for the gay community. One of the lay ministers, Preacher Dave, invites them back to his house along with Dee, Chantal, and Laney, three runaways that Bo and H.F. met in a local park before being ushered off to the church. In typical nonchalant fashion, Preacher Dave dismisses Conservative churches condemnation of homosexuality with the comment:

Well think about it. What did Jesus say in the Bible about homosexuality? Not one word. Now, sure, homosexuality is prohibited in the Old Testament, but so is wearing knit fabric and eating shellfish. And I don't know about you, but I've seen plenty of supposedly devout straight Christians wearing polyester and chowing down at Red Lobster. (Watts 122)

This experience enables the two young Kentuckians to witness a form of Christianity that enables them to remain within their faith and that, in the case of H.F., still respects most aspects of her grandmother's religious upbringing. Bo and H.F. may not agree with all the statements and tenets of the Baptist church, just as Memaw would take issue with some of the ideas espoused in the MCC. Nonetheless, there are certain beliefs and rules, such as generosity and kindness that span these denominational differences. Thus, the urban gay-friendly church can be seen to have given the rural youth potential resources to question, challenge, and adapt the faith that they were taught in their local Baptist congregation.

Later, once they've left Atlanta and are on their way to the Florida panhandle to find H.F.'s mother, the two friends decide to swim naked in the ocean. When they hug each other in giddy celebration, H.F. has the following spiritual and emotional awakening:

You know how the hateful preachers are always saying that God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve? Well, hugging Bo naked in the ocean, I feel like we're a new kind of Adam and Eve. We already ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and instead of being punished for it, we learned that the world is big and full of opportunities, and that love is always good: Girls can love girls if they

want to, boys can love boys if they want to, and a girl and a boy can love each other as dear friends and nothing more or less. We are naked, and we are not ashamed. (Watts 140)

The life that H.F had always imagined taking place in some faraway city like San Francisco is a life that she now realizes also exists in Atlanta, and is in many ways a state of mind dependent upon the realization and acceptance of being part of a larger gay and lesbian community that spans all sorts of rural and urban borders, whether they be religious, sexual, or political.

H.F and Beauregard will carry this important knowledge back with them to Morgan. But their discovery of the MCC is not the only one that the two friends make while on their road trip to Tippalula. While on the road from Kentucky to Florida, they also have the chance to interact with each other beyond the confines and limits of their families and hometown, as well as outside a larger gay and lesbian community in Atlanta of which the MCC is only one part.

In many ways their road trip is a journey to the discovery that life is fraught with infinite possibility and limitless potential beyond anything they could have imagined had they spent their entire lives in Morgan. Even though most of their discoveries are made beyond the town limits en route to Tippalula, there is nevertheless a small space near home that H.F. and Bo claim as their own and in which they find refuge from their everyday lives. They even go so far as to begin inviting Wendy, before the realization of her feelings for H.F. temporarily frightens her away. The three of them go off to a waterfall at nearby Deer Creek and happily “make up [their] own world . . . a place where everybody, no matter how small or weak or different, can be safe from harm” (Watts 31).

In *Men Like That* John Howard comments that “interstate buses and other modes of public transport were hybrid spaces neither local nor foreign. Bus interiors offered a place

suspended from community laws and norms” (109). In many ways, this can equally be said about “Bo’s little Escort” (Watts 79), for it is neither small town nor big city, yet is the object that links the two worlds for the two travelers. Indeed, at the very first scenic overlook that they come to, Bo insists on stopping to see the view of the little town below and states that “I don’t want to be like that . . . a little-bitty person down there livin’ a little-bitty life. . . . I want to live me a great big life . . . with music and friends and, oh, I don’t know what all” (Watts 81). They are at this point only a few miles outside of Morgan, and yet there is still a burgeoning sense that there is indeed an amazing potential for life and experiences beyond their own little town.

Their notions of “a great big life” are further expanded upon their arrival in Atlanta when Bo and H.F. witness two men walking through a park holding hands and how H.F. is especially given to think that “of all the things I’ve seen in one day, this is the most amazing” and immediately “picture[s] [herself] skipping through the park holding hands with a girl” (Watts 96). This simple act of two men walking through a park holding hands is enormously influential for H.F. and Bo, though the two young men never realize that they have so affected the two teenagers who are watching them. By simply living their lives openly and unashamedly, this one gay couple’s display of affection and attachment permits others to consider the possibility of a happy and fulfilling life as an openly gay person as well.

H.F. is soon romanced by Laney, one of the homeless girls that she meets through Preacher Dave at the MCC, only to find herself dumped and ignored once they have spent the night together (Watts 128). The fact that Laney’s parents drove her from their house when they found out she was a lesbian shows that even in cosmopolitan cities like Atlanta, ignorance and fear still exists, as Christopher Rice has already shown about New Orleans in *A Density of Souls*. Upon reflection, though, H.F. comes to the conclusion by the end of the novel that “wherever [Laney] is, I hope she’s OK. And if she’s not, it’s her parents’ fault as sure as if they’d picked up

a gun and shot her” (Watts 163). This assertion shows that H.F.’s roadtrip permits her to see that southern society must bear some responsibility for the potential destruction of its gay and lesbian youth due to its refusal to grow and adapt. It also gives the reader a glimmer of hope that the protectiveness and caring of the gay community that H.F. and Bo experienced in Atlanta will shelter Laney from some of the harm she faces as a homeless teenager.

Bo also officially comes out to someone for the first time while speaking with Preacher Dave and his partner, Bill. When the two teenagers are back on the road to Florida, Bo recounts his conversation with the two men and finishes up by saying, “Seein’ Dave and Bill... I don’t know... I guess it gave me hope. Eighteen years they’ve been together, H.F. They’ve been together longer than either of us has been alive. Dave looked at me last night, and he said, ‘Adolescence sucks, Beauregard. Just wait... Life’ll get easier’” (Watts 133). Like the two men strolling in the park, the example of a happily gay couple living their lives openly and proudly is enough to give Bo hope for the future. H.F. then comments that “If Bo and me have to be on such a difficult road--and I’m not talking about the road to Florida here--at least we get to go down together” (133).

The strength and confidence that the two young people garner from their stay in Atlanta serves them well when they finally arrive in Tippalula and find H.F.’s mother. The reunion does not go at all the way the young woman had imagined it when she planned it in her head. H.F. had always imagined that her mother fled Morgan for something infinitely better; in fact, before she leaves Morgan to find her mother she comments about one of the waitresses she sees at the local diner who got pregnant and stayed, rather than run away like H.F.’s mother. The young woman hopes that “wherever [her mother] is and whatever she’s doing, she’s having more fun than this poor girl” (Watts 62). It is therefore hardly surprising that, in an ironic twist, H.F.’s mother, Sondra, is a waitress at the local diner in Tippalula “a town that looks just like

[Morgan]" (Watts 137). Sondra soon dismisses and rejects her daughter, preferring to complain bitterly about all of the men she slept with in Morgan, including Bo's father, and of the life she should have had in Hollywood as a famous actress rather than as a waitress in the Florida panhandle (Watts 150). This encounter only reinforces H.F.'s resolve that family can sometimes mean the people with whom you surround yourself, such as Bo and Wendy, rather than being merely limited to the biological family into which you were born. This realization permits H.F. to forge a truly diverse and loving family that includes her Memaw as well as her gay and lesbian friends by the time she reaches the end of the novel back in Kentucky. She thereby actively chooses the people with whom she wishes to surround herself.

It is only when they are back on the road to Kentucky that Bo and H.F. both realize that there is the distinct possibility that they may in fact be half-brother and -sister by virtue of the same father (Watts 154). Though they discuss having a blood test to ascertain that they are actually related by blood, they decide against it, stating that "[they]'re brother and sister no matter what some test might say. There's more to family than just blood." (Watts 163). The connection that they forged with Preacher Dave and Bill, as well as with Dee and Chantal, has shown them both that they are now truly members of a large and ever-growing gay and lesbian family that unifies the rural and the urban spaces in non-biological ways.

Earlier in the novel, before the idea of their being related is ever mentioned or considered, Heavenly Faith comments that when she describes her relationship with Bo to Dee and Chantal as "just friends", that this characterization does not seem adequately to reflect the relationship that they share. "It makes it sound like friends don't mean nothing compared to family, but I don't think that's true. I mean, I love Bo better than any real-life brother I could've ended up with" (Watts 99). The fact that he might be her brother only deepens the bond that they already share as a gay man and a lesbian growing up in a small Kentucky town. Their lives

together as gay people are like the back roads they took on their road trip: “The road may be bumpier and it may be hard to figure out where you’re goin’ on it sometimes, but at least it’s not boring” (Watts 135). The absence of all references to fear or uncertainty from this statement shows that H.F. and Bo have truly come to terms with their lives on the rural back roads of the South, but nevertheless see the challenges they face as exciting and manageable.

Wendy and H.F. reunite at the end of the novel and, eighteen months later, are “still together” (Watts 162). By the end of the novel, H.F. has not yet come out to her grandmother, though she says “I like to think that someday, when I’m grown up and out of her house, I can make her understand about the way I am, but I don’t know if I can” (Watts 162). Preacher Dave gets Bo into Atlanta State University on a scholarship for gay and lesbian students, though H.F. chooses to stay behind in order to remain near her grandmother, stating “she’s always done right by me, so I ought to do right by her” (Watts 164).

Though it may seem to the reader that H.F. and Wendy are in no better a position than Addis and Jenny looking after Nana Rose, the reader must consider that there is still a connection to a larger, external gay community in Watts’ novel. There is also always the hope that Heavenly Faith can bring her grandmother around if she were to come out to her in the future. Memaw is also someone truly worthy of care and compassion, for there is none of the ongoing parental physical and emotional abuse that ran rampant in Grimsley and Allison’s novels. There exists a strong and devoted love between the two women, so a positive reaction to her coming out to her grandmother is a possibility, especially if H.F. were to stress her faith and her connection to the MCC, since religion is so important to Memaw.

The conclusion of the book finds H.F. collaborating on an art project with her grandmother of Noah’s Ark on a rainbow background, though she is well aware that the rainbow means something entirely different to Memaw than it does to her:

I know that Memaw takes the story of Noah's Ark and the sign of the rainbow at face value--that it was God's way of saying he wouldn't flood the world again . . . Here's where we're different [from Noah]: me and Bo gathered up good people along the way. Preacher Dave and Bill, Dee and Chantal, and Wendy, who helped us when we really needed it. . . . Memaw would say I was blaspheming if she knew I was comparing something in the Bible with my own experience of being queer. But . . . to me, the rainbow sign God put in the sky for Noah said pretty much the same thing as the sign I saw at . . . the [Metropolitan Community] [C]hurch, and in the faces and hearts of the rainbow of people who are my gay family: "Here you were, thinking it was the end of the world, when it turns out it was only the beginning." (Watts 165)

In this art project created by a lesbian and her grandmother, the reader sees a true possibility for growth in the rural sphere. Heavenly Faith has gained experience and fortitude from the journey that she made to Atlanta, but then brought that knowledge and experience back with her to Morgan, Kentucky in order to live her life with her family and friends.

It is important to note that while Pastor Dave fled his rural Kentucky town for Atlanta as a young man, and never returned, that Bo, in contrast, actually does find the courage and resources to return to the rural space. This contrast exists precisely because he has interacted with someone who found acceptance in the urban sphere (Watts 116). What is more, Bo can see there is still the possibility for growth and reevaluation of H.F.'s position in her small town, such as coming out to her grandmother at an appropriate time. While it can be argued that H.F. should perhaps be out of the closet to everyone and living her life completely openly like Zach

and Trevor were in *Drawing Blood*, Bo is even further able to comprehend that the way in which H.F. goes about her private life is still in many ways a step forward from those women presented in Grimsley and Allison.

In view of the lives of Bo and H.F. just presented, it can also be stressed that the closet may not be an entirely negative space under all circumstances. Critic Aaron Betsky writes that while the closet is a “harrowing spooky space” it is “also one that is free from outside constraints” (Howard, *Men* 63). Within this space H.F., Bo, and Wendy can create a small society that shelters them from the disapproval and cruelty of others while still existing as “not so much hiding as resistance, a refashioning of a seemingly inflexible environment into a site of perverse pleasure” (Howard, *Men* 63). They can thereby be completely open and free with each other in a protected place, but still be visible and open enough to inspire others in their rural sphere, as did the two men walking hand in hand in Atlanta. Their power comes not necessarily from H.F. actually holding Wendy’s hand, but from the fact that their connection permits visibility to others around them, and thus provides a view of the possibility of defying gender and sexual norms within a sheltered and protected space within a chosen “family.”

There is now no longer either an absolute need to sacrifice companionship for societal and familial expectations as in the case with Allison’s Aunt Raylene, or the necessity of silently tolerating abuse and gossip as with Grimsley’s Addis and Jenny. The rural isolation and fear is dissipating. Watts’ readers are now able to view bonds of friendship extend across gender, generational, and state lines, thereby granting a larger circle of resources from which everyone in the extended gay and lesbian community can benefit. These growing links and connections, along with the promise of higher education that all three protagonists of Watts’ novel intend to pursue at the end of *Finding H.F.* (164), thus expands their horizons and social spheres, and

consequently holds the promise of even greater progress, connection, and visibility in the rural South yet to come.

As these three teenagers grow into mature adults they can thereby provide resources to the generation that follows them by forging stronger ties between the rural towns and the resources they have witnessed in large urban centers. These urban centers have thus, in this novel, progressed from simple Meccas to which to flee from the rural closet and have become locales of resources and example. The cities are still very necessary, as can be seen by the influence that Atlanta wields on Bo and H.F. Nonetheless, the friendships and relationships that are forged, even if only covertly at this stage, in rural towns and hamlets show the possibility of even more growth and potential for succeeding generations through the ever-expanding multitude of resources. In this manner, Morgan, Kentucky, has thus become yet another “zone of possibilities” still mostly untried and untapped, and what is more, a “site of permanent becoming” (Jagose 2, 131), inaugural of an ideal definition of a queer space.

NOTES

9. Angelia Wilson devotes an entire chapter in *Below the Belt* to the examination of contemporary southern femininity in the early 21st century. It is especially fascinating that through interviews and personal recollections she demonstrates, by her interaction with Southern women from across the social and sexual scales, that the desperate need to be the “southern belle” is still a reality in the present day.

Conclusion

And so, the subsequent generation of fictional male and female Billy Joe McAllisters have rejected the once seemingly inescapable suicidal swan-dive off the Tallahatchie Bridge. The new generation of southern characters have, almost without exception, survived to live lives as complex and fascinating as their heterosexual counterparts. It is this overwhelming sense of pride and defiance that links these three novels together as they weave tales that show that while being gay or lesbian in the rural South is not easy, it is not impossible.

In the context of my argument of questioning the notion of the Big City as the sole place for gays and lesbians to find acceptance and freedom, it must be noted that the lone non-heterosexual character who commits suicide in these three novels, Greg Darby from *A Density of Souls*, does so while living in the most notoriously permissive southern city: New Orleans. Clearly, therefore, the urban sphere is thereby not enough to ensure happiness and liberation for queer youth. What is seemingly more important, as is represented in all three novels under scrutiny in this project, is the necessity of a supportive community or family. In the terms “community” and “family”, I include not only the pre-established concepts of an established gay community and of blood families, but also those of a circle of friends from all across the sexual spectrum that become the “chosen” families surrounding the characters in the three novels.

In my introduction, I expressed my desire to inquire into how these three novelists challenge and question established social norms through a close reading of their novels. Now that I have done so, I believe that the greatest tool that these three writers utilize in this quest is the notion that their characters simply refuse to accept the limitations that are imposed upon them by their repressive social spheres. This refusal is not limited to notions of sexuality, though, but expands into the realms of class, gender, and religion, also. If one briefly

reexamines each of the protagonists of the Rice, Brite, and Watts novels, the reader can see that none of these characters is willing to be stifled by outdated notions of proper behavior. In *A Density of Souls*, Stephen and Jordan consciously reject their sheltered positions in upper-class New Orleans society in order to express openly their love for each other; Trevor and Zach defy small-town expectations in *Drawing Blood* by holding hands and kissing on the main street of a tiny southern hamlet while adamantly refusing to label themselves as gay, existing simply as two people in love; finally, H.F. and Bo find inspiration in Atlanta and return to rural Kentucky with a renewed sense of religious faith and love for their families and a boundless sense of hope for the future in *Finding H.F.* As previously quoted in chapter three, these young people have all created both for themselves and for their lovers, friends, and family, a space where “nothing was forbidden; everything was possible” (Allison, *Things* 2).

This notion of anything being possible is quite a departure from the fiction of Grimsley and Allison explored in this project. In all of those novels, there was an undeniable sense that the protagonists are far more willing to maneuver within the strict limitations of the imposed social codes without ever overtly breaking or challenging them. In *Boulevard*, the reader witnesses Newell completely isolate himself from his rural family in order to slavishly readapt himself to the expected social behavior of gay New Orleans in the 1970s; *Comfort and Joy* not only mirrors this sense of familial isolation in the characters of both Danny and Ford, but also displays the seeming necessity of fleeing the rural space for the urban; Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Grimsley’s *My Drowning* both present rural lesbians as both isolated and piously condemned by their bible-toting relatives. While all of these characters ultimately come to occupy a safe and tolerable space within the communities they inhabit, there is nevertheless a sense of repression and self-denial where “everything” is only “possible” within certain polite

boundaries and limitations. My younger generation of writers is not willing to accept or tolerate such social strictures.

It is important to point out that the younger generation of authors are expressing a shifting and ever-changing reimagining of the South. This is a literary phenomenon that is still in its infancy compared to the literature produced regarding gay life in large cities such as San Francisco and New York, but it is nevertheless a sign of a burgeoning willingness to express the present perception of gay life as seen by the younger generation of queer writers in the contemporary South. And it is an undertaking that will continue to grow and expand, as new voices are added to tell the stories of the South that have for so long gone unexpressed and unrecorded. Readers need only look to the brief appearances of Warner Doutrie in *A Density of Souls* and Mr. Henry in *Drawing Blood* to see examples of lives secretly lived, yet are no less worthy of exploration and consideration.

While the purpose of this study was to explore and uncover the positive progress of young gay men and lesbians in the South through contemporary queer literature, my research and reading has nevertheless presented to me many ideas and concepts that this project only permitted me to touch briefly upon, if at all. Foremost among these concepts is the recurring character of the strong maternal figure that exists in all the novels of both the older and the younger generation. These maternal relationships are fascinating considering the amazing influence that these figures wield over the younger gay/lesbian generation's lives, whether it be positive, such as Monica Conlin in *A Density of Souls*, or negative, such as Sondra Simms in *Finding H.F.* This is surprising, due to the nearly powerless position that the "good" Southern woman occupies in polite society in comparison especially to the seemingly boundless power of their husbands. As mentioned in the Introduction, there is equally a marked physical or emotional absence of a same-sex parent in all the "younger" novels under consideration. Both

the unavailable same-sex parent and the power and influence of strong female figures in the lives of these young people, particularly young gay men, are worthy of further exploration and consideration beyond the passing reference I make to them in this project.¹⁰

Another subject that I encountered during my reading was the strange racial divide that existed within Christopher Rice's novel. Nowhere in the gay world of *A Density of Souls* does a Black or non-Caucasian character appear, a notion that is mirrored in Charles I. Nero's essay "Black Gay Men and White Gay Men: A Less than Perfect Union" in *Out in the South* (115-126) which comments upon the stark division between the white gay world and the black gay world that still exists in the South at the turn of the millennium. To research the interaction between different racial groups in gay and lesbian southern fiction would be a further enlightening project to explore on the basis of what I have only been able to present here. It would be equally fascinating to investigate the interaction between gay men and lesbians in contemporary southern queer fiction, for in both Rice and Brite's novels the world explored is exclusively that of gay men. Indeed, in both of these novels there is not even one lesbian or bisexual female character that appears; all the women presented by these two authors are staunchly heterosexual. It is especially curious that Brite, who fiercely self-identifies in interviews as "queer, because it includes those of us who don't fit neatly into categories" ("OUT" 50), seems so unwilling to explore the broad, indefinable spectrum of female sexuality in her novel that she so willingly grants to her male characters, Trevor and Zach.

Jim Grimsley comments in his essay "Myth and Reality" that "we men talk to the men and we women talk to the women" (*Out* 231), and though he is writing of his own experience in New Orleans in the early- to mid-1970s, the novels of Rice and Brite seem to imply that little has changed in the nearly three decades since with regards to gender interaction in the gay community.¹¹ It should be noted that Julia Watts positively addresses these notions of

interaction across lines of sex and race in *Finding H.F.* by having her titular character pithily observe upon meeting two Black lesbians that “No matter where we’re from or what we look like, we’re the same kind of different” and that “I don’t reckon there’s nothin’ wrong with noticin’ people bein’ different than you, as long as you don’t think less of ‘em for it” (Watts, 105, 135).

These considerations of race and gender thus can be seen as the next step within the broadening and reinventing of a queer space within the southern sphere. And since there must always be progress and movement within a truly queer space, this expansion and reinvention is to be expected and anticipated in future novels. The rural isolation of denial and repression once set in sharp contrast to the urban playground of sexual delights at last has begun to be questioned and dismantled by all of the authors under scrutiny in this thesis and by their contemporaries. The novels of Jim Grimsley and Dorothy Allison, while a vital and necessary aspect of gay and lesbian fiction of the American South for their time, must not be considered as the ultimate defining novels of the queer experience in the rural space, particularly as it is evolving ever new in the new millennium. It is equally true accordingly that *A Density of Souls*, *Drawing Blood*, and *Finding H.F.* will be surpassed in their turn as characters like Stephen Conlin, Jordan Charbonnet, Trevor McGee, Zachary Bosch, Heavenly Faith Simms, and Beauregard Martin learn to live more fully openly and honestly in both the city and the countryside of the South.

Nevertheless, all of these characters have found a space to occupy and thrive “where often inconsistent, sometimes conflictual, social memberships, like being gay and Christian or queer and traditionally Southern, . . . , can be blended” (Gray, *Out* 183). If these authors set out to provide a view of Southern life that certainly queered the traditional notions of Dixie, my contention is that they have succeeded. As they make their way down the meandering, fascinating back roads of the South to an undefined place between the urban metropolis and the

rural holler, Dorothy Allison's fictive space in which "nothing was forbidden; everything is possible" appears truly to have become realized.

NOTES

10. Martin Pousson's *No Place, Louisiana: A Novel* (New York: Riverhead Books/Putnam/Penguin, 2002) is an excellent example of a contemporary work by a young gay man that ponders the issues of powerful, independent southern women struggling against the need to be "the southern belle" and of the influence of these women on their gay children (especially gay sons).

11. A prime example of the division between gay men and lesbians in the South is seen in the aftermath of the bombing of Sanctuary in *A Density of Souls*. When Stephen Conlin and Meredith Ducote go to a vigil for the dead, Rice refers to the "seventy one" victims as "the murdered *men*" (Rice 178-180 my emphasis). That all the victims of the blast were men shows that Grimsley was not mistaken in "Myth and Reality" when he stated that "[w]e men talk to the men and we women talk to the women" (*Out* 231) in terms of social interaction between gay men and lesbians in the new millennium.

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