Distribution Agreement

In presenting the thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

____ ________________

Abigail Parsons Date

Sapphic Scarletts, Dixie Dykes, and Tomboys:
Representing Female-Bodied Queerness in Contemporary Southern Novels and Films

By

Abigail Parsons
Doctor of Philosophy

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Martine Watson Brownley, Ph.D.
Advisor

Michele Schreiber, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Pamela Scully, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

Sapphic Scarletts, Dixie Dykes, and Tomboys:
Representing Female-Bodied Queerness in Contemporary Southern Novels and Films

By

Abigail Parsons
M.Res., University of Central Lancashire, 2005
B.A., University of Central Lancashire, 2004

Advisor: Martine Watson Brownley, Ph.D.

An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
2013

Abstract

Sapphic Scarletts, Dixie Dykes, and Tomboys:
Representing Female-Bodied Queerness in Contemporary Southern Novels and Films
By Abigail Parsons

This dissertation examines how representations of female-bodied queerness in contemporary fiction and film challenge dominant cultural narratives about the U.S. South. The events and images that configure prevailing narratives of southern exceptionalism – slavery, segregation, the Civil War, antebellum courtship rituals, evangelism, Southern Baptist doctrine, and redneck culture, for example – present few, if any, possibilities for a visible queer southern history. Queer southerners are all too aware of how hegemonic conceptions of the region erase or obscure their very existence, yet certain fictional texts capitalize on the flaws, contradictions, and ellipses in these conceptions to show that southern queerness is always already a possibility.

Through close analyses of twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels and films set in the U.S. South, I illuminate how a concept I call female-bodied queerness is represented, and how, where, and when it manifests. I situate textual representations of queer female bodies, identities, and experiences within a distinctly regional context in order to ascertain what cultural and narrative work they perform on dominant narratives of the South. I critique the tendency in scholarship and creative works to reduce queer U.S. history to a series of binaries – urban/rural, North/South, gay/straight – that render the concept of southern queerness untenable or invisible. I examine how racial, class, religious, political, and cultural narratives of the region place limits on representations of queer characters, images, themes, and stories but then explore what strategies particular texts use to render queerness visible in spite of those limits. I draw on scholarship in the fields of history, cultural studies, film and literary theory, queer studies, and southern studies to in order to understand how dominant cultural narratives are produced and how they function as regulatory fictions that govern representations and perceptions of the South and southerners. Ultimately, this dissertation suggests that representations of female-bodied queerness in contemporary southern novels and films create counter-narratives about the region that demand we acknowledge and embrace the existence and complexity of queer southern histories.

Sapphic Scarletts, Dixie Dykes, and Tomboys:
Representing Female-Bodied Queerness in Contemporary Southern Novels and Films

By

Abigail Parsons
M.Res., University of Central Lancashire, 2005
B.A., University of Central Lancashire, 2004

Advisor: Martine Watson Brownley, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
2013

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisor, Martine Watson Brownley, for not only being an incredible intellectual resource but a fierce advocate and seal trainer par excellence. I can only apologize for making your life more difficult with my maddening comma misuse.

Thank you to my committee members, Pamela Scully and Michele Schreiber, for your unwavering support and encouragement throughout this process and your insightful commentary that helped me create a dissertation I could be proud of.

Thank you to Berky Abreu for being a constant source of comfort, humor, care, help, light, and inspiration. Thank you to April Biagioni and Cheryl Delaney for not just your willingness to help me when you could just tell me to go read the handbook but your friendship and general awesomeness.

Thank you to Aimi, Chanel, and Nikki, the members of Professor Beth Reingold's Research Design class in the Fall of 2010. Your questions and ideas during the formative stages of this project were essential in helping me find direction and break through critical plateaus.

I must extend a huge thank you to Michael Shutt, Director of the Office of LGBT Life, for being an incredible mentor and advocate. Thank you for the opportunities you have given me in the Office and for planting the seed at Creating Change in Minneapolis that maybe, just maybe, I should consider a career in Student Affairs.

Thank you to Danielle Steele, Jodi Jackson, and Kate Bulger for being the best neighbors I could ask for. You have made my off-campus life fun and fulfilling. I am so lucky to call you my friends.

Thank you to my parents who don't really understand why I am still in school at the age of 31 but have finally stopped giving me a hard time about it.

Thank you to Kelly, Karen, and Simone who remind me there is more to life than reading books and who give me a place to come home to.

Thank you to the Helblings for cheering me on from afar. Your support means the world to me.

Finally, thank you to Kal Helbling for your unending support, patience, and love. We did it!

Table of Contents

	Page
Foreword	1
Chapter One "Behaving Like a Lady:" Crossdressing Women and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Civil War Novels	19
Chapter Two "I just cain't wait to get to heaven": Nostalgia and Idealized Queer Community in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*	48
Chapter Three Neither Here Nor There: Black Female Sexuality and Queer (Invisibility) in *The Color Purple*	75
Chapter Four "Share Our Anger and Our Love": Imagining Queerness in Hostile Spaces in Ann Allen Shockley's *Say Jesus and Come to Me* and Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller*	107
Afterword	149
Works Cited	156

Foreword

Nell Irvin Painter writes “there is seldom a singular ‘the South,’ for simple characterizations eliminate the reality of sharp conflicts over just about everything in Southern culture” (*Color Line* 111). In so doing, she draws attention to the ways in which denying multiple and often conflicting histories results in a privileging of one history over others. This project is concerned with one particular collection of heretofore marginalized southern histories, those of female-bodied queer people. I aim to explore certain kinds of queerness in representations of the South that scholars in the field of southern studies have thus far critically ignored. The focus on gay southern men, especially white men, has dominated the already narrow field of queer southern studies and much of the gay literature set in the South. Therefore, instead of focusing on queer images and narratives in their most visibly recognizable forms – the figure of the isolated gay white male, or the story of gay migration to urban queer havens, for example – I turn to a set of marginalized images that constitute what I call female-bodied queerness.

This project suggests that a collection of interdependent dominant narratives and counter-narratives help define the region, and in particular, it focuses on the ways in which films and novels either conform to dominant cultural narratives about the region or diverge to create counter-narratives of their own. Through close analyses of twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels and films set in the U.S. South, I illuminate how a concept I call female-bodied queerness is represented, and how, where, and when it manifests. For the purposes of this project, “female-bodied” refers to characters whose assigned or assumed sex is female but who may not necessarily present or identify as

girls or women. For example, the term "female-bodied queerness" might more accurately describe a tomboy who was born female-bodied but has a proclivity for cross-gender identification or a desire to be read or treated as a boy. Much of the existing scholarship in the field of queer Southern Studies has failed to examine female-bodied queerness as a broader and usefully pluralistic category that allows for an exploration of how gender non-conformity, lesbianism, and other unnamed forms of desire between female-bodied individuals can intersect in complex and unexpected ways to produce counter-narratives that challenge the authority of more visible narratives of queerness in the region.

Over the course of the next four chapters, I situate textual representations of queer bodies, identities and experiences within a distinctly regional context in order to ascertain what cultural and narrative work they perform on hegemonic conceptualizations of the South. I seek to understand what limits racial, class, religious, political, and cultural narratives of the South place on representations of queer characters, images, themes, and stories and what strategies particular texts use to render queerness visible in spite of those limits. The regional context of this dissertation is multi-faceted and takes into account how the economic, religious, racial, social, and political histories of the region coalesce to produce images of the South that are as unique and recognizable as they are enduring. Thus, although the primary texts under discussion are films and novels, scholarship in the fields of history, cultural studies, film and literary criticism and theory, queer studies, and southern studies will inform their analysis in order to understand how dominant southern cultural narratives function as regulatory fictions that govern representations and perceptions of the South and southerners.

This project derives its understandings and definitions of the various forms of female-bodied queerness from a number of texts in the fields of gender studies and LGBTQ studies. I use the term "queer" here in an active attempt to avoid labeling the characters, themes or narratives in these texts as exclusively gay or lesbian, or to avoid privileging gay or lesbian identities over other forms of queerness in my analysis. I intend for "queer" to encompass non-heternormative gender identities (transgender, butch, tomboy), sexual identities (lesbian, bisexual, asexual), and other forms of gendered embodiment and desire that defy easy definition. In taking such a capacious and cautious approach to my readings of queerness in the films and novels, I can avoid two potential pitfalls. First, I will not be limited to only analyzing self-defined lesbian characters (of which there are very few). Second, I can avoid imposing contemporary labels such as "lesbian," "transgender," or "bisexual" and the connotations that accompany them onto texts that might be more accurately described with terms relevant to the specific contexts of their production. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam develops the concept of perverse presentism, which is a process of viewing historical queer identities without applying "insights from the present to conundrums of the past" and "projecting contemporary understandings back in time" (53). In adopting Halberstam's strategy, I can similarly avoid misapplying terms that have specific racial, class, and historical connotations, and recognize that the primary texts either create or deploy terms more relevant to the context of their characters, settings, and narratives.

Mapping the South

The South is a complicated concept, and any definitions of the region are highly contested and open to debate. Is it the region below the Mason-Dixon line, as suggested by southern studies scholar Tara McPherson? (2) Do we simply count the states of the Confederacy along with Kentucky and Oklahoma, as historian Dewey Grantham does in his study, *The South in Modern America* (xv)? What do we do about Florida, which is technically further South than Georgia and the Carolinas but is perceived to have a culture entirely its own? Or Texas, which seems to share more in terms of landscape, culture and climate with the southwest than the southeast (except for the east side of Texas where the landscape and climate have more in common with Louisiana than New Mexico)? Some scholars, such as James C. Cobb and Howard Zinn, choose not to name any particular states at all, perhaps assuming that readers will instinctively know and share a definition of the South.

Wilbur Cash's 1941 magnum opus, *The Mind of the South,* a defining text in the field of southern studies, insists that throughout the region, one could easily trace "a fairly definite mental pattern, associated with a fairly definite social pattern," at least among white people (viii). More than fifty years later, southern sociologist and cultural commentator John Shelton Reed would attempt to determine whether Cash's claims were true. In his book, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture,* Reed devotes a chapter to answering the questions, "Where is the South?" and "Who do we count as southerners?" Reed concludes that no general agreement exists on which states constitute the South, but he offers a variety of ways – all tongue-in-cheek – for approaching the question. These include counting states where kudzu most flourishes, or the states that played the biggest role in the cotton industry, and making generalizations

based on cultural stereotypes such as assuming that "people who eat grits, support corporal punishment in the schools, hunt possum, go to Baptist churches, and prefer bourbon to scotch…are likely to be Southerners" (15). Reed does, however, suggest that, "we can look at the South, not just as a distinctive economic or cultural area, but as the home of people somehow bound together by ties of loyalty and identification" (19).

Exactly what this loyalty and identification might be is unclear in Reed's book, and, crucially, he does not tackle the thorny question of whether all southerners share the same sense of regional identity regardless of race, class, and sexuality. Yet Reed's tendency to generalize about the South in this way is quite common in both academic southern studies – particularly in the field's formative years - and popular culture more broadly. Comedian Jeff Foxworthy has built an entire career around southern schtick, while The History Channel's 2011 documentary *You Don't Know Dixie* pokes lighthearted fun at southern accents and the region's obsession with football, hunting, and fishing. In the film, southerners are asked, "What does it mean to be a southerner?" and their answers include being "humble," "sincere," "genuine," "laid-back," "friendly," and "good hearted." Their self-definitions are a far cry from the stereotypes of the ignorant, intolerant, degenerate, and sometimes even savage southerners portrayed in novels such as James Dickey's *Deliverance,* Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road,* and John Grisham's *A Time to Kill*, all of which were made into films.

Certainly, attempts to define the South and southerners are fraught with disagreement, and scholars in the field of southern studies seemingly opt for whatever definitions best suit their individual projects. For the purposes of this project, I veer away from thinking of the South in cartographic terms, that is, as a region with immutable

physical borders. I also resist the urge to generalize about southerners as a collective, recognizing that doing so erases the voices, images, and experiences of the most marginalized.

Instead, I read the South as a region that is culturally defined through the repetition of particular memories, representations, and narratives. For example, while fried chicken, the Ku Klux Klan, and bluegrass music are not exclusive to the South, they have come to signify the region when situated alongside objects and moments that *are* uniquely southern, such as Jim Crow laws or Confederate iconography. Whites living in poverty become "white trash" stereotypes because of particular southern accents and dialects, their economic status relative to wealthy white plantation owners, or their assumed proclivity for violence, alcoholism, and birthing children they cannot support. Similarly, physical spaces come to be recognized as southern when specific people or events are situated on or within them. The historical presence of slaves marks the agricultural landscape as southern, while civil rights marches do the same for the urban metropolis. It is through their collective and repeated deployment that particular symbols, representations, spaces, or narratives come to be read as southern. I am therefore concerned with primary texts that contain various combinations of these regional identifiers.

This dissertation revises an assumption, prevalent in some southern studies scholarship and in popular, predominantly white-produced artistic, literary, cinematic, and media renderings of the region, that a unique cultural narrative about the South exists, which is constituted by various referents that include stereotypes, tropes, and representations. These referents are drawn from actual historical events and figures, and

also from embellished or fictional cultural productions. They function collectively to circulate and perpetuate assumptions about the South to both southerners and non-southerners. I reject the idea that there is one unified notion of "The South." Rather, the southern cultural memory that I analyze in this dissertation is a multitude of fluid and shifting fictions that speak to incoherence and dissonance even as they create an identifiable notion of the South. These diverse fictions produce varied responses and interpretations but are all informed by the dominant images and narratives of the South.

McPherson argues that, in the case of the South, a history that validates, excuses, or overlooks the oppression and violence perpetrated by elite white heteronormative southerners is privileged over a history that gives voice and agency to poor whites, African Americans, queer people, and other marginalized groups that have historically been victims of that violence and oppression. She underscores the contradictory nature of multiple southern histories by pointing out that

> in many ways, Americans can't seem to get enough of the horrors of slavery, and yet we remain unable to connect this past to the romanticized history of the plantation, unable or unwilling to process the emotional registers still echoing from the eras of slavery and Jim Crow. (3)

She describes a process of dissociation whereby the horrors of violence during slavery and segregation become removed from more favorable aspects of those historical contexts, such as the plantation home and its attendant nostalgic narratives. For example, the dominant narrative of nostalgia for plantation life, with its wealth and elegance, works to obscure the counter-narratives of slaves' lived experiences. The slave forced to bear her master's children and the body of the lynched black man hanging from a tree fade into the background, while the elegant southern belle and the dashing Confederate

hero come to the fore. Elderly slaves become the jovial mammy and the faithful, happy Tom (Bogle 6, 9; Wallace-Sanders 2). The fact that these nostalgic images are fictional is irrelevant; they have been reproduced and deployed with such frequency and enthusiasm in film, art, literature, advertising, and politics that they have come to obscure or even erase accounts of southern history and culture that are more firmly grounded in historical fact.

In his essay, "Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South," Jim Grimsley joins McPherson in taking issue with the ways in which racial privilege skews representations of the region's history. He goes one step further, however, by adding that heterosexual privilege has also worked to obscure or marginalize histories and representations of queer people. Grimsley emphasizes the repercussions for gay southerners of promoting an idealized and unified notion of the South by describing the problems that arise when dominant cultural narratives about the region which are inherently heterosexist or homophobic are allowed to proliferate and become the most visible. He wonders aloud whether gay southerners in particular are really invested in upholding a cultural history that all but rendered their lives invisible or inferior: "Do we have a southern gay identity? Do we buy all that talk about the past, about our supposedly common heritage? Is there any truth in it all?" (231). The events and images that configure prevailing southern cultural narratives – slavery, segregation, the Civil War, antebellum courtship rituals, evangelism and Southern Baptist doctrine, for example – present few, if any, possibilities for a visible queer southern history. Gay and queer southerners are all too aware of how hegemonic conceptions of the South elide their very

existence, yet certain fictional texts capitalize on the flaws, contradictions, and ellipses in these conceptions to show that southern queerness is always already a possibility.

The Paradox of Southern Queerness

The myopic and nostalgic mirage of an elegant or heroic southern memory relies on the suppression of certain historical realities, such as racism and moral and sexual deviance, for its continued survival as one of the dominant cultural narratives of the region. Given the social, religious, and legal prohibitions against infidelity, secularism, miscegenation, and other moral "transgressions," and the celebration of rigidly proper and heterosexual figures such as the belle and her beau in nostalgic representations of the South, it is hardly surprising that gender non-conformity and same-gender desires do not figure into prevailing conceptions of southern culture. However, I argue that therein lies a curious paradox about southern queerness, because the region's unique history actually enables queer cultural counter-narratives while seemingly refuting their very possibility.

Dominant cultural narratives inscribe compulsory heterosexuality, gender conformity, and homophobia onto representations of the South. Popular representations of the Old South cultivate and uphold images of sexual purity and propriety through attentiveness to piety, chastity, and fidelity, while more contemporary representations propagate images of southerners as socially and politically conservative, even bigoted and uneducated. However, despite the prominence of these dominant narratives in southern cultural discourse, there are counter-histories that reveal the South's capacity for gender non-conforming identities, same-sex intimacy, and other potentially queer

identities, desires and behaviors. It is in the folds of the contradictions described by McPherson and Grimsley that my project envisions a space for a queer South to flourish. For example, while the most enduring image of white southern women is arguably the belle who embodied refined, delicate and stereotypically feminine white womanhood, the rural, pre-industrial landscape demanded that working-class women of all races perform manual labor that necessitated strength, toughness and rugged physicality, work that conferred upon them a physical identity we might consider masculine (Jones 2002, Walker 2003, Edwards 2000).

The tension between dominant and counter-narratives also plays out in the construction of spaces related to family, war, work, and the home. The presumed pervasiveness and moral superiority of the heteronormative nuclear family are undermined by the narratives of sexual immorality or deviance it attempts to suppress, such as the white plantation master's rape of and infidelity with black slave women, the tearing apart of slave families sold to different owners, and the murders and lynchings of black husbands, fathers and sons (Davis 1983, Wells 1997).

The South during slavery and Reconstruction necessitated the creation of single-sex spaces where intimate relationships could be formed. The close bond between the plantation mistress and the "mammy" or maid allowed for physical and emotional intimacy, while women left at home during wartime sought solace in each other's company and shared activities (Knowlton 1997). Male migrant workers during the Depression traveled, worked, and lived together in single-sex spaces such as railroad labor camps, while Civil War battlefields and encampments were also same-sex spaces for soldiers that fostered loyalty, camaraderie, and mutual dependency (Allsop 1972,

Anderson 1967). I therefore approach the South as a concept that inherently possesses a queer potentiality through its subversive appropriation of heteronormative structures – spatial, relational, and identificatory - with these processes of appropriation occurring within an identifiably regional context.

So far, relatively little critical attention has been given to queer history and culture in the South compared to other regions. Roger Corber notes that

> the focus on urban lesbian and gay subcultures located on the East and West coasts…reflects an unstated assumption about lesbian and gay identities, that their formation has been contingent upon urbanization, the declining importance of religion and the family, and the rise of consumer capitalism in American society. (394)

Existing literature has privileged urban migration narratives, or has assumed that queer history has only been visible and recorded in urban spaces because they are more amenable to community formation (Davis and Kennedy 1993; D'Emilio, Armstrong, Stein 2004; Chauncey 1995). These urban migration narratives are predicated on the assumptions that queerness can become visible and legible in the city because there are less judgment and surveillance from parents, neighbors and teachers, a larger dating scene, greater acceptance due to a more diverse population, and access to queer facilities such as centers, clubs, bars and social organizations (Weston 1995).

However, as Donna Jo Smith notes, in skewing representations of queer regional history towards analyses of certain coastal urban communities and a few major southern cities such as Atlanta (Chesnut and Gable 1997), Louisville (Williams 1997), and Raleigh (Sears 2001), queer studies in anthropology and sociology ignore other key sites - and, I would add, texts: -

> If the lesbian/gay cultural imaginary has mapped visibility or outness onto urban bar cultures, it has mapped the closet onto rural areas, small towns, and small cities. These sites, which predominated in the South in the mid-twentieth century, are conceptualized as spaces of uniform, hegemonic oppression, with minimal, if any, lesbian/gay visibility and community. (381)

Smith's essay highlights the potential dangers in allowing certain images and narratives to take precedence in the creation of a queer regional discourse, claiming that the emphasis on urban migration and bar culture establishes an identity model that "has led our histories to privilege certain kinds of visibility over others" (373). But even as cultural narratives of the South, including the rural South, expand and shift to represent a climate that is more tolerant or accepting of queerness, there is still an unevenness in the kinds of lives and experiences that are represented.

In 2012, a white gay man from rural Georgia named Lee Thompson became a reality television star when he appeared on the TLC show, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo.* The show is named after his niece, the child beauty pageant contestant who first found fame in another reality show, *Toddlers and Tiaras,* and who has affectionately named Thompson "Uncle Poodle." Thompson, who claimed in an interview that he is "as redneck as I can be," insists that, "things are changing [in the South]." Thompson lives in Milledgeville with his husband where he claims they "go to the same bars as everybody else," and are "all part of the same community." Far from confirming the image of the South as a stronghold of homophobic vitriol and violence, Thompson reveals that the "forty or fifty" queer people living in Milledgeville are "all open about [their sexuality]" and "if there's people who have a problem with it, they keep it to themselves" (web).

Southern studies scholar Karen Cox suggests that Thompson's appearance on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and his acceptance by his family of self-proclaimed

rednecks "has opened people's eyes to something many have never considered: that you can be openly gay and accepted in the rural South" (web). Yet while Thompson enjoys a level of visibility and acceptance that may not have been possible in decades past, he nonetheless fits the category of those who experience the most privilege in queer regional discourse. Indeed, queer geographies have been weighted toward making visible the history of white gay men (Fellows 1996, Bell 2000), and queer southern studies are no exception. While white lesbians fare reasonably well (Segrest 1985, Cragin 1997, Holloway 1997), they are still the subject of far fewer studies than white gay men. Scholarship focused on groups such as trans people, bisexuals, and queers of color has been even more scarce. A modest number of anthologies about southern queerness have emerged in recent years, most notably John Howard's *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* in 1997 and Dews and Law's *Out in the South* in 2001, but again their focus has been primarily on the most mainstream sexual and gender identities.

Only relatively recently have some scholars begun to consider how spaces and identities in the queer South might be viewed in terms of their multiplicity, contingency, and ambiguity. Mary Gray's ethnography of queer youth in rural Kentucky (2009), E. Patrick Johnson's oral history project with southern gay black men (2008), and James T. Sears's biographical essay on the life of transsexual Gordon Langley Hall (1997) comprise some of the scholarship on more marginalized forms of queerness in the region.

The inattention shown to female-bodied queerness is perhaps even more surprising given the proliferation of fictional and other creative texts that situate female-bodied queerness at the center of their narratives. It has been forcibly written into southern history through fictional and creative media such as novels by Dorothy Allison,

Fannie Flagg, Alice Walker, Carson McCullers, and Ann Shockley, poetry by Minnie Bruce Pratt, memoirs by Laura Milner, Mab Segrest, and Rita Mae Brown, and films particularly - although not exclusively - in adaptations of novels by queer female-bodied authors such as Walker's *The Color Purple,* Allison's *Cavedweller* and *Bastard Out of Carolina,* and Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes*. These texts, including those studied in this project, frequently address and challenge the sexist, racist, and homophobic socio-political structures in operation in the South that have historically suppressed marginalized queer voices and images.

Despite these creative texts highlighting the significance of female-bodied queerness, few scholars have considered its effects on the creation and negotiation of cultural narratives about the region. Theorists and critics of southern women's writing such as Patricia Yaeger (2000) and Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks (1995) have paid scant attention to female-bodied queer people in their books, except for cursory nods to a few lesbian authors and characters. Even within the already marginalized fields of scholarship on southern women writers and southern queer writers, there is evidently a hierarchy that positions discussions of heterosexual cisgender women and gay cisgender men above discussions of more marginal queer identities. Scholarship addressing female-bodied queer people of color in literature constitutes an even smaller field, while any study of queer southern film is, for the most part, non-existent.

This project acts as a corrective to this critical oversight, moving chronologically through southern history to reveal how authors and filmmakers imagine female-bodied queerness within the context of significant events in the region's past. Chapter One examines two queer novels about the Civil War. The first of these texts is *High Hearts* by

Rita Mae Brown, which features homoeroticism and female-to-male crossdressing, while also offering a critique of marriage and the nuclear family. The second novel, *House of Clouds* by K.I. Thompson, tells the story of two women – one a Union Spy and one a Confederate sympathizer – who fall in love. These novels reimagine the Civil War battlefield and plantation house as inherently queer spaces because of the ways in which they foster intimate same-sex bonds and gender non-conformity. The Civil War necessitated gender segregation by sending men off to live and fight together in the hypermasculine arena of the battlefield, while forcing the women who were left behind to step into household and community leadership roles that men held previously. Both novels contain examples of same-sex attraction and cross-gender identification, making them ripe for queer analysis.

In Chapters Two and Three I turn my attention to two novels and their film adaptations set in the South in the first half of the twentieth century. Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* portray romantic relationships between women as being sites of emotional and physical refuge for women who escape abusive male partners. These texts undermine the institutions of heterosexuality and marriage, and they challenge gender norms which presume that a husband's natural inclination and responsibility is to protect his wife by positioning relationships between women as ultimately safe and desirable instead. The queer narratives in these novels and films are couched in the racial and sexual politics of the Jim Crow era, but their characters work against hegemonic ideals of gender and sexual normativity and white supremacist constructions of black womanhood to produce stories of liberation through resistance and love.

Although both novels were written post-Stonewall, they rely on the kinds of euphemisms and ellipses that one might expect to characterize sexual desire between women before Stonewall, that is in a time when queer culture and same-sex relationships were largely hidden from public view. Their Hollywood adaptations, directed by Jon Avnet and Steven Spielberg respectively, were subject to an added layer of queer erasure, presumably to make them more palatable to a mainstream heterosexual, gender-normative, and potentially conservative audience. This chapter therefore explores how the novels and films queer certain characters and interactions so that readers and viewers can identify them as queer, while still adhering to the politics of visibility that governed the period in which these stories are set. In analyzing both novels and films, I uncover the varied processes and mechanisms by which different media can render the same queer narratives visible.

Chapter Four examines two novels set in lesbian feminist communities in the post-Stonewall South, one in the urban hub of Nashville, and one in a small rural town in Georgia. Historiography of lesbian-feminist organizing in the late 1960s and 1970s has focused heavily on the actions of a few prominent groups and individuals in New York and the northeast, such as Radicalesbians, The Furies, Rita Mae Brown, Charlotte Bunch, and Ti-Grace Atkinson (Brown, 1999, Brownmiller 2000, Jay 2000). The novels discussed in this chapter challenge the dominance of northeastern lesbian-feminist histories, and the subsequent assumption that women in the South were apolitical and inactive. Moreover, they take spaces that dominant queer representations have ignored or dismissed as hostile and regressive, and reconfigure them as sites of liberation and cooperation.

Say Jesus and Come to Me by Ann Allen Shockley tackles the double bind of racism in the lesbian feminist community and homophobia in the black church for its main protagonist, an African-American lesbian minister named Myrtle Black. Shockley's novel attempts to grapple with the supposed incompatibility of black church evangelism and second wave lesbian-feminist politics by merging rhetoric from both spheres and finding their common causes. As a result, Shockley offers a counter-narrative about black lesbians living in the Bible Belt that refutes the suggestion that blackness, lesbianism, feminism, and Christianity are inevitably mutually exclusive.

In *Cavedweller by* Dorothy Allison, small towns and rural landscapes become recognizably southern backdrops for a coming-of-age story about a white-trash tomboy named Cissy. As such, this chapter considers the role that the vivid depiction of certain locales plays in conjuring up and then recreating southern memory in ways that give voice to the marginalized poor white class. Cissy comes to achieve a queer subjectivity without the influence of the queer urban mecca, and instead internalizes her process of identity development by immersing herself in intense periods of self-reflection in the all-consuming silence and darkness of the womblike caves she explores every weekend.

Both Shockley and Allison offer perspectives on how to conceive of female-bodied queerness in the South after Stonewall and in the midst of a lesbian feminist movement that, at least in other parts of the country, was thriving and visible. Shockley explores how southern black women may have been able to carve a niche for themselves in the movement so that they might fully participate in effecting socio-political change. Conversely, Allison explores how queer self-actualization might occur in the absence of an identifiable queer culture or community. In both cases, the authors highlight figures

that are pushed to the margins in both fictional and non-fictional texts about queer regionalism.

These chapters interrogate how novels and films have worked to resist interrelated systems of oppression, or, where relevant, how they have maneuvered within them. For example, I will explore how racism, classism, and heterosexism have combined to compound silences and further deny the possibility of female-bodied queer people of color and female-bodied poor or working class people. I am particularly interested in how fictional texts both draw on actual histories and invoke popular cultural tropes about the region in order to revise them in the creation of a new queer southern past. The analyses that follow reveal the strategies that novels and films employ to navigate the systemic conditions that frame queer identities in the South.

Chapter One

"Behaving Like a Lady:" Crossdressing Women and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Civil War Novels

On the verandah of Dickey House stand three demure young women, all dressed in elegant satin gowns, with flowers and jewels adorning their intricate hairstyles. They look out across the plantation's expansive garden where magnolia trees flank the flawlessly manicured lawn, and pink and white azalea bloom in the spring sunshine. Three handsome young suitors in their finest formal wear, each one bearing a charming albeit slightly nervous smile, ascend the spiral staircase to take their place alongside the belles. From the lawn below, mothers and fathers fix proud but wistful gazes on their children. Tonight's party signals the young people's departure from the family home and their growing into adulthood. As is custom for an occasion such as this one, the blushing young couples are on their best behavior, observing all the formalities of this traditional courtship ritual under the watchful eye of their chaperones.

The date is April 21st, 2012, and these young southern belles and beaux are posing for prom photos against the lavish backdrop of the antebellum plantation at Stone Mountain Park in Georgia. Should there be any further doubt that this scene is not unfolding in 1850, two of the couples are interracial, with white women posing with Black and Asian partners. The image is fraught with anachronisms and with a studied obliviousness to the troubling politics of the location as the radiant young couples capitalize on all the surface charm and beauty of the plantation home to ensure they leave with the perfect prom picture. The spectacle of this prom photoshoot captures the essence of Stone Mountain Park's identity crisis.

Located less than sixteen miles from the former Civil Rights hub of downtown Atlanta, the park is a Disneyfied memorial to the Confederate Army. A Yogi Bear 4D Movie Adventure, a soft play area for tots, zip lines, miniature golf, and several overpriced fast food joints surround Stone Mountain itself, upon which is a carving of Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis, and Robert E. Lee. The carving was the brainchild of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which bought the deeds to the north face of the mountain in 1916 (Martin 191). The Daughters, an organization devoted to honoring those who served in the army of the Confederate States of America, also received funding for the project from the Ku Klux Klan, who held meetings at the mountain in the early twentieth century. The park's mish-mash of attractions desperately attempts to navigate the thorny question of how to commemorate the Confederacy and capitalize on the market value of southern pride in the post-Civil Rights era. Recognizing that in the region's tourism industry, family-friendly amusements are a bigger financial draw than the bloodshed of war and the barbarity of slavery, the park struggles to reconcile its glorification of white southern history with a racially diverse visitor demographic and a social climate increasingly intolerant of racism.

The park's misguided attempts to merge the incompatible speak to the larger conundrum of how to understand the South as a whole and as a site comprised of multiple histories and narratives, especially where the Civil War is concerned. This chapter examines two novels that grapple with the conflicts and contradictions in contemporary renderings of the antebellum era and the Civil War. *High Hearts* (1987) by Rita Mae Brown and *House of Clouds* (2007) by K.I. Thompson invoke a range of one-dimensional stereotypes and motifs found in Civil War representations, then question their viability

and authenticity by redeploying them with more nuanced and critical understandings of sexual and racial politics. As the couples in the prom photoshoot exemplify, even our contemporary condemnation of slavery cannot fully diminish the plantation's associations with romanticism, refinement, and blossoming young love for some people. Indeed, when considering dominant narratives of the antebellum South, even in the context of reframing them with historically accurate counter-narratives of violence and poverty, it is arguably impossible to dispense with the more popular tropes of regional exceptionalism altogether. Moonlight and magnolias, heterosexual courtship rituals, Confederate heroism, the benevolent master and mistress, the belle, and the beau are so deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination of the deep South that counter-narratives such as the novels by Thompson and Brown have to cite them in order to be recognized as dissenting contributions to the existing scripts of southern memory.

Popular representations of the plantation as an idyllic Eden on which slaves lived peacefully with their beneficent and kindhearted masters owe a debt to the plantation literature tradition. Many examples of plantation literature were written in response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852), which went on to become the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century. Abolitionists received *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with "wild enthusiasm" (Donovan 27), even though Stowe's own faithful slave portrayals were problematic. Proponents of slavery were so enraged by her work of "abolitionist propaganda" (Kaufman 19) that they began publishing their own novels that countered Stowe's depictions and messages. Their stories promoted a vision "of a South in which slaves and masters enjoy a mutually supportive, familial bond that is only severed by the ignorant or greedy machinations of abolitionists" (MacKethan web).

One example of such a plantation utopia is in Thomas Nelson Page's story, *Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia,* in which a white aristocrat encounters a former slave named Sam on a country road and asks him about his time on the plantation. Sam replies,

> Dem wuz good ole times, marster — de bes' Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac'! Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do—jes' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an' cleanin' de hosses, an' doin' what de marster tell 'em to do; an' when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont 'em out de house, an' de same doctor come to see 'em whar 'ten' to de white folks when dey wuz po'ly. Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin'. (9)

Page's story goes on to portray a freed slave who can only reminisce wistfully about the "good ole times" on the plantation, and who mourns his master's passing as though he had lost his most cherished family member. Stories such as *Marse Chan* gained popularity among white southerners who yearned for the serenity of their pre-war South, while drawing contempt from those who saw faithful slave narratives as insidious ploys to downplay or deny white people's ruthless and violent behavior.

Authors in the plantation literature tradition also used the faithful slave trope to persuade readers that abolition was a mistake, not because it threatened to divest whites of their power and wealth but because it would leave vulnerable, childlike slaves unable to fend for themselves. Works such as *The Planter's Northern Bride* by Caroline Lee Hentz (1854), *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* by Mary Eastman (1852), *The Lofty and the Lowly* by Maria J. McIntosh (1853), and *The Master's House* by Thomas B. Thorpe (1854) featured slaves who proclaimed that their owners ensured they were happy and well cared for and who balked at the idea of ever being separated from them. The rhetoric of plantation literature vindicated white southerners; they may have lost the war, but theirs was a moral victory over the Yankees who had to live with the guilt of committing formerly contented slaves to a life of homelessness, starvation, and deprivation.

Yet while plantation literature may seem outdated to some contemporary audiences, the fondness for some of the stories and tropes from this genre has endured. Many of plantation literature's basic principles - particularly those of the faithful slave and the idealized vision of the planation - still enjoy popularity with contemporary audiences. The thousands of tourists who visit plantation homes throughout the southern states every year and the legions of fans that participate in *Gone With the Wind* online communities and fan fiction sites are a testament to plantation literature's legacy. Catherine Clinton dubs plantation literature "Confederate porn" that even today is "dragged out furtively and in private," and produces "responses that range from delight to revulsion" (204). Despite everything they know about the harsh realities of nineteenth-century life for slaves and poor whites in the South, many consumers of southern popular culture are still reluctant to abandon their faith in the possibility of a more virtuous and romantic bygone era.

In *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Planation, 1936-1968,* Michael Bibler turns his attention to a number of twentieth-century queer novels set on plantations. These include Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order* (1944). While these novels make reference to familiar tropes from nineteenth-century plantation literature and use the plantation as their primary setting, their ideology is quite different. Bibler claims that the twentieth-century antebellum novels he studies "share one remarkably consistent purpose: to imagine the possibilities for social equality in the South" (3).

Both novels discussed in this chapter perform similar work, challenging prevailing assumptions about white planter-class families and sexualities and making fictional queer interventions into representations of the Civil War. *High Hearts* and *House of Clouds* also employ a critique of the pro-slavery ideology that characterized many white-authored antebellum and Reconstruction-era portrayals of nineteenth-century southerners in the plantation literature genre. Brown and Thompson reference those portrayals indirectly and then manipulate them to construct a southern history that gives agency to marginalized voices, especially those belonging to female-bodied queer people and enslaved Blacks. *High Hearts* emphasizes the queer potentiality of the army camp and battlefield, weaving in narratives of cross-dressing and homoeroticism, while *House of Clouds* is a love story between two women, a southern belle and a Union spy. Although the physical manifestations of queerness in these novels are markedly different, they do share a queer thematic and rhetorical sameness in their destabilization of the nuclear family and their denunciation of heterosexual marriage. This chapter will unpack the ways in which these novels draw on existing plantation and Civil War histories – both real and imagined – and exploit their inherent ability to make queer identities, relationships, and behaviors recognizable.

High Hearts is Brown's sixth novel and one of many to feature queer storylines and characters. Brown first gained notoriety as a lesbian feminist activist in the early 1970s. As a member of the Lavender Menace, she protested the women's movement's exclusion of lesbians at the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970 and went on to form the lesbian feminist collective known as the Furies the following year. As an author, she is perhaps best known for her debut novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), a coming-of-age

story about a tomboyish girl named Molly Bolt who realizes she is a lesbian and spends her teenage and college years trying to build relationships and find community with other lesbians. Queer themes recur throughout Brown's oeuvre, with *Six of One* (1978), *Bingo* (1989), *Venus Envy* (1993), and *Alma Mater* (2001) all featuring same-sex relationships and lesbian or bisexual protagonists. Yet aside from *Rubyfruit Jungle,* Brown's queer works have not garnered critical appraisal, either because of their dubious aesthetic qualities and genre fiction status, or because they failed to make any significant commercial or cultural impact. The queer themes in *High Hearts* receive a cursory mention in an article on concealment in Brown's fiction by Nicole Décuré, but otherwise scholars have overlooked this novel altogether, making it ripe for analysis in this project.

High Hearts tells the story of Geneva Chatfield, an impetuous southern belle who disguises herself as a man so that she can join her new husband Nash as a soldier in the Confederate Army. Geneva is the daughter of Henley and Lutie Chatfield, wealthy planters and horse breeders. Lutie has spent much of her life trying to inculcate proper belle attitudes and behavior in Geneva but with little success. Instead, Geneva develops prowess in battle and adopts a convincing male persona. Her stereotypically masculine attributes antagonize her mother and humiliate and disgust the effeminate, cowardly Nash. As Geneva grows increasingly distant from Nash, she embarks on a homoerotic affair with the Colonel in her Cavalry unit, Mars Vickers, whose attraction to Geneva begins before he discovers that she is female-bodied. The character of Geneva therefore offers an intriguing commentary on the institutions of marriage, heterosexuality, and family that buttressed ideals of white southern respectability and superiority.

Prior to the Civil War, the social status of women in the planter class depended on their adherence to a code of conduct that demanded duty to the family, competence in domestic matters, and their ability to be “modest, gentle, kind, quiet, industrious, and naturally innocent and pious and thought” (Censer 11). Incidentally, these are all attributes that Geneva lacks. Many of these women internalized these social scripts about supposedly ideal forms of womanhood, embracing their status as dainty, delicate ladies in need of care and protection. Giselle Roberts claims that the belle strove to uphold her family honor by “embodying the Southern feminine ideal,” and asserted her “elite femininity” by “pursuing her ‘natural’ role as a wife and mother” (5). One young belle named Gertrude Clanton wrote in her diary, “I delight in *looking* up and love to feel my woman’s weakness protected by man’s superior strength” (qtd. in Edwards 21). A number of women wrote to their Governors, asking them to exempt the men of the house from military service on the grounds that they were too incompetent to manage a household and business on their own and were vulnerable to violent attacks from slaves. These letters reveal the extent to which women of the planter class not only internalized scripts about gender roles but played a role in perpetuating them as well.

Geneva, however, is a character crafted from the lesser reproduced histories of elite white women who refused to comply with the debilitating expectations of their race, gender, and class. Accounts of these women describe the ways in which social and economic upheaval necessitated a shift in gender roles, forcing women of the planter class to either manage a household and plantation or seek work outside the home. While Giselle Roberts and Laura Edwards found evidence to substantiate the image of the belle as weak, submissive, and fearful, others such as Crystal Feimster, Bonnie Tsui, DeAnn

Blanton, Lauren Cook, and Jane Censer present evidence that suggests many young women of the planter class had agency and complexity, not least because they defied the gendered expectations placed on them. For example, some elite white women learned to use pistols, hatchets, and tomahawks to defend themselves and their homes from slave insurrections and marauding Union soldiers while white men were away from home (Feimster 19). In LaGrange, Georgia, the legendary female militia group known as the Nancy Harts formed to protect their communities (Clifford Smith 75). Geneva is arguably one of the few fictional representations of the southern belle that is more closely aligned with these women than with the likes of Gertrude Clanton.

High Hearts is in fact a work of fiction based on an actual trend of women disguising themselves as men to join their husbands in war. Blanton and Cook list numerous women who followed their husbands on to the battlefield, and many of these continued to serve even after their husbands were injured or killed (43-4). While a significant portion of the female-bodied, cross-dressing Civil War soldiers fought for the Union, a few accounts of southern women going to war do exist. Given that some female remains dressed in Confederate uniforms were later excavated by chance, there is no way of knowing how many there actually were, leading Richard Hall to speculate that the number of women in the Confederate Army could have been "seriously underreported" (*Patriots* 106).

Also absent from much of the historiography is a queer reading of the motivations behind military cross-dressers, and this oversight makes *High Hearts* a crucial intervention into the history of female-bodied queer women in the Civil War. While Blanton and Cook discuss women who followed their husbands out of love and appear to

be the inspiration for Geneva's character, these historians dismiss any suggestion that queer women went to war. According to Blanton and Cook, any stories about lesbians on the battlefield are "inconclusive," and the logic of such suggestions is "counterintuitive" because "why would a lesbian join the army, where she would be surrounded by men?" Furthermore, they contend that, rather than being a worthwhile contribution to the historical literature on queer lives in the South, "any focus on the sexuality of women soldiers is nothing more than a smokescreen that obscures consideration of their military record" (201).

Blanton and Cook's dismissal of a queer reading comes despite their findings that cross-dressing soldiers engaged in non-heteronormative and gender non-conforming behaviors. For example, one soldier named Sarah Edmonds took women out on dates (Blanton and Cook 54), while another, Albert Cashier (named Jennie Hodgers at birth), had a female sweetheart, and continued to identify and live as a man until his death in 1915 (Tsui 51-64; Eggleston 16-22). Rather than speculate that female-bodied people went to war to more freely express their masculinity and to escape the confines of enforced femininity at home, historians have chosen to focus their discussions on prostitutes who plied their trade among lonely and sex-starved soldiers and romantic tales of women who followed their husbands out of sheer devotion. When scholars have found no evidence to suggest that prostitution or love were motivating factors, they have implied that the crossdressing females were simply diehard patriots who went to war to defend their region (Hall, *Battlefront;* Tsui 14).

Brown's novel, then, offers an alternative to these readings of cross-dressing women, taking the well-documented narrative of the devoted young bride following her

husband to war and establishing a queer context for it using three main strategies. First, Brown imbues the heterosexual southern belle with masculinity, making her a transgressor of gender norms. Second, she sets up the Confederate Army's encampment as an inherently queer space where men are forced into close and often intimate physical proximity with one another, and, consequently, where the threat of unwanted homosexual advances is ever-present. Third, Brown posits supposedly conventional forms of marriage – those between white, upper class, heterosexual couples - as unsustainable and fraught with mistrust, resentment, and unhappiness. I want to turn to an examination of these strategies and of Brown's reworking of plantation literature motifs in order to unpack the critique they offer of the South's hegemonic narratives about sexual and racial politics. The scope of this chapter is also to determine what critical addition Brown is making to the scholarly and popular representations of female-bodied queerness in this historical period.

Geneva is characterized as an atypical belle from the beginning of the novel when, on her wedding night, she is described as having "broad shoulders," "nonexistent hips," and a "long, lean, and boyish" body, as well as an insatiable sexual appetite (Brown 19). When she decides to disguise herself as a man so she can join the army, her half-sister concurs that given Geneva's small breasts and with some dirt rubbed on her face, she could feasibly pass as a man (54). Her exceptional riding ability, her reckless courage in battle, and her willingness to engage in stereotypically masculine behavior such as drinking and brawling counter the weaknesses in her disguise, namely her feminine voice and plain but delicate features.

Geneva's masculinity is emphasized in the contrast between her and the other white women in the novel who choose to remain at home and engage in roles reserved especially for them such as sewing uniforms and nursing wounded soldiers. Nash heaps scorn on Geneva when he compares her to the Colonel's wife Kate Vickers. According to Nash, Kate is "the most beautiful woman in the world," who is "doing what she's supposed to be doing: nursing the sick and behaving like a lady" (386). Nash is so repelled by Geneva's newly expressed masculinity, he confides in her brother that his feelings for her have changed, that "lately there didn't seem to be much desire on his part" (198). He even thinks of other women, "women who looked and acted like women" (204), when they make love. Initially, when Geneva senses that Nash's affections are dwindling, she laments the loss of her desirability, saying, "he says that after the war, when I go back to being normal, that everything will be all right" (377). With this statement, Geneva belabors the value that gender-conformity – or what Nash considers "normality" – has in the development and maintenance of heterosexual relationships.

Nash's escalating feelings of emasculation underpin his physical aversion to Geneva, who progresses rapidly through several masculine rites of passage. When a fellow soldier in the regiment challenges Geneva's masculinity by calling her a "sister boy," she retaliates by kicking him to the ground, then injuring his genitalia in an attempt to affirm her masculinity in front of the other men. Her attack also compensates for her lack of masculine cues in other regards such as her voice and her smooth skin (88). Immediately following the brawl, Colonel Vickers challenges Geneva (who is now going by the name Jimmy) to a horse race, which she wins. Her prize is that she is allowed to stay in the regiment, even though Vickers believes her to be an underage boy.

Vickers's newfound respect for Geneva as a skilled rider and a determined and gutsy soldier leads him to promote her, an action that publicly symbolizes Geneva's success at embodying and exhibiting masculinity. Nash struggles to accept Geneva's new position of power, particularly as her promotion means she has to give Nash orders. Worse still for Nash, he is ineffective in battle and possesses no discernible skill in riding or shooting. Nash's ineptitude as a soldier prompts Vickers to compare him unfavorably to Geneva, telling him that "Jimmy" is "twice the man you are" (172). Vickers's ongoing taunts, coupled with Geneva's growing popularity as a fierce fighter, only serve to exacerbate the tensions between the newlyweds. Incensed by Vickers' efforts to humiliate him in front of the regiment, Nash challenges him to a fight, at which point Geneva intervenes in an attempt to soothe the enmity between them. The confrontation between Nash and Vickers is also a pivotal moment in the development of Geneva's masculinity because, for the first time, her own husband fails to see her as a woman, saying "Shut up, or I'll knock the shit out of you" (173). His later confession to Geneva's brother that he no longer finds her attractive only confirms the success of her metamorphosis from belle to soldier, from woman to man.

In fact, the more masculine that Geneva appears, the more attractive she becomes to Colonel Vickers. What begins as a paternalistic fondness for "Jimmy" soon turns into homoerotic desire, and this transition is possible because of the ways in which the army encampment is constructed as an always already queer space. Physical proximity often takes surprisingly intimate forms; Brown writes, "When it rained the men slept in twos…The two would lie on the ground blanket, then put another blanket and rubber cover on top of themselves" (204). The soldiers verbally recognize the possibility of

queerness in camp with the language they use to mock one another. Homophobic slurs are a staple of their vocabulary as they use terms such as “cocksucker” and “sister boy” in rituals of mutual emasculation, and even Vickers taunts Nash for acting like “the Siamese twins of love” with Geneva. To the latter insult, Nash retorts, “I notice you giving [Jimmy] the glad eye!” (219), effectively outing Vickers as queer. If sharing blankets can be dismissed as a necessary measure to keep warm, the soldiers’ homophobic language and accusations of desire or sexual behavior between their comrades function as an inescapable acknowledgement that homoeroticism and perhaps even homosexuality is ever-present and does not go unnoticed in the regiment.

Vickers’ attraction to “Jimmy” manifests as an obsessive jealousy over his closeness with Nash and in relentless attempts to drive a wedge between them. In addition to constantly questioning Nash’s masculinity and his worth as a soldier, Vickers insists on calling him “Piggy,” hoping that his paternal and military influence over Geneva will cause her to see Nash the same way that he does. Then, at a party in camp where men are dancing with men (with one in each pairing taking the woman’s part), Vickers cuts in on a dance between Nash and Geneva, making a brazen physical intervention that supplants Nash as the focus of Geneva’s attention. This signals the onset of a queer love triangle in which Nash and Geneva present as a pair of male lovers, and Vickers’ fatherlike attachment to “Jimmy” takes on an increasingly erotic tone.

Moreover, Vickers’ gender becomes progressively more fluid as his queer relationship with Geneva develops. When they dance together, Geneva tells Vickers, “I don’t want to be the girl,” to which Vickers replies, “I’ll gladly be the girl. In fact, if there’s reincarnation, I want to come back as a woman” (105). This moment of double

cross-gender identification is yet another attempt by Brown to destabilize the gendered foundations upon which white upper-class southern society is built and to suggest the possibility of queer transgressions even in spaces that seem to be rigidly heteronormative and gender normative. Vickers also hopes that by becoming a woman, he will be able to enter into a socially sanctioned relationship with Jimmy, unaware that, ironically, that would still end up being a queer relationship. Thus, the counter-narrative that Brown creates renders the pair necessarily and unavoidably queer.

The queer attraction between Geneva and Vickers is solidified when, delirious with pain after receiving an injury in battle, he openly flirts with her and "coos" to her, "Jimmy, you hot too?" Immediately thereafter, Vickers discovers Geneva's true sex when he jumps into the river, and a naked Geneva jumps in to rescue him. Failing to comprehend that Geneva is a woman, Vickers sees her body and asks, "What's wrong with you?" before whispering, "Jimmy, you lost your cock" (372). When the truth about Geneva dawns on him, Vickers kisses her immediately, suggesting that he has wanted to do so all along but the taboo of two men openly expressing same-sex desire prevented him from doing so. After the discovery, Vickers still insists on calling Geneva "Jimmy," even in private. His refusal to see Geneva as a woman reaffirms that their relationship is predicated on queer desires, and that he himself is queer. Vickers is able to enter into a relationship that appears to others to be heterosexual because Geneva is female-bodied. However, his insistence that Geneva continue with her charade even after they have been intimate reveals the homoerotic subtext of his private fantasies.

The prevalence of homoeroticism on Brown's reimagined battlefield is just one feature of *High Hearts* that allows for a queer reading and that renders non-normative

sexualities and genders possible and visible in the novel. *High Hearts* also calls into question the legitimacy of narratives that situate white, upper class, heterosexual, married couples in a social and moral hierarchy above interracial, Black, same-sex, and cross class couples, whether married or not. In the process, the novel asserts that interlocking systems of oppression work together to police particular bodies and sexualities that threaten to upset, if not destroy, the social order. Geneva's family, friends and former slaves defy codes of conduct in order to create affirming kinship systems based on love and mutual respect. Brown, therefore, omits any discussion of the additional hardships and conflict such defiance might produce, opting instead to conceive of an alternative, perhaps fantastical, southern social order that is truly accepting and emancipatory.

The revelation that Geneva's father Henley was deeply in love with a slave woman with whom he fathered a child further complicates the sexual and racial politics of dominant narratives from the antebellum era. Henley's love for the slave disputes the assumptions that sex with Black women could only ever be reduced to demonstrations of power, or serving the functional purpose of growing the workforce. Brown's treatment of the slave woman is not without its problems. The slave woman is granted no agency in the novel and, in fact, is not even given a name. But Brown manages to hint at the possibility that sexual encounters between slave owners and slaves were not always coerced or violent and the power differential not always fixed. Henley expresses remorse and sorrow at his treatment of the slave woman he proclaims to love more than his wife. His last thoughts as he dies on the battlefield are of the unnamed slave woman: "Did she love me? Did she ever really love me?" (359) Brown invokes the narrative about slave women's vulnerability to rape by white men, and she hints at an alternative reading,

namely that interracial love could exist on the plantation and even be predicated on a white man's deep emotional attachment to a Black woman. Moreover, Henley's fear that his love may have been unrequited upends power relations on the plantation, positioning him as vulnerable and in need of validation from the woman who was supposed to be entirely dependent on him.

In contrast, in his marriage to Lutie, Henley says that they "have become as brother and sister in some fundamental ways" (193), lacking passion or romantic love. Lutie goes so far as to suggest that Henley have an affair with an attractive socialite if it would make him happy and fulfill him sexually. Meanwhile, Henley's enslaved, mixed-race daughter from his affair with the slave woman marries a white soldier. While both the Black and white communities caution the young couple against the hardships they will face together, the naysayers eventually realize that the slave and the soldier have a relationship based on mutual love and respect, and they grudgingly offer their blessing. Henley and Lutie's mutual acceptance of alternatives to monogamous marriage, along with the egalitarian nature of the relationship between the slave girl and the soldier, speak to the liberatory sexual politics that define the social structure of Brown's idealized antebellum South. The ideology of sexual freedom that characterizes the social, romantic and familial interactions in the novel creates a space for other forms of non-normative sexuality, namely queer identities and behaviors, to become actualized.

In the novel's epilogue, an elderly Geneva tells her grandchildren about life after the war, including the story of how Vickers left his loveless marriage to a beautiful, feminine aristocrat and married Geneva. But while they may have gone on to present as a conventional, heterosexual couple in the post-war years, Geneva and Vickers's

relationship will always be based on their initial homoerotic attraction to each other. Geneva also reveals that the widowed Lutie went on to marry Banjo Cracker, a poor, uneducated but honest and kind white man who fought alongside Geneva in the war. Together Lutie and Banjo raised orphans, gave land to the slaves whom they set free, and worked alongside them in the fields. But Geneva tells her grandchildren that regardless of the financial hardship that Lutie had to face, "the years after the war made [her] joyful. She had a purpose. She had love" (410). For Lutie and Banjo, Brown invokes the clichéd happy ending of the conventional romance narrative. However, Brown depicts their relationship as unusually egalitarian, based on mutual respect, and sharing domestic labor, including childrearing. Brown sidesteps the violence that continued post-emancipation and focuses instead on the ways in which the end of the war and Lutie's recent descent to the working class serve as equalizing mechanisms that promote fellowship and harmony among formerly disparate groups.

Lutie and Banjo, like Geneva and Vickers, and the soldier and slave girl, find love outside of social strictures, and in doing so they disrupt the carefully segregated categories of race, gender, and class upon which the region's social order depends. The result is that Brown's novel functions as a fantasy in which love can save or heal the dispirited, lonely and heartbroken, and make even the harshest and most divisive forms of oppression seem inconsequential. Brown sees stigmatized sexual, racial, and class groups as being necessarily aligned because of their status outside the boundaries of respectability and normativity, despite the differences between those groups. Brown's vision of a South in which disparate marginalized groups work cooperatively to achieve social progress is obviously idealistic, perhaps naively so. Characters reflect briefly on

their own misfortunes and then go on to perform transformative social justice work, dismantling subordinating structures and building integrated communities. Brown depicts the plantation as a site of cross-class and cross-racial cooperation, while the shifts in the South's wartime and post-war socio-economic landscape allow Brown to rethink the presumed authority of heterosexuality and gender conformity in dominant cultural narratives about the region.

Likewise, *House of Clouds* is a love story between two women that connects their social oppression and hope for liberation with that of the plantation's slaves. *House of Clouds* (2007) is the debut novel of lesbian author K.I. Thompson, about whom very little is known. Thompson has published three novels to date, and her short stories have appeared in a number of lesbian anthologies, but her work is yet to receive any critical attention. *House of Clouds* is nonetheless a fitting text for this project because, like *High Hearts,* it portrays racism, classism, and sexual and gender oppression as operating interdependently to subordinate marginalized groups and maintain the elevated social and economic status of a powerful (white, heterosexual, wealthy, and predominantly male) few.

The story centers around Laura, a southern belle, and Jordan, an actress and Union Spy, who fall in love despite their political differences. When Jordan escapes from the prison she was sent to for spying and Laura is also forced to run from the authorities when she shoots a man who tries to recapture Jordan, the couple turn to the Underground Railroad to hide before fleeing into Union territory. But more than evading arrest, the clandestine lovers also seek the anonymity of a new location so that they can be together and more freely express their love. Only when Laura is faced with restrictions on her own

autonomy and sexuality is she able to feel remorse for her own role in perpetuating the mistreatment of slaves.

As Laura experiences increasing pressure from her mother to marry a suitable man, she begins to scrutinize the institution of marriage, women's roles within it, and her feelings about her potential suitors. She looks first at her parents' marriage, wondering why her mother is so intent on seeing her married off when her own marriage to Laura's father is rife with disloyalty and bitterness. As Laura sees it, "the ideal relationship between a man and a woman was supposed to be romantic and filled with happiness and joy [but] her parents' fell far short of this perfection," and she speculates that "it must be miserable for both husband and wife" to be in a "loveless marriage" (116). The novel implies that the kind of unsustainable and unwanted marriage Laura witnesses is inevitable but at least serves a practical purpose. Martha, the family's maid and also her father's mistress, advises her: "not many women marry for love. Men neither. Love grows with time when you gets to know the one you married in a way you can't know before. You'll see" (38). Her father echoes this sentiment, telling her that "sometimes marriage is less about love and more about companionship. Even if love does not flourish, becoming friends and enjoying each other's company can be vastly fulfilling" (266). Laura's parents both encourage her to accept a proposal from Preston Young, an intelligent, respectable, wealthy man, who is a good father to his children but whom Laura has no romantic feelings for.

For Laura, the notion of marriage being functional and enacted like a business deal is contrary to the fairytale ideal that she had always believed was possible. After dancing with several suitors at her cousin's wedding, Laura finds them all lacking. She

writes in her journal, “When will I meet someone who makes me feel?” (29) For all their qualities – wealth, stability, handsomeness, promising political futures – the men, especially Preston Young, Laura’s most persistent suitor, fail to excite Laura emotionally or physically. Heterosexual courtship and marriage are staple tropes of popular antebellum romance narratives about the white planter class but Thompson recasts those tropes as undesirable. She implies that restrictive customs and power imbalances will structure the future of the belle who faces an arranged marriage. In the process, she creates a queer romance that provides a more favorable counter-narrative, suggesting that the fairytale ideal is attainable if she dispenses with the requirement that her partner be male.

By contrast, Laura finds that “being with Jordan was so much more pleasurable and exciting than the company of men” (304). At first, with no context to understand her romantic desire for Jordan, Laura is drawn to her because she represents a life that Laura wants. Jordan is employed as an actress and is therefore mobile and financially self-sufficient, believing it to be “a waste for her to be married off to someone who neither appreciated her humor nor her intellect, and for her to spend her days tending to children and mindless household tasks” (55). Laura, on the other hand, has always depended on her father for money; when married, she will depend on her husband. She also has a duty to maintain her family’s honor, to marry someone her parents deem fit, and to rear a family of her own. Fantasizing about the freedom that Jordan’s life must bring her, Laura “wished she could be more like her, not a care in the world, an exciting job with her own income and the ability to go where she wanted whenever she wanted.” Jordan concurs that “the life of a married woman holds no appeal for me, and besides, I enjoy too much

the demands of the theatre" (156). In this instance, marriage and the theatre are set up as opposing realms, the former bringing confinement and stasis, the latter bringing autonomy. The theatre is set up as a liberatory safe space for queer expression and identity formation. It is a space in which "dandies" (70) are accepted, and where Jordan, whose "features were strong and not particularly feminine," and who drinks whiskey with men in the saloon, can experiment with gender, playing both men and women "with complete believability" (66).

The theatre/plantation home dichotomy parallels that of the North/South divide in the novel, in which the North symbolizes freedom for queer people and former slaves and where women are free to work and engage in political action, while the South is home to slavery and stifling social and marital customs. Jordan learns that her theatre is a stop on the Underground Railroad where slaves can hide out before the theatre manager helps transport them across Union lines, the novel's first example of queers and slaves aligning to undermine a social order and political system that subjugates them both. Also, in the same way that the theatre allows Jordan to crossdress and express her masculinity without fear of reproach, the North is a place where women can more freely practice deviant gender expression and sexuality. The elite white women who visit Laura's home pour contempt on the North for being a place where women are "accustomed to working in public," and can wear men's attire and where suffragettes threaten womanhood with their desire to "be like a man" (119).

While initially Laura balks at the "horrors" (119) that northern women are rumored to partake of, her desperation to escape the threat of an arranged, loveless marriage soon make Jordan's lifestyle appear more appealing. But what begins as envy

and admiration for the bold and non-conformist Jordan soon develops into a romantic attraction to her. With *House of Clouds,* Thompson takes the "romantic friendship" narrative that Lillian Faderman documents in *Surpassing the Love of Men,* and makes it unequivocally sexual. In her landmark historical text, Faderman draws on the work of historians and novelists and on the letters and diaries of women in the nineteenth century to demonstrate that women formed intensely emotional and erotically charged relationships long before the term "lesbian" came into popular usage and before Western society believed that two women could ever engage in sexual behavior with one another. Such friendships were not considered scandalous at the time and were even thought to be the norm among middle and upper class white women. A woman

> could share sentiment, her heart – all emotions that manly males had to repress in favor of 'rationality' – with another female. And regardless of the intensity of the feeling that might develop between them, they need not attribute it to the demon, sexuality, since women supposedly had none…The shield of passionlessness that a woman was trained to raise before a man could be lowered with another woman without fear of losing her chastity and reputation and health. (Faderman 159)

Romantic friendships allowed women to explore desire and attraction in socially acceptable ways but, as Faderman suggests, they also provided the means for women who were attracted to each other to engage in sexual behaviors under the guise of intense but platonic friendships.

Historians have cited the lack of references to explicit sexual activity in romantic friendship literature as a reason to be cautious about seeing these relationships as anything more than intimate emotional attachments between friends. Ott concedes that "the affections between young women had romantic undertones," but her findings that "few admitted in their letters or diaries that their relationships were sexual" (107) prevent

her from proceeding with a queer line of inquiry. Also, while much of the scholarship on romantic friendships by lesbian and queer historians has focused on Boston Marriages, that is, relationships between women in colleges in the Northeast, scholars of southern history have found evidence of similar relationships in the antebellum South. In some cases, the southern historians downplay the lesbian potential of romantic friendships, suggesting that "what we would label as sexual behavior between women may well have been seen in the mid-nineteenth century as simply a natural extension of already powerful ties of emotional attraction and dependence" (Faust 144). For Ott, even though "in some cases bonds between young women were substitutes for romantic relationships, many viewed their friends as sisters or part of a larger family" (81). For the sake of custom, etiquette and propriety, young white men and women of the planter class were carefully separated and supervised during their courtship. Romantic friendships between women were condoned and even encouraged because they supposedly fulfilled their need for physical and emotional intimacy without jeopardizing their sexual purity or social standing.

However, the diaries and letters of some of these women certainly suggest that they engaged in behaviors or ideas that would garner them the label "lesbian" in the twenty-first century. For example, Lucy Breckinridge, a southern belle from Virginia, wrote extensively about her distaste for marriage, echoing sentiments similar to Laura's in *House of Clouds:* "I envy girls who are free – they cannot realize the blessedness of it. I hate the idea of marrying…" (Breckinridge 175). Her pessimistic view of marriage as inevitably becoming loveless and mundane is reminiscent of Laura's when she writes,

> Very few people can expect happiness after they are married…The wife's love grows, becomes deeper, more patient and fonder than ever the girl's could be,

> while the husband's almost invariably cools down into a sort of patronizing friendship. (29)

For Breckinridge, "old-maidism" and being with a woman are preferable to heterosexual marriage. Indeed, her declarations of love for other women make the sexual potential of romantic friendships impossible to downplay. She writes, "I can never learn to love any man. Oh, what would I not give for a *wife!* Some pure, lovely girl who would be mine and never learn to love any male" (142). Of one Jennie Caldwell, Breckinridge writes,

> [we] are really in love with each other. I wish I could love Mr. Bassett as I love her. There was a mistake made about me by Mother Nature. She gave me a man's heart. I fall so desperately in love with girls and do not care a straw for gentlemen. (177)

Another belle, Clara Solomon from New Orleans, wrote in her diary about a woman named Belle, describing how she "gazed upon those cherry lips and with all the passion of my heart pressed them to mine" (qtd. in Faust 143). Thus, the romantic friendship narrative as it is represented in both fiction and historical scholarship is a frustrating distraction for contemporary lesbians and queer women who might yearn for some tangible information about or acknowledgement of their history.

In *House of Clouds,* Thompson seeks to address this critical oversight by extending the romantic friendship to what is perhaps its logical conclusion; an unambiguously sexual encounter. Jordan and Laura's initial intimacies are veiled in formalities and politeness such as clasping hands and chaste kisses on the cheek. Even as their attraction to each other grows, they are able to express their closeness quite publicly because of the prevalence and social permissibility of romantic friendships. But as Laura begins to articulate her feelings for Jordan internally, she realizes that the notion of a

romantic friendship does not provide adequate language for her to fully express herself, to name what she is or how she is feeling. Thompson never uses contemporary terms such as "lesbian," "queer," or "gay" to describe the characters. Instead, she relies on evasive expressions of desire to convey the erotic feelings that Laura and Jordan have for each other, reflecting both Laura's confusion and the language of the time. She writes, "Laura knew that Jordan felt something for her as well. But how they would ever come to terms with it was beyond her" (194). By referring to the relationship with an ambiguous "it," Thompson avoids imposing historically inaccurate labels on to her characters and narratives. Later, Laura thanks Jordan "for giving me something…I shall never forget" (277), again connoting her inner struggle to find a context and a language for her feelings and emerging identity. Even when Jordan thinks of the male "dandies" in the theatre where she works, she dismisses the idea of female equivalents as "absurd" (69) and, tellingly, the female equivalents are invisible enough not to be given a name. For Laura and Jordan, no context exists for them to frame or describe their relationship. Rather, the novel deals with feelings and actions but never attempts to label identities. Both women can eventually express their love for one another but still refer to their coupling as a "friendship," the only term available to them.

When Laura and Jordan eventually do have sex – or rather when they experience "the last intimacy left to them" (359), to borrow Thompson's euphemism – the scene is a satisfying addition to the literature on romantic friendships in the antebellum South. Thompson exploits the queer potentiality of romantic friendships, placing an unambiguously queer reading front and center. The novel insists that sexual relationships

occurred between women, filling the silences in the existing literature and turning tentative speculations into bold proclamations.

In this regard, *House of Clouds* becomes more than just a fictional rendering of female-bodied queerness in the antebellum South. The novel is an intentional contribution to the historiography that writes queer counter-narratives into our understanding of a particular historical moment. Thompson weaves actual political figures into the story, and they interact with her fictional characters that go on to play significant roles in the war. For example, Allen Pinkerton and Kate Warne, both detectives and spies in the Civil War, recruit Jordan to be a spy for Pinkerton's agency. As a spy, Jordan passes on intelligence to the Union that changes the course of the conflict, and for her service Abraham Lincoln thanks her during dinner at the White House. When Jordan and Laura become fugitives, Elizabeth Van Lew, an abolitionist who operates a Union spy ring and whose house is a stop on the Underground Railroad in Richmond, shelters the couple until it is safe for them to move on. By integrating her own characters and narratives with actual events, Thompson puts forward an alternative history that not only insists on the existence of female-bodied queer people, it claims they were instrumental in determining the outcome of the war as well.

In her author's note at the end, Thompson stresses that *"House of Clouds* is a novel, first and foremost," and a novel in which, "for narrative purposes," she has "taken certain liberties with the historical timeline." Thompson is also keen to point out that "any fiction author approaches the representation of historical figures with trepidation, for we are in the business of storytelling, not biography," and hopes "the reader will indulge [her] occasional manipulation of historical detail to serve the requirements of

[her] story" (n.pag.). Thompson's efforts to fuse the real and imagined result in a rethinking of cultural narratives about the Civil War that refuses to erase or downplay the existence and contribution of queer people. She rewrites the common Civil War romance about the belle waiting for her male sweetheart to come home from war and makes the belle pine instead for another woman.

House of Clouds does not radically revise the codes or structures of the romance narrative. On the contrary, Thompson utilizes a very conventional romantic plot despite the gender and sexuality of her protagonists. But the novel does contest the presumption of heterosexuality that underpins popular romantic representations of the war by shifting the focus to a same-sex couple. In the process, the novel creates a queer counter-narrative to the typical Civil War romance plot, suggesting that the landscape of southern cultural representation has the capacity to include queer characters and stories. With a dearth of documentary evidence about actual relationships between women in the antebellum South, romance novels such as *House of Clouds* become one of the few available points of identification for contemporary audiences seeking an acknowledgement or representation of queer history. Romance fantasies cannot supplant the facts presented in the historiography but they do call into question whether the facts tell the whole story, and they work in conjunction with the historical record to establish new narratives about the region.

Similarly, Rita Mae Brown ends *High Hearts* with a list of Virginia's dead soldiers that serves as a pointed reminder that her fictional tale is rooted in nonfictional events. In the absence of letters, diaries or other primary sources to verify the roles of female-bodied queer people in the war, Brown exploits a popular narrative that has the

potential to be queered, namely the prevalence of female crossdressing soldiers on the battlefield. Many historians have ignored altogether the possibility that such soldiers might be queer, preferring instead to see them as patriotic or intensely devoted to a male family member going off to war. Blanton and Cook reject outright any suggestion that crossdressing indicated a lesbian or queer sexuality. Brown, however, insists that we consider reading the crossdressing female soldier as queer in sexuality and also gender. In doing so, she offers an alternative script for the well-documented cases of heterosexual, gender conforming women who fought in the war. Along with Thompson, Brown offers up speculative interpretations of the Civil War, and their efforts contribute to counter-narratives that challenge the dominant heteronormative paradigm of queer representation in the antebellum era.

Chapter Two

"I just cain't wait to get to heaven:" Nostalgia and Idealized Queer Community in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Popular narratives of queer history in the United States have frequently compartmentalized the development of queer identities, politics, groups, and movements into two distinct phases: before and after Stonewall. According to these narratives, the Stonewall Riots that took place in Greenwich Village in the summer of 1969 ushered in a new era of activism and awareness in which the visibility of queer issues and queer Americans increased exponentially. In the national consciousness, Stonewall became the watershed moment that sparked a widespread rebellion against the laws that criminalized gay, lesbian, transgender, and transsexual people, highlighted the violence and intimidation perpetrated by the police and members of the public, and led to the emergence of visible queer social scenes.

There are, of course, limitations with a model that reduces queer history to two distinct periods. In celebrating Stonewall as the impetus for radical change, the popular discourse of queer history has given woefully inadequate attention to the many instances of protest and resistance that occurred prior to 1969, leading to the assumption that pre-Stonewall queer communities were inactive, if they even existed at all. The before/after model also simplifies the concept of visibility; it characterizes the pre-Stonewall period as the era of the closet, suggesting that prior to the riots, queer Americans lived in secrecy, isolation, anguish, and fear of being outed. By contrast, pride, visibility, community, and public displays of defiance characterize representations of the post-Stonewall era.

The effect of this over-simplification is that pre-Stonewall instances of activism, resistance, and community formation become inexplicable anomalies rather than essential components of queer socio-political development as a whole. In the before/after model, the homophile movement that preceded Stonewall becomes separate and distinct from the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement. Prominent homophile organizations that formed in the 1950s such as The Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis become noted for the covertness of their meetings and operations, their newsletters and magazines mailed in inconspicuous plain brown wrappers, and their misguided assimilationist methods. The gay liberation movement, on the other hand, is recognized for the formation of the Gay Liberation Front, the first advocacy group in the United States to use "gay" in its name, and the beginning of annual Gay Pride Marches in major cities on the east and west coasts in 1970. In short, the before/after model inspires a series of binaries – closeted/out, euphemisms/explicit language, assimilationist/resistant - that misrepresent the complexity of queer history in the United States. Moreover, popular representations of twentieth-century queer history have tended to overemphasize the roles that gay men and lesbians played in crucial historical moments while downplaying or even denying the contributions of transgender, transsexual, gender non-conforming, and bisexual people. The result of this erasure is that yet another misleading binary – gay/straight – is produced that shores up the over-simplified dichotomous framework within which activists, artists, and scholars have conceptualized the most visible queer historical narratives.

But despite the problematic constraints of the before/after model and its attendant binary oppositions, it has nonetheless had a profound effect on representations of

queerness in the twentieth-century United States. For example, the award-winning documentaries *Before Stonewall* and *After Stonewall,* the PBS production *Stonewall Uprising,* and Martin Duberman's book, *Stonewall,* attempt to give voice to some of the lesser-known actors in the history of queer social and political movements but still reify the binary model in the process.

I therefore face an uneasy predicament in the following chapters. While not wishing to endorse the binaries that I have just critiqued, I must acknowledge that they inform and influence the primary texts I will be discussing. This chapter will focus on Fannie Flagg's novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café,* and the film adaptation, *Fried Green Tomatoes,* directed by Jon Avnet. The next chapter examines Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple,* and Steven Spielberg's Hollywood adaptation. The novels and the films were released at least two decades after Stonewall but are set many decades before, beginning shortly before the Great Depression in a period that popular narratives would have us believe queer people were without communities and experienced an oppressive blend of invisibility, violence, hostility, loneliness, and denial. The novels and films under discussion in these two chapters directly and indirectly address the limitations of language and community in the pre-Stonewall era, while imagining ways that female-bodied queer people might find liberation, affirmation, and self-actualization regardless.

The primary texts also confront and challenge another troublesome binary that has worked in tandem with the before/after Stonewall model to suppress and distort the reality of queer lives in certain regions of the country. The fixation on Stonewall and the bicoastal activism that immediately succeeded the riots secured New York City and other

major urban centers such as San Francisco, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and Los Angeles as the primary hubs of queer socio-political transformation. The result is the creation of an uneven rural/urban binary that privileges cities – east and west coast cities in particular - as sites of progress while naming the space between as the locus of repression and silence, in essence making the rural United States "America's perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet" (Gray 4).

While extensive community studies in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history have sought to understand how spatial relations have influenced the development of gay and lesbian identities, politics, social groups, and modes of communication, the vast majority of these studies have limited their scope to urban areas. Studies of the Buffalo lesbian bar scene by Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy, San Francisco's gay leather clubs by Gayle Rubin, and Philadelphia's gay and lesbian neighborhoods by Marc Stein reinforce the assumption that queerness can more easily become visible and legible in the city than in the country.

Studies such as these reflect the predominance of another narrative of queer American history that works to suppress awareness of the most marginalized queer populations: the urban migration narrative. Kath Weston's landmark essay, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," suggests that queer people have migrated from rural to urban areas because they assume cities will provide less judgment and surveillance from families, friends and neighbors; a larger dating and social scene; greater acceptance due to a more diverse population; and access to queer facilities such as clubs, bars, and social organizations. In the urban migration narrative, "urban queers" pity the "sad and lonely" rural queers who "might be thought of as 'stuck' in a

place that they would leave if they only could" (Halberstam, *Queer Time* 36). The luckier rural queers can leave the oppressive small towns in which they were raised and move to the city, where a warm welcome and a plethora of social, political, and sexual opportunities await.

If proponents of urban migration viewed rural areas across the United States as generally incompatible with nurturing queer subjectivities and relationships, then the rural South especially, with its perceived regressive and conservative tendencies, became an entirely hostile space, inimical to queer possibility. Renowned Washington D.C.-based activist Frank Kameny recalls how he and his peers in urban gay rights organizations referred to the space between the east and west coasts as a "vast desert." Such was the perceived dearth of queer visibility or activism in the "hinterlands" in the 1950s and 1960s. But Kameny also claims that their perception of the South in particular was that it "remained a 'desert' for long thereafter" (ix), a region that did not dare contribute to any sort of queer movement or embrace a collective national identity until the latter part of the twentieth century.

Yet some scholars have problematized the scholarly, literary, and artistic preoccupation with the urban migration narrative for its tendency to undermine the capacity of rural areas, especially those in the South, to generate and sustain queer communities and relationships. In his study of gay men in Mississippi, John Howard urges us to "listen and look closely" to learn stories that counter the assumptions that the urban migration narrative makes. He suggests that by scrutinizing the lives and stories of gay men from the South,

> not only can we hear the words of those who utilized privilege to craft a gay life away from home, but we also can see the interactions between men who

> experienced and acted on queer desire within a small, localized realm, men who never took on a gay identity or became part of a gay community or culture. (*Men Like That* 14)

The rural/urban divide, coupled with what James Sears calls the "bicoastal bias" (1) in dominant historical narratives have all but rendered the lives of queer rural southerners implausible in the cultural imagination. John Howard's suggestion to look beyond the identities and culture that emerged primarily from participation in queer urban communities provides a model for the approach I take in these next two chapters.

These chapters examine how *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (the novel)*, Fried Green Tomatoes* (the film)*,* and both novel and film versions of *The Color Purple* work around and within the discursive space of the pre-Stonewall rural South to unfasten the binary oppositions that have produced simple and coherent if flawed and incomplete narratives. Although they differ in tone, style, and in their depictions of female-bodied queerness, the two novels and their film adaptations share a commitment to providing counter-narratives that visualize a queer southern past rarely seen in prevailing representations. In particular, they are concerned with exploring the ways in which female-bodied queer people might experience life in the rural South when they do not have ready access to learning the language, culture, or social and sexual mores of rapidly evolving urban communities.

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café inverts the urban migration narrative by suggesting that the city is not necessarily a place of freedom and possibility for minority groups, particularly queer people and African-Americans. John Howard notes that gay urban migration in the first half of the twentieth century coincided with the Great Migration, the mass movement of African Americans from the country to the cities

(*Men Like That* 13). The decline of the agricultural industry, brought about by the Boll Weevil infestation of the 1920s and the Great Depression that saw sharp declines in the price of major crops such as sugar, tobacco and cotton, prompted large-scale population shifts. Farm laborers, many of them African American, sought better employment opportunities in industrialized urban areas, especially in the north. But according to Louis Kyriakoudes, intra-regional migration also occurred, with African Americans moving from the rural South to the urban South. Furthermore, their reasons for migrating were not entirely labor-based. Kyriakoudes claims that for many black southerners, relocation to the city was part of a "fundamental social process" (342). Those who could not afford to move to faraway states or who had family ties to the South moved to southern cities because, like their queer counterparts, they perceived social conditions to be more favorable there.

Whistle Stop is not the final destination on the railroad but a place that trains pass through on their way to more industrialized cities and regions, a place that progress has seemingly bypassed. Yet Flagg implies that the city, for all its promises of excitement, growth, self-discovery, and opportunity, is far less desirable than the rural community of Whistle Stop. Flagg's novel aligns queer and black communities in a revision of the common urban migration narrative by constructing the rural South as a place innately geared towards accepting marginalized individuals and fostering queer, multi-racial communities.

Set in Birmingham, Alabama, in the mid-1980s and the nearby fictional town of Whistle Stop in the first half of the twentieth century, the novel tells several intertwining stories using a variety of narrative strategies. Evelyn Couch is a frustrated and under-

appreciated housewife whose life is transformed for the better when she goes with her husband to visit his elderly mother in a nursing home. There she meets the aptly named Ninny Threadgoode, a lovable and chatty but foolish old woman who dreamily reminisces to Evelyn about her life growing up in Whistle Stop, a small railroad town in rural Alabama. The narrative action jumps back and forth from the nursing home in the present day to the Whistle Stop of Ninny's flashbacks. Ninny's flashbacks revolve around her fond memories of her sister-in-law, Idgie, and Idgie's best friend/companion/lover, Ruth. The two women set up a home and café together after Idgie rescues a pregnant Ruth from her abusive marriage and brings her back to Whistle Stop, where they also raise Ruth's son, Stump. They become de facto community leaders; their café serves as the epicenter of the small town's diverse and inclusive social scene, with the two women hosting town events and celebrations, and defying law and custom to take in and serve black and homeless patrons. In the imaginary town of Whistle Stop, threats of prejudice and harm come from the outside, from cities, while inside the small town, residents establish safe and nurturing kinship systems predicated on cooperation and interdependency.

The third-person narration of the flashbacks and the scenes with Evelyn and Ninny is interspersed with the first person narration of the *Weems Weekly*, Whistle Stop's newsletter penned by local resident and busybody, Dot Weems. Occasionally, more formal and detached news bulletins from Birmingham and Valdosta intervene to fill gaps in the plot. The contrast in tone between the *Weems Weekly* and the city newspapers reflects the different social climates of the two kinds of locale. Dot Weems writes with a gossipy tone that conveys her familiarity with all the residents of Whistle Stop, whereas

the Birmingham and Valdosta publications report stories in a way that distances the nameless and neutral reporters from the stories' subjects. Weems's conspiratorial tone lends credence to the claim that in the small town, everyone knows everyone else's business. Urban migration narratives claim the lack of privacy in small towns drives people to the city where they hope that anonymity will bring them the freedom to explore new identities and experiences. However, Flagg suggests that the intimacy of the tightknit community in Whistle Stop is ultimately beneficial because transparency among members breeds faithfulness and a collective pride in the community.

A subplot involving Artis Peavey, the son of Idgie's black employees, emphasizes Flagg's inverted urban/rural narrative. Filled with wanderlust and contempt for the stifling nature and tedium of small town life, Artis leaves Whistle Stop for Birmingham. Upon arrival in the big city, Artis seeks out Slagtown, "the Harlem of the South," which was "all too much for the seventeen-year-old black boy in overalls who had never been out of Whistle Stop" (Flagg 117). Flagg captures the excitement and promise of the city with vivid descriptions of its "towering skyscrapers and steel mills that lit up the sky with red and purple hues, and its busy streets buzzing with hundreds of automobiles and the streetcars on wires" (118). Slagtown is at once colorful, bustling, sensual, liberating and dangerous. Artis, experiencing for the first time a town in which black people are seemingly economically, socially and creatively autonomous, "knew he was home at last" (120).

However, Artis's exhilaration is short-lived. Jailed over a misunderstanding, Artis soon learns that the city is rife with injustice, and that even black communities such as Slagtown are not immune to externally imposed racist oppression by a white supremacist

judicial system. Paradoxically, the anonymity of the city that allows Artis a chance to reinvent himself as a sophisticated and worldly man-about-town also deprives him of a support network that would have protected him. It is not until Idgie travels to Birmingham with Whistle Stop's white sheriff to speak on Artis's behalf that he is released from prison.

Conversely, Whistle Stop is depicted as a tightknit community where members are bound by a loyalty to one another that transcends racial boundaries and a desire to protect themselves from intrusion by outsiders. When Ruth's ex-husband Frank turns up in Whistle Stop and tries to kidnap Stump, Ruth and Idgie's elderly cook named Sipsey kills Frank with a frying pan. Sipsey's son, known as Big George, stands trial for Frank's murder, but the people of Whistle Stop convene in the courthouse to protest his innocence. Reverend Scroggins, the town's curmudgeonly minister, goes so far as to lie under oath to secure Big George's freedom. Scroggins's actions demonstrate that the need to preserve the cohesiveness and stability of Whistle Stop's community supersedes the legal imperative to tell the truth. Furthermore, Scroggins defies the assumption that a pious, white, middle-class southern man would not lie to protect a poor black man.

While the train repeatedly passing back and forth through Whistle Stop succeeds in tempting Artis to the city, Ruth, Idgie and their black employees remain impervious to its pull. Instead, they construct a space in the rural South that is always already safe, inclusive, and liberatory, negating the need for them to migrate to urban areas. The residents of Whistle Stop create and honor kinship systems and a "progressive reworking of 'family'" (Kabir 128) that supplant the nuclear family as the foundation of the town's social order. In Flagg's imaginary small southern town, a masculine woman can create a

chosen family comprised of a married woman with whom she parents an amputee son, a black family that includes a baby found abandoned at a train station, and an alcoholic vagrant, all without fear of judgment or reprisal.

In Flagg's fleeting descriptions of Birmingham, the city is rife with loneliness, disloyalty, crime, and injustice. In contrast, the small town engenders solidarity, warmth, humor, and safety. When the dangers of the city threaten to infringe upon the relative tranquility of Whistle Stop, the small town community rallies around to dispatch troublemaking outsiders; Whistle Stop's Sheriff sends away the Ku Klux Klan from Valdosta, Sipsey kills Frank when he tries to break up Ruth's new queer family, and the town conspires to thwart detectives' efforts to capture Frank's killer. Flagg's vision of a pluralistic and cooperative small town in the Jim Crow, pre-Stonewall South is an improbable fantasy, but it functions as an important counter-narrative that proposes alternatives to the dominant urban migration narrative for both queer and black people. The novel aligns both populations in a reinvented rural society where everyone, especially those belonging to marginalized groups, works to ensure each other's protection from destructive outside forces.

Yet *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* appears to normalize Ruth and Idgie's relationship to the extent that the other characters find two women falling in love and setting up a home together to be entirely unremarkable. No one in the novel expresses surprise or offers comment of any kind upon learning that Ruth and Idgie are a couple; instead, they accept their atypical family set-up as a mundane component of the community as a whole. Given the dominance of representations that map silence, isolation, and repression on to the pre-Stonewall rural South, Ruth and Idgie, as a

romantically involved couple, seem to enjoy a heightened level of visibility and acceptance that seems unlikely, if not impossible.

So how does Flagg convincingly normalize a queer relationship that would surely have provoked extreme hostile reactions had it been so publicly visible in real life? Or, to use the words of Jennifer Church, how has Flagg turned a story about a "tomboy's life of playing poker and drinking, defying the Ku Klux Klan, recapturing her lesbian lover from a violent marriage, and murdering and cannibalizing the husband" (193) into a much-loved bestseller that even garnered high praise from *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee? *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* does not comport with dominant narratives about the pre-Stonewall South, yet somehow succeeds in making queerness appear to be an intrinsic and unexceptional occurrence. I propose that Flagg's use of nostalgia is the primary contributing factor in fostering the acceptance of a queer relationship among the characters in the novel (and, perhaps, among the readership that kept the novel on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirty-six weeks). Although the novel is everything that Church described, it is also a sentimental and palatable tale about "a sweet old woman in a rest home telling stories of a distant past to a middle-aged housewife" (Church 193).

Ninny's flashbacks recreate a queer love story in her imagined past. As the omniscient and subjective narrator, Ninny filters out her most undesirable memories, leaving only those memories that accord with her rose-tinted vision of her youth. Peter Applebome describes the South as "a place congenitally geared to looking toward the past in a nation rushing headlong into the future" (10), an observation borne out in the novel. Ninny laments the disaffected state of modern life, claiming that people are not

happy “like they used to be” (Flagg 250), and she recalls that “those Depression years” were “the happy times, even though we were all struggling” (248). Instead of emphasizing Ninny’s memories of Klan violence, the devastating effects of poverty and hunger, and the decimation of the region’s agricultural industry and primary source of livelihood, the novel uses the repetitive motif of southern cooking to tie the story firmly to the region, a motif that also enhances the text’s nostalgic quality. Ninny’s memories invoke the affective and sensory properties of southern food with vivid, mouth-watering descriptions. She remembers fondly how Sipsey’s dumplings “were so light they would float in the air” (48), and tells Evelyn she would “pay a million dollars for a barbecue like Big George used to make, and a piece of Sipsey’s lemon icebox pie” (302). Food appears throughout the novel as a way for characters to show affection and respect for one another, consequently strengthening Ninny’s romanticized Whistle Stop community. Ruth and Idgie insist on selling their food to black people, promoting interracial harmony in the idyllic Whistle Stop of the segregated South, and food brings comfort to Smokey Lonesome, a starving hobo who shows up at the café looking for work and a place to stay.

However, southern home-cooked food is not the only nostalgic device that emerges in flashbacks. In Ninny’s recollections, the residents of the town become flawless and idealized. Ruth is beautiful, selfless, and virtuous, while Idgie is charming, hilarious, and fearless, the kind of person “everybody wanted to be around” (80). White and black people are devoted to each other (in not entirely unproblematic ways), and the Threadgoodes welcome anyone into their extended family. Even as she looks towards her death, Ninny expresses excitement at the prospect of reverting back to her previously

happy family life, telling Evelyn, “Sometimes I just cain’t wait to get to heaven. I just cain’t wait” (325). Ninny’s selective and subjective memories dictate the course of the narrative, meaning that much of the evidence contradicting her memories is left unknowable.

Film theorist Pam Cook calls nostalgia “a state of longing for something that is known to be irretrievable, but is sought anyway.” Nostalgia is also, according to Cook, “rooted in disavowal, or suspension of disbelief” and is “generally associated with fantasy” (2). Certainly, Ninny’s remembrances of Idgie and Ruth’s relationship require the reader to push dominant narratives to one side, and conceive of a queer southern history that is not real and hidden but imagined and desired. Cook also claims that “nostalgia plays on the gaps between representations of the past and actual past events, and the desire to overcome the gap and recover what has been lost” (3). In the novel, Flagg uses Ninny’s flashbacks to offer a desirable view of the past that contradicts much of what we know about the visibility and acceptance of queer people in the early twentieth-century Deep South. At the same time, she attempts to compensate for a lost history by writing queer lives into existence, however inconceivable they may be. That Ninny’ flashbacks may be inaccurate or even fantastical is not as important as the fact that Ninny highlighted her memories of Idgie and Ruth as worthy of recovery and preservation in the first place. Only with the suspension of disbelief that nostalgia engenders can we envision an early twentieth-century, rural southern community that does not just tolerate but embraces a same-sex couple and their chosen extended family.

The nostalgia in the novel, however, also produces a vision of the past that is stripped of certain key political associations. The novel is set decades before Stonewall

and the onset of a visible gay liberation movement, in a region far removed from the queer subcultures then found in west coast and northeast cities. For the residents of Ninny's imagined Whistle Stop, there is no homophobic political or pathological discourse available for them to recognize the kind of queerness that Ruth and Idgie embody or to mark it out as deviant. By situating Ninny's memories in a pre-political or apolitical milieu, and by framing those memories as the selective nostalgic and wistful reminiscences of an old lady, Flagg can place a queer couple at the front and center of her story without ever confronting the possibility that they might experience opposition from a homophobic society.

Deborah Barker's essay on contemporary southern chick flicks describes how *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café,* its film adaptation, and similar films can use nostalgia to bypass the historical moments of civil rights, second wave feminism, and gay liberation, effectively depoliticizing the South in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, Evelyn Couch tries "to raise her son to be sensitive, but Ed had scared her so bad, telling her that he would turn out to be a queer, she had backed off and lost contact with him" (Flagg 31). That Evelyn and Ed are raising a son not just in the post-Stonewall era but in the midst of the AIDS crisis means Evelyn reacts to a warning about her son's perceived feminization with horror and anxiety. Evelyn is forced to think about her son within the context of a political and historical moment characterized by the fear and othering of gay people, whereas Ninny's reminiscences leapfrog over that moment so that Ruth and Idgie can be fondly idealized. In other words, by creating an imagined past divested of the gender and sexual politics of the present, "a pregnant woman (Ruth) can leave her abusive husband (Frank) for another woman (Idgie) with

whom she lives, works, and raises a child without being labeled feminist or lesbian" (Barker 102).

Furthermore, the flashbacks, nostalgia, and erasure of political context produce a temporal flux that contests the linear progress model of popular queer history narratives. As such, certain principal images in the novel and film can be dislodged from their original historical context and meaning, and resignified within readings that prioritize queer interpretations. Perhaps the most striking example in Flagg's novel and the adaptation comes from reading Idgie's tomboyism as a symbol of her queerness. The tomboy is a curious cultural figure that, depending on how, when, and where it is deployed, can be a harmless symbol of youthful vigor and adventure, or a worrisome precursor to adult homosexuality and cross-gender identification. In the late nineteenth century, tomboyism was considered an antidote to Victorian female frailty, a way of preparing girls for the rigors of childbearing in adulthood. Charlotte Perkins Gilman championed tomboyism in her 1898 treatise, *Women and Economics:* "The most normal girl is the 'tom-boy' – whose numbers increase among us in these wiser days, - a healthy young creature who is human through and through; not feminine till it is time to be" (56). Gilman points to a crucial assumption about tomboyism, namely that it reaches its natural conclusion at the onset of adolescence when any traces of masculinity are superseded by conventional, feminine characteristics that include the desire to be a mother. Furthermore, the tomboy is, according to Gilman's reading, an asexual or perhaps pre-sexual being, whose masculinity is benign because it is not configured within the "adult imperatives of binary gender" (Halberstam, "Bondage" 179) that conflate adherence to traditional roles with heterosexuality. In Gilman's imagining, the tomboy is playfully and appropriately

experimenting with cross-gender behaviors before succumbing to inevitable adult femininity.

However, Gilman does not address what happens to the tomboy who does not grow out of her masculinity and does not consider the possibility that tomboyism might in fact be a precursor to a transgender or butch identity later in life. Lee Zevy critiques the tendency to view childhood as a pre-sexual state, claiming that such a tendency "fails to acknowledge the developmental continuum of lesbian sexuality" (181). Autobiographical essays by lesbian, trans-masculine, and transgender adults certainly shore up Zevy's theory that queer sexual development begins in childhood and that tomboyism in young girls can morph into adult masculinity. Sara Cytron describes how she "anxiously submerged the feminine" (210) as a young tomboy, while Judith Halberstam recalls asking for boxing gloves for her thirteenth birthday, believing "that these accoutrements of masculine competitions signified for me a way to keep adult womanhood at bay" (*Female* 267). While I am hesitant to impose labels onto fictional characters that the text itself rejects or ignores, and while I do concede that one could make a persuasive case for reading Idgie as male-identified, this chapter will follow Flagg's example of using female pronouns to describe Idgie. As such, this chapter recognizes the grown-up Idgie as a masculine-identified woman who desires other women.

The young Idgie possesses many of the traits typically associated with tomboyism including "a proclivity for outdoor play (especially athletics), a feisty independent spirit, and a tendency to don masculine clothing and adopt a boyish nickname" (Abate xvi). As a child, Idgie – named Imogen at birth – is made to wear "a brand new white organdy

dress." Ninny recalls that, taking issue with this forced feminization, Idgie "stood up and announced…'I'm never gonna wear another dress as long as I live!'" and then "marched upstairs and put on a pair of Buddy's old pants and a shirt" (Flagg 13). In an effort to prevent similar disruption at the wedding of Idgie's older sister, Momma Threadgoode lets Idgie wear a green velvet suit to the ceremony. Ninny's description of the young Idgie further exemplifies her tomboyism:

> Seems like Idgie was always in overalls and barefooted. It's a good thing, too. She would have ruined any nice dresses, going up and down trees like she did, and she was always going hunting or fishing with Buddy and her brothers. Buddy said that she could shoot as good as any of the boys. She was a pretty little thing, except after Buddy got her hair all bobbed off, you'd swear she was a little boy. (34)

But even in adulthood, Idgie retains the behaviors of her adolescence and makes no attempt to suppress her innate masculinity. At a time when Idgie is expected to submit to the social pressures of gender conformity and heterosexuality, she persists with a masculine gender expression and shows no interest in dating men. After Idgie causes a scene in a barbershop where she threatens to kill Frank for beating Ruth, the barber misreads her sex and says, "that boy must be crazy" (189). Later, when Idgie performs in drag with the town sheriff as part of a fundraiser for the school sports teams, Dot Weems announces in her weekly newsletter that their skit will feature a "womanless wedding" (278). Halberstam finds that tomboyism can be "encouraged to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of a girl identity" (*Female* 6), but in the fantasy world of Ninny's flashbacks, Idgie's womanhood is consistently negated without penalty.

Idgie's masculinity also manifests when she becomes a parent to Stump but takes on a paternal role rather than becoming an adoptive mother figure. When Stump is born, Idgie's mother exclaims, "Oh look, Idgie, he's got your hair!" (192), effectively erasing Stump's biological father and inserting Idgie into the role. Moreover, her joke that Stump bears a physical resemblance to Idgie implies that Ruth and Idgie had the capability to conceive him together naturally, which not only hints that the two have a sexual relationship but that Idgie is somehow masculine enough to overcome her biological femaleness. Even Poppa Threadgoode acknowledges Idgie's masculinity when he perpetuates the idea that she is Stump's natural father. Ninny recalls that Poppa "sat Idgie down and told her that now that she was going to be responsible for Ruth and a baby, she'd better figure out what she wanted to do, and gave her five hundred dollars to start a business with" (192-3), demanding that she fulfill responsibilities typically attributed to husbands and fathers. As Stump grows up, Idgie sees him through several masculine rites of passage, coaching him in football, leading his Cub Scout troop, and even giving him advice about dating and sex.

Idgie thus complicates both traditional narratives of tomboyism that presume the tomboy will grow into a feminine and heterosexual adult woman, and queer readings that suggest tomboyism is a precursor to butchness, lesbianism, or transgender identity in adulthood. In either case, Idgie is female-bodied but masculine presenting, and is known to engage in romantic and sexual relationships with women, rendering her undeniably queer in gender and sexuality.

In contrast, Ruth is almost excessively feminine, with "light auburn hair and brown eyes with long lashes, and was so sweet and soft-spoken that people just fell in

love with her on first sight" (80). In effect, the romantic and demure Ruth plays the part of the southern belle to Idgie's roguish young suitor, initially rebuffing Idgie before surrendering to her charms. Ruth thus queers the image of the belle by entering into a same-sex relationship while still possessing the features that make the belle recognizable, a maneuver that the film adaptation succeeds in replicating.

The film of Flagg's novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes* remains quite faithful in its portrayal of Idgie and Ruth. Ruth is first seen at a party at the Threadgoode house dressed in a pale pink gown and a bonnet with flowers on it. Her strong southern drawl further identifies her as an archetypal belle but, crucially, Ruth is a belle divested of the compulsory heterosexuality that has characterized many of her real-life and fictional counterparts. The novel and the film perform important critical work on this famously southern image by suggesting new possibilities for the belle, one being that she possesses lesbian potentiality when read as a femme character in relation to Idgie's butchness.

The young Idgie in the film is seen climbing trees, throwing her frilly dress on the floor, and disrupting every family occasion with practical jokes and mischief. Even when Idgie's mother dresses Idgie in a frilly white frock and oversized hair ribbons, the tomboy's scraped knees, cheeky smile, and unkempt hair undermine her mother's attempts to force femininity upon her.

As an adult, Idgie frequently manages to retain the appearance and demeanor of the youthful tomboy, occasionally affecting a theatrical hypermasculinity that makes her appear as a boy playing dress-up in men's clothes. When Stump is born, it is Idgie who proudly announces "It's a boy!" to their friends and family waiting in the parlor, before exclaiming, "Goddamnit to hell sonofabitch, she did it!" Idgie then promptly initiates the

paternal ritual of wetting the baby's head and smoking a cigar. When she performs in drag as part of the town follies, Idgie easily slips into a confident performance of excessive masculinity by slicking her hair back, donning a suit, and adopting a swagger. The rest of the time, she keeps her playfulness and her juvenile sense of humor by playing pranks on the residents of Whistle Stop, and she persists with her adventuresome ways, most notably by climbing out of her bedroom window to sneak out on a date with Ruth and trainhopping in the middle of the night to steal food for the poor. In fact, Idgie seems to be modeled on another famous icon of southern fiction, appearing as a kind of female-bodied Huck Finn character with her pants rolled up, feet bare, face muddy, and with a fishing pole slung over her shoulder. She spends much of her free time by the river or roaming around outdoors, teaching herself how to find food in the wild. Idgie also befriends the black residents of Troutville on the other side of the railway tracks, going so far as to give them food from the café despite the sheriff's warning that "there are some people don't like you sellin' to coloreds."

Jan Whitt suggests that in preventing Idgie's tomboyism from growing into adult female masculinity, the film actually affords some viewers an opportunity to read Idgie's queerness as non-threatening, even non-existent. She notes that "even though Idgie is a lesbian and chooses to wear pants, suspenders, ties, and vests, it is still possible for members of the audience to refer to Idgie as a 'tomboy' and avoid dealing with her lesbianism entirely" (50). In keeping Idgie as a tomboy, it becomes less problematic that she has not yet succumbed to adult femininity, the operative word being *yet;* as long as Idgie's masculinity remains in a state of suspended adolescence that permits and even

encourages gender experimentation, there is always a possibility that she will grow out of it eventually and assume a more feminine identity.

The softening of Idgie's masculinity in the film is just one factor that has drawn criticism from viewers who had hoped to see a film that was as unambiguously queer as the novel from which it was adapted. *Fried Green Tomatoes* has divided critics on the subject of queer visibility. In one review, a critic concedes that "of course some compromises were made in bringing *Fried Green Tomatoes* to the screen," presumably hinting at the constraints that filmmakers, studios and investors place on queer content in a Hollywood film that they hope to be commercially successful. The critic advises, "for those of you expecting romantic themes to be played out, prepare yourself for some heavily restricted voyeurism" (Vetrano 29-30). Film critic Rita Kempley calls the film "a parable of platonic devotion" (*Washingtonpost.com*), while Jennifer Church writes that "the most common response in the mainstream audience…was that [Ruth and Idgie] had a deep emotional tie" (193). Even Fannie Flagg, herself an out lesbian, downplayed claims that the film is about a queer relationship, despite her ex-girlfriend, the renowned lesbian author Rita Mae Brown, claiming that Idgie was based on Flagg's lesbian aunt (Brown, *Rita Will* 325). According to Flagg, the story "is about love and friendship. The sexuality is unimportant…We are looking at them from 1991. [The 30s] were a totally different time period. There were very warm friendships between women" (qtd. in Berglund 146).

In spite of Flagg and others participating in a critical unqueering of the film, *Fried Green Tomatoes* won the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Award for Outstanding Depiction of Lesbians in Film in 1992. Some critics have been similarly

generous, highlighting the ways that queerness does appear in recognizable forms in the film. For example, Naomi Rockler suggests that the film relies on "strategic ambiguity" (91) to represent Ruth and Idgie's relationship, showing interactions that can be interpreted as constituting a lesbian love story or a platonic buddy movie depending on the position, investment, and intent of the viewer.

The screenplay undeniably dilutes some of the more explicit queer content of the novel, in particular in the dialogue, but does not dispose of it altogether, making it difficult to reduce the film to just another buddy movie. In the novel, Flagg writes that Ruth and Idgie's displays of affection were so obvious that "even Sipsey razzed [Idgie]," and says, "that ol' love bug done bit Idgie" (82). Flagg portrays Ruth as being similarly enamored, writing that, "she had no idea why she wanted to be with Idgie more than anybody else on this earth, but she did" (89). In the film, there is no talk of crushes or "be[ing] with" someone, but Ruth's desire for Idgie is palpable when she tells Idgie, "all the guys must be wild about you," and then nervously asks "got a fella yet?" Later, once the two women have started a business and family together, Idgie reassures Ruth that her wandering days are over, telling her, "I'm as settled as I ever hope to be." Throughout the film, their conversations are supplemented with intense, longing gazes and affectionate, often sensual caresses and embraces that, along with the spoken declarations of love and commitment, make it easy to understand why GLAAD recognized the film for its depiction of "lesbians."

I, too, read Ruth and Idgie as a queer couple, and use their relationship to examine how the interplay of queer aesthetic and narrative cues with southern iconography produces a queer romance that contributes to the cultural imagination of the region.

Placing the belle into a queer context by having her leave her husband to establish a home and family with a woman with whom she enjoys a visibly romantic relationship is just one example of how *Fried Green Tomatoes* manipulates images that are fundamental to dominant narratives about the South.

The film deploys many other signifiers of southern culture to ground this queer love story firmly in the region, from the Threadgoode's grandiose plantation-esque home to the swampy, bluesy locale of the speakeasy that Idgie frequents. The repetitive shots of southern geographical icons – especially the verdant rural landscapes and Victorian architecture – and the sweeping orchestral score aligns *Fried Green Tomatoes* with other southern nostalgia films of the late twentieth century such as *Driving Miss Daisy, Steel Magnolias* and *Forrest Gump,* while the occasional blues and gospel refrains are a nod to the African American musical roots of the region. Moreover, these southern signifiers are often used to facilitate the development of queer characters and stories. For example, the blues provides a seductive soundtrack to Ruth and Idgie's most intimate scenes, the Baptist church attempts to reform Idgie's rebellious, prankster ways (although not her queerness), and the undeveloped rural landscape encourages Idgie to express her adventurous tomboy spirit.

As in the novel, the tantalizing images of food invoke sentimental memories of the South in a bygone era. There are lingering camera shots of cherry pie, green tomatoes frying in the skillet, and pork simmering in the barbecue pit. But food in the film is also used to convey sensuality and to facilitate a the closest thing to a sex scene that a Hollywood film about a queer couple in the 1930s Deep South is likely to show. Director Jon Avnet claims that, in his vision for the film, "the food fight would be an

improvisational scene that would really allow the audience to see two people making love" (*Moments of Discovery*), and it is this scene that has attracted the most attention from critics performing queer readings of the film.

The scene begins with close-ups of bowls containing plump, juicy berries and smooth, creamy chocolate frosting. A sultry blues number plays in the background. Ruth and Idgie are cooking in the café, Idgie attempting to make fried green tomatoes that Ruth deems "terrible." Idgie, feeling slighted by the remark, exacts revenge by throwing water into Ruth's face. When Ruth asks, "what did you go and do that for?" Idgie replies flirtatiously, " I just thought you needed a little coolin' off." From there, a food fight breaks out, with the shrieking and giggling women smearing berries and chocolate on to each other's faces and chests. As the two women grapple and wrestle each other to the ground, their skin flushed and moistened with sweat, they transform playful teasing between friends into a deeply sensual display of erotic desire.

Grady Kilgore, the town sheriff and long-time admirer of Idgie, is sufficiently motivated by both outrage and jealousy to threaten the women with arrest for disorderly conduct. Grady therefore functions as a representative of two interlocking systems of law that attempt to suppress queerness by regulating what kinds of gender and sexuality are permissible. As Sheriff, he represents the legal-juridical system that interprets Ruth and Idgie's behavior as deviant and endows him with the authority to intervene and put a stop to it. Grady also symbolizes a system of heteropatriarchal law that works to destroy affective and erotic bonds between women as a means of upholding the power and authority of the heterosexual male and regulating the social order over which he presides. Therefore, Grady's intervention in Ruth and Idgie's food fight seeks to restore order, not

only by enforcing calm and decent public conduct but also by turning the women's attentions away from each other and redirecting them towards a proper (male) object.

Yet, in the queer-affirming, nostalgic utopia of Whistle Stop, Grady is comically ineffective in his efforts to enforce the laws. When he confronts the women about their conduct, they respond by taking a bowl of chocolate frosting and smearing it over his face and shirt while they continue to laugh hysterically. Similarly, the detective who comes from Valdosta to investigate Frank's disappearance becomes the subject of Idgie's derision. Idgie gets the better of him for five years, teasing him for taking so long to catch Frank's killer and tricking him into eating Frank, whose body was disposed of in the café's barbecue pit. Even though the detective confidently claims that "you can't beat the law" and eventually arrests Idgie and Big George for Frank's murder, Idgie and her allies manage to outsmart the system at every turn. Because of Idgie's quick-witted responses in court that make a mockery of the prosecutor's interrogation tactics, and the testimony of Reverend Scroggins who provides a false alibi for her and George, the legal-juridical system fails to break up their queer kinship system. In fact, it is in court that Ruth and Idgie's love is most publicly cemented, with Ruth's declaration that she left Frank for Idgie because "she's the best friend I ever had…and I love her." With those words, Ruth defiantly refutes the alleged authority of heteropatriarchal law and the legal-juridical system by suggesting that her relationship with Idgie is invested with more meaning and value than her legal union with Frank.

As in the novel, the Valdosta detectives and court officials are interlopers who try to impose their views on morality and justice on to a small town that they deem immoral and lawless. They constitute oppressive and menacing forces that threaten to throw the

harmonious Whistle Stop community into turmoil, but they are ultimately unsuccessful because the Whistle Stop residents' collective investment in upholding the town's unique ethos makes their community impervious to interference from outsiders. Even those in the town who, by definition, should be upholding and enforcing externally-imposed laws and social standards prioritize their devotion to their community over the demands of their jobs; Grady advises Idgie to flee before he can arrest her for Frank's murder, and he even enjoys socializing with other residents in the drinking and gambling den at the river, while Reverend Scroggins lies in court to save Idgie and Big George from execution. Whistle Stop adheres to its own code of conduct that favors intra-community cooperation, mutual respect, unconditional acceptance, and vigilante justice over compliance with a biased and corrupt legal system and social order.

The insular and unified community is an integral part of the imagined past that Flagg and Avnet have created. The novel and the film produce a fantastical space so that queer-affirming counter-narratives can develop without having to confront or negotiate the cultural and political realities of the time and place in which they were set. The *Fried Green Tomatoes* texts situate representations of female masculinity, desire between women, and alternative family configurations at the center of a story about life in the rural South before the advent of a publicly visible and accepted queer community. In doing so, these texts shift the discourse of queer southern history away from the binary models discussed earlier, and offer a more nuanced concept that shows the complexity of how queer behaviors, cultures, and relationships might have been developed and practiced.

Chapter Three

Neither Here Nor There: Black Female Sexuality and Queer (In)visibility in *The Color Purple*

The previous chapter explored the effects of using nostalgia to frame contemporary representations of female-bodied queerness in the pre-Stonewall South. The use of nostalgic devices in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and its film adaptation allowed for the creation of a comforting and idealistic queer-affirming community in which a white female couple could experience acceptance and visibility. In Whistle Stop, oppression is an outside force that fails to penetrate the united interracial community. Black characters, being somewhat superficially valued by the white characters, are pushed to the margins, while their resemblance to the faithful slave stereotypes found in predominantly white-produced popular texts trivializes the complexity of their experiences as black southerners living in the Jim Crow era. Flagg's novel and Avnet's film bestow narrative control upon white characters, depriving black characters of agency in the process.

This chapter considers two texts that grant agency to black characters and to black women in particular, placing them at the center of the narrative. Moreover, rather than positioning black people as allies to queer white people within an imaginary harmonious and cooperative community, these texts offer up possibilities for exploring queer desires, behaviors and relationships between black women within an all-black social and familial milieu. The chapter will explore how localizing queer narratives in a black community allows for queerness to develop in the distinctive socio-cultural, linguistic, and political contexts of that community.

Alice Walker's 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple,* and Steven Spielberg's 1985 eponymous film adaptation tell the story of Celie, a poor black girl from Georgia who is raped by the man she believes to be her father, has her two children taken away from her, and is forced to marry a man named Albert. Her husband is a manipulative and abusive layabout who sends away Celie's sister Nettie, her only companion and confidante. Celie lives a miserable, isolated life caring for Albert's unruly children and keeping the household running until Shug Avery, Albert's long-time lover, comes to stay. Celie falls in love with Shug, who guides Celie's sexual awakening and gives her the courage to leave Albert and become financially independent by starting her own business. This chapter examines the ways in which the novel and film adaptation each employ different formal and aesthetic strategies to portray Celie's journey to queer self-actualization. Furthermore, I explore these texts' capacity for revising existing cultural narratives about southern black women and queerness in the first half of the twentieth century. Walker's novel and Spielberg's film present alternatives to the dominant discourse of sexual politics in the Jim Crow South that stripped black women of autonomy and subjectivity, and offer liberating representations of female-bodied queerness that have heretofore been hidden from history.

In the case of *The Color Purple,* I locate queerness in Celie's physically intimate relationship with Shug and in Walker's strategy of replacing patriarchal control in Celie's nuclear family with the woman-centered economy of a mutually supportive extended kinship system. As with chapter two, I am hesitant to impose contemporary and contextually specific labels such as "lesbian" onto characters who would likely not have used them to describe themselves; rather, I prefer to discuss behaviors that are included in

the book and film instead of speculating about identities that are not named. For this reason, I resist using "queer" as a noun when discussing Celie and Shug but do use it as an adjective to describe their non-heteronormative interactions and desires. However, Walker herself names Celie as a lesbian in her later writings about the novel (*River* 35), and so I occasionally reference sources that use the term "lesbian" where appropriate.

The Color Purple begins in the first decade of the twentieth century, with Celie's giving birth to her stepfather's child, and ends several decades later when she is reunited with Nettie and her children, who have all been living as missionaries in Africa. While the black community of Celie's extended family and neighbors make few explicit references to Jim Crow or the growing Civil Rights movement, the characters feel and experience the ramifications of those eras' politics throughout. Celie's queer sexual development is thus couched in an awareness of the unique conditions of the Jim Crow South that framed the treatment and representations of black women.

Walker's novel confronts the social, political, and economic disenfranchisement and devaluation of black women in the South and suggests ways in which they might find hope, empowerment, and safety within or despite the constraints imposed upon them. Walker unpacks the narratives of pain, violence, and domination that have surrounded black women's bodies and sexualities in the rapes and beatings of slave women and in malignant accusations that black women were uncontrollably promiscuous. To contextualize the motivations behind Celie's need or desire to engage in a same-sex relationship with Shug, I want to first consider the ways in which popular white supremacist myths policed black female bodies and determined the social status and treatment of black women in the Jim Crow South.

During slavery, the rape of black female slaves became an effective means for white slaveowners to exert their authority and dominance, and to grow the workforce by making slave women bear their offspring, who would later become slaves themselves. Yet while emancipation freed black women from the auction block and repeated forced childbearing, their safety and worth during Reconstruction and in the decades that followed was not assured, and "the pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse of Black women became so powerful that it managed to survive the abolition of slavery" (Davis, *Women* 175). Valk and Brown suggest that white men had grown so accustomed to wielding power over black women during slavery that "they did not easily yield this alleged right when slavery ended" (8). From Emancipation until the early twentieth century, white supremacist vigilantes known as night riders terrorized black communities as they sought to enforce their "visions for a hierarchical racial order for southern society" (Rosen 181). Although rape was "first and foremost a crime against women," it was also a "political weapon" that white men used to assert control over black people as a whole. Raping black women was "an attempt by white men to stifle the freedman's efforts to assume the role of patriarch" (Dowd Hall xxvi).

Hannah Rosen's study of the experiences of freedpeople in the decades following Emancipation finds that white people perpetuated the myths about black people that had become popular during slavery because they helped sustain a power imbalance between the races and assured white people of their elevated social status. She writes that whites in the South

> invented and communicated a fantasy post-Civil War world wherein white men's power approximated that before the war, thereby erasing military defeat and

> reclaiming the political privileges of whiteness bestowed by the system of slavery even on nonslaveholding white men. (Rosen 180)

One particular strategy for ensuring the continued authority of white people was to disseminate injurious stereotypes about black people's sexuality that prevented whites from becoming sympathetic to the causes of integration and racial equality. Whites who opposed the end of slavery sought to maintain control of the social order they had created in the South by fostering white supremacist ideologies that positioned black women as sexual objects, available and willing to initiate or submit to any sexual act. In this period, black women in the South had been granted legal freedom but nonetheless found themselves subjected to intense scrutiny, violence, and regulation. The Jezebel emerged as a "controlling image" during slavery as a way of maintaining control over black women by reducing "all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women" (Collins, *Politics* 81). The image functioned as a rationale for white men's rape of black women because, "viewed as 'loose women' and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy" (Davis, *Women* 182).

White supremacist ideology also positioned the licentious Jezebel with her allegedly vulgar hypersexuality in a false dichotomy with the equally mythical virtuous, pure, refined white woman, a figure so delicate she required the care and protection of her honorable and heroic white husband. In turn, these "beliefs about White womanhood helped shape the mythology of the Black rapist," another "controlling image" that appeared post-emancipation and that spoke to white southerners' fears "that the unfettered promiscuity of Black freedmen constituted a threat to the Southern way of life" (101). One of the most obvious and well known examples of racist stereotyping

occurred in the trial for the Scottsboro Boys, a group of nine young black men who stood accused of raping two white women in Mississippi in 1931. At their trial, Judge Callahan claimed, “Where the woman charged to have been raped, as in this case is a white woman there is a very strong presumption under the law that she would not and did not yield voluntarily to intercourse with the defendant, a Negro” (Sommerville 217). The stability of the post-Emancipation social order depended upon white people’s abilities to uphold the belief in sexist and racist myths about black people’s sexualities. White people positioned black women as wanton and promiscuous Jezebels out to seduce white men, and black men as animalistic brutes bent upon defiling chaste and defenseless white women.

Black women reformers became intent on dismantling these stereotypes but, as Evelyn Hammonds points out, their strategies for doing so further stigmatized certain groups of black women. Hammonds claims that the most prominent of these strategies was to promote “a public silence about sexuality” because they “hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman.” She also criticizes the tendency for middle and upper class black women to police the behavior of poorer black women, particularly behavior that they deemed detrimental to the social, economic, and political progress of their race. The intraracial enforcement of a politics of respectability meant that silence characterized the public discourse around black women’s sexuality. “In choosing silence black women also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality” (143), a move that Hammonds claims affected lesbians to an even greater extent.

If racism and sexism have commingled to make heterosexual black women appear deviant, then the addition of homophobia made black lesbians the ultimate symbols of perversity. According to Hammonds, in a culture in which harmful assumptions about black women's sexuality were (and still are) used to justify the systematic mistreatment of black women, black lesbian sexuality has been "rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the collectivity," making it "acceptable for some heterosexual black women to cast black lesbians as proverbial traitors to the race" (147).

Cultural representations of black female queerness in the early twentieth-century South are exceedingly scarce. The very possibility that black females could develop a sexual subjectivity, engage in erotic relationships with other black females that nourished their physical and emotional wellbeing, and reduce their dependency on both black and white men is entirely absent from dominant narratives about the Jim Crow South. Black women who loved other women and enjoyed sexual intimacy with them are inconceivable in the imaginary of popular southern history because they do not comport with stereotypes that presume heterosexual promiscuity.

But it would be a mistake to accept the dominant narratives' assumptions that queer black women did not exist at all in the South during this time. For example, we know that a period of exponential artistic and literary growth among the black community in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, now commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, also facilitated the emergence of a vibrant queer scene in this hip urban enclave (Faderman, *Odd Girls* 73). Although relatively liberated and laissez-faire attitudes that characterized the culture of Harlem at this time were in contradiction with

the hegemonic values that governed the Jim Crow South, Harlem's influence was far-reaching nonetheless, manifesting in the southern states in certain artistic contexts.

A host of queer female blues singers whose careers had thrived in Harlem made names for themselves in the South. Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters had been open about their affairs with other women, yet still toured extensively in the southern states and enjoyed widespread popularity and commercial success there (Davis, *Blues*; Lieb; Niven 698). Karen Hollinger likens the sexually free, bisexual Shug to these blues singers (184), a connection that Walker herself makes at in the novel when Shug sings a Bessie Smith song and Celie writes: "She say Bessie somebody she know. Old friend" (64). Celie's brief comments about Smith leave open questions about whether she and Shug were perhaps something more than friends. In either case, Walker grounds Shug in a specific cultural space characterized by its tolerance, if not acceptance, of queer visibility. Walker derives inspiration for Shug from her historical counterparts, whose commercial popularity in the South suggests that black communities were not entirely hostile to the concept of their women being queer.

The characters of Celie and Shug thus radically rebut the dominance of the "White, masculine, and heterosexual" figure that Patricia Hill Collins calls the "mythical norm." As queer black women, Celie and Shug represent the norm's "antithesis, its Other" (97), and so their success in attaining sexual, emotional, and financial independence reveals the fallibility of the racist and heteropatriarchal power structures that have sought to confine them to pre-determined subjugated roles. Celie especially derives power from her otherness, drawing on her erotic, nurturing, supportive, and inspiring relationships with other women to rewrite the hegemonic scripts of racial and

sexual politics that have kept her and other poor southern black women subordinated. If the popular discourse of southern racism gleaned at least part of its authoritative status from its efforts to reduce young black women to the level of the rampantly (and heterosexually) promiscuous Jezebel, and if black women reformers countered that sexist strategy with silence, then black women's same-sex desire is foreclosed as a possibility. Celie and Shug therefore confront and undermine the sexist and racist mechanisms that attempt to keep black female queerness hidden from view.

Another effect of reproducing myths about black women's sexuality and focusing on interracial sexual violence is that attention is then shifted away from the potential harm that black women experienced in their own families and communities. In *The Color Purple,* Walker demonstrates how slavery's demise liberated black women from one particular kind of institutionalized racism and sexism but did not entirely protect them from prejudice and hardship. Walker received criticism from black readers who accused her of demonizing black men, with one critic from *Time* magazine writing, "Walker's message: Sisterhood is beautiful, and Men stink" (qtd. in Walker, *River* 224). A more sympathetic reader might suggest that far from trying to denigrate all black men, Walker is simply trying to show that the end of slavery did not necessarily spell freedom for southern black women. Nell Painter finds that intraracial conflict among black people is "a closely held secret of the race" that presents its own significant challenges and restrictions "because discussions of the abuse of black women would not merely implicate whites" ("Racial Stereotypes" 213). In *Black Sexual Politics,* Patricia Hill Collins agrees that black people have concealed their own mistreatment of black women as a means of preserving positive images about the race:

> Because Black male leaders have historically abandoned Black women as collective rape victims, Black women were pressured to remain silent about these and other violations at the hands of Black men. Part of their self-censorship certainly had to do with reluctance to "air dirty laundry" in a White society that viewed Black men as sexual predators (226).

I therefore read *The Color Purple* as an attempt to redress an ellipsis in the dominant narratives by focusing its attention on how racist and sexist ideologies made black women especially vulnerable to harm from multiple sources, including their own communities and families. Furthermore, I argue that solidarity and eroticism between black women in the novel combine to offer possibilities for protection and healing from interpersonal violence as well as systemic oppression. In a cultural narrative and historical context that disallow black women the possibility of possessing sexual agency and safety - a point that Walker underscores by having Celie experience incest and domestic violence – queerness in the form of a same-sex relationship and a reimagined socio-familial structure presents possibilities for liberation and fulfillment. In the novel, Celie's journey is one "marked by milestones where she liberates herself from the control of cultural and historical stereotypes" (Sangwan 183), as Walker offers up a new vision of sexual politics in the Jim Crow South. Existing stereotypes of black females – the Jezebel, the Mammy, the Sapphire – are notably absent from Walker's story. Even as the portrayal of the hypersexual Shug appears to veer into Jezebel territory, Walker redeems her by imbuing her with emotional depth and vulnerability. Instead of reproducing recognizable images that are necessarily and irreversibly tied to troubling racial and sexual politics, Walker creates complex, multi-dimensional characters that are able to establish and operate within alternative frameworks of southern black womanhood.

Although Celie is born into an era in which black women are legally emancipated, she nonetheless finds others placing limits on her freedom, most notably when her stepfather marries her off to Albert, a young man hoping to become Nettie's suitor. In one letter to God, Celie recounts the conversation that she overhears between her stepfather and Albert in which they reduce her to a commodity to be bartered and exchanged. The stepfather tries to convince Albert that Celie would make an ideal wife on the grounds that she would be useful around the home and that she is now infertile, meaning Albert can have sex with her as much as he wants without having to face the undesirable consequence of providing for more children: "She ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it." He goes on to suggest that Celie is one item in a package deal, also coming "with her own linen" and "that cow she raise down there back of the crib" (Walker 9-10). Even Albert's sisters voice their approval of Celie, saying, "Brother couldn't have done better if he tried" because Celie is a "good housekeeper, good with children, good cook" (20). Celie is dehumanized and evaluated according to her usefulness in domestic work and childrearing. She is eventually judged to be a fit wife because of her prowess in these areas, not because of the personal qualities and characteristics that she possesses.

Albert's reduction of Celie to object status in his exchange with her stepfather sets the tone for his behavior toward her once they are married. He demands her total subservience in the home, treating her as a maid and nanny, and demeaning her verbally and sexually. His constant manipulation, intimidation, and bullying compounds the isolation and inadequacy that Celie already feels as a result of her violent upbringing. By

the time Shug Avery arrives at their home to visit Albert and recover from an illness, Celie is already convinced of her own worthlessness. Her resolve weakened, Celie cannot stand up for herself when Shug begins to mock her and order her around, telling her, “You sure *is* ugly” (42), and snapping, “I don’t want none of your damn food” (46).

However, Shug soon develops a fondness and sympathy for Celie and begins a process of bolstering Celie’s confidence and self-love by teaching her how to find pleasure in sex, beauty in her own body, and pride in her talents as a tailor. The relationship that they build together, predicated on trust, desire, and mutually satisfying sex – all things missing from Celie’s marriage to Albert - allows Celie to explore queerness as a means to achieving wholeness and an empowered sense of self. Shug facilitates Celie’s sexual awakening in a safe space that allows Celie to explore sex free from the threat of violent coercion and domination.

Walker has received significant criticism from scholars for her handling of queer themes in the novel. Bell hooks and Barbara Smith have censured Walker for failing to include characters’ homophobic reactions to Celie and Shug that they believe would have been inevitable in the pre-Stonewall South. Smith goes so far as to call *The Color Purple* an “inspiring fable” because of its “depiction of a lesbian relationship unencumbered by homophobia or fear of it,” and notes that the two women “move as lovers through a totally heterosexual milieu” with “complete ease,” even though such a thing would be “improbable, not to say amazing.” Ultimately, Smith finds it problematic that Walker uses a “disarming strategy of writing as if women falling in love with each other were quite ordinary,” an occurrence so unlikely that Walker’s vision can only be thought of as

a fantasy, "a picture of what the world could be if only human beings were ready to create it" (62).

Yet Smith fails to consider the possibility that if Walker's vision of an anti-homophobic community really is impossible, it can still serve a useful purpose in creating queer alternative histories of the South. As with the *Fried Green Tomatoes* texts, *The Color Purple* establishes queer counter-narratives for the region that do not take the place of factual historical accounts but rather allow us to imagine what queer histories might have looked like, had they been recorded. Additionally, these queer counter-narratives expose the images and assumptions that perpetuated the oppression of marginalized populations, and they challenge the notion that they constitute something normal or natural.

As for hooks, she criticizes Walker for undermining "the powerful suggestion that sexual desire can disrupt and subvert oppressive social structures because it does not necessarily conform to social prescription" by refusing "to acknowledge it as threatening, dangerous." Hooks takes issue with the fact that Albert is unperturbed by Celie's romantic devotion to Shug, citing this as evidence that "homophobia does not exist in the novel" (285). For hooks, Albert's nonchalant dismissal of Celie and Shug's relationship suggests that erotic bonds between women are insignificant and weak, incapable of inflicting any meaningful damage upon his authority within the family and upon patriarchy more broadly.

I, however, read Albert's response as foolishly hasty and naïve because he fails to recognize the potentially powerful consequences of Celie's love for Shug. Walker disproves his (and patriarchy's) assumption that bonds between women – especially

erotic bonds – are worthless and harmless by placing a same-sex relationship at the foundation of Celie's newly acquired autonomy and agency. When Albert undermines the significance of his wife's love for Shug, he unwittingly enables Celie to continue the relationship that leads to her personal revolution. Celie's growth into an autonomous and fearless woman culminates in her resigning as his maid and leaving their home. Albert believes that by devaluing the deep connection that the two women share, he can maintain control over his wife. However, by failing to intervene, he eventually sees the micro-patriarchal economy he created in his own home fall apart.

Audre Lorde's essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power, provides especially pertinent ways for thinking about the transformative power of the erotic in *The Color Purple*. More than sexual acts, more than pornography's "sensation without feeling," the erotic, according to Lorde, is all about feeling; it is, in fact, "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" (340). Lorde sees the erotic as the nexus of a woman's creative, intellectual, spiritual, and sexual power. She defines the erotic "as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our work, our lives" (341). Lorde's work connects the exploration and affirmation of eroticism with a freeing of the self, a means of liberating one's potential power from the confines of patriarchy.

In *The Color Purple,* Celie's sexual liberation is necessarily entwined with a more holistic view of her own potential in other areas of her life in which she has previously felt stifled or restricted. She begins to question her relationship with God, her husband's insistence that she is ugly, worthless, and undesirable, and her long-held belief that she

has no skill or knowledge that would allow her to be financially self-sufficient. Celie's relationship with Shug helps her to recognize the erotic as a source of power, as their initial sexual encounter becomes a deeper attachment that inspires Celie's transformation. Celie's first satisfactory sexual experiences with Shug are a primary catalyst for change, bringing about a shift in consciousness that leads Celie to detach herself from the anxiety and disgust surrounding her own body, and then from her reliance on people and structures that negatively impact her wellbeing.

Celie first sees Shug in a photograph and is immediately mesmerized by her appearance. She writes in a letter to God, "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw…She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me." She confesses to staring at the picture "all night long," and reveals that "when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery" (Walker, *Purple* 8). Celie's gaze throughout the novel develops as an essential part of the process of claiming erotic power. At the beginning, Celie writes, "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (7). Here, Celie implies that she finds looking at women a safer and less intimidating prospect than looking at men. Looking at men reminds her of the violence, exploitation, and isolation they have forced upon her, whereas looking at women makes Celie feels comfortable and unafraid. Celie gradually comes to realize that looking at women is not only non-threatening, it is potentially pleasurable, and so her exploration of the uses and power of the gaze become a motif that recurs throughout the novel.

As Celie and Shug develop an intimacy with one another, Celie learns how to utilize her gaze as an integral part of achieving pleasure and taking control of her body. At first, Celie's gaze is dissociated from her body as she describes Shug's beauty without

connecting it to any feelings of arousal within her. Celie goes to see Shug sing at the juke joint and writes, "I love looking at Shug," describing her "bright black skin in her tight red dress, her feet in little sassy red shoes. Her hair shining in waves" (64). Yet she fails to explain what kind of pleasure this looking brings her. This act of unrestricted looking grants her a freedom she has never before experienced; gazing at Shug is seemingly the only thing that Albert cannot control or manipulate.

Soon after, Celie turns the erotic gaze on herself at Shug's insistence. Shug, as a woman who is comfortable with her own sexuality and who makes a living using her body as an integral part of a seductive, sensual performance, is shocked to learn that Celie has never explored her own body. She encourages Celie to look at herself "down there" (69), a suggestion to which Celie reluctantly agrees on the condition that Shug joins her. After her initial disgust upon seeing her naked body for the first time, Celie begins to explore its capacity for sexual pleasure under Shug's guidance. Shug explains that she has "a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody" (69), and Celie experiences "a little shiver go through [her]" (70) when she looks at Shug and touches it.

Thereafter, Celie is able to connect the sight of Shug – both real and imagined – with her own body's arousal. Writing about another evening at the jukejoint, Celie confesses, "All the men got they eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too" (72). Celie thus identifies the connection between the pleasure in looking and bodily arousal, and in doing so, learns how to take control of her sexuality for the first time in her life. Celie's previous sexual encounters with an abusive stepfather and a husband are fraught

with a mixtures of fear, boredom, and dissociation. She reveals that “Most times I pretend I ain’t there,” and instead lies beneath Albert while he “just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (68). By contrast, sex with Shug is consensual, emotive, and satisfying.

As a result of finding herself in a safe and affirming space with Shug, Celie is able to explore those facets of her life that had long been denied to her. Whereas Albert had confined Celie to a life of bleak domestic drudgery, Shug encourages Celie to travel with her to see new places and meet other people, and to design and make pants for a living so that she can support herself while indulging her urge to be artistic and creative. Lorde’s definition of the erotic is about something more capacious than sex. Rather, Lorde credits being “in touch with the erotic” as a means of becoming “less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (342).

Gradually, Celie is able to be in touch with the erotic, both in terms of evolving into a sexually empowered subject and by making a renewed commitment to pursuing the things that energize and inspire her, such as her affective bonds with other women in her extended family and her creative design work. Celie’s newfound connection to the erotic manifests in her defiance of her husband and the purging of her secrets about her stepfather’s abuse in a confession to Shug. Only after Celie releases herself from the hold that her husband and stepfather have over her can she face the possibilities of her expanded horizons. The very act of confession releases Celie from a lifetime of silence and shame, allowing her to submit sexually to Shug in a way that is willing and trusting, unlike the coerced submission to her stepfather and husband. Thus, the same-sex

relationship at the center of the novel provides more than a mere illustration of what desire, love, and sex between black women in the Jim Crow South might look like.

I want to return to bell hooks's earlier claim that Walker's treatment of a seemingly harmless and isolated case of sexual desire does not have the capacity to bring about any significant, widespread manifestation of liberatory sexual politics. Celie's pursuit of a same-sex relationship does not result in a large-scale revolution of subjugated black women in the novel, but it would be shortsighted to dismiss the important political implications of *The Color Purple*.

Walker positions Celie's transformation at the center of a larger critique of how normative gender roles and sexual identities within the nuclear family shore up patriarchal domination in black communities in the Jim Crow South more broadly. According to Candice Jenkins, the novel "engages in a project of 'queering' the black family, reshaping it in unconventional ways that divest its black male members of a good deal of power" (970). In Walker's vision of the black family, power does not operate in a top-down structure with men at the top. Instead, power is shared among the women and any men who commit to a spirit of egalitarianism and cooperation. The violent enforcement of certain norms such as heterosexual relationships and rigidly defined gender roles restricts authority to the men in the family until the women band together to usurp them and negotiate their own horizontal power structure.

As Celie gains confidence from her relationship with Shug, she begins to form a community of women who work to ensure one another's liberation in spite of their differences. Mary Agnes, the second wife of Celie's stepson Harpo, frees Harpo's first wife from prison by visiting the warden and asking for her release, even though

approaching him with such a bold request means putting herself in danger. Later, Shug helps Mary Agnes realize her dream of becoming a singer by taking her on the road and giving her opportunities to perform onstage. Finally, Celie hires Sofia to work in her shop as a sales clerk. Sofia, who is mentally and physically broken from years of prison labor and then indentured servitude to the Mayor's wife, can finally earn a living wage in a safe workplace. Mary Agnes, Celie, and Sofia renounce their roles as wives after their marriages prove to be abusive or restrictive. Instead they seek companionship and support in an alternative family space, raising each other's children, living together, working together, and sharing a commitment to resisting oppression from the men in their lives.

The shock of losing Celie and Shug to an interdependent, all-female community prompts Albert to enter into a sustained period of self-reflection and atonement for his earlier abusive ways. He turns to housework, religion, and even sewing to help Celie out with her business. The result is that he gains an enhanced awareness of how a non-hierarchical, queer family structure in which a father "is no longer dominant or even interested in domination" (Jenkins 972) can bring about fulfillment and liberation for all members. Albert begins to understand how the expectation that he exert an oppressive and controlling masculinity harms his own ability to form sustainable, productive relationships. He also expresses regret that he treated his wife and children poorly in his efforts to secure his position as the head of the family. He describes how he spent years being "just miserable," revealing to Celie that he "couldn't understand why us have life at all if all it can do most times is make us feel bad" (Walker 238). When revealing that he has been reflecting on his purpose in life, Albert says, "The more I wonder…the more I

love." Celie replies, "And people start to love you back, I bet," and notes that he acts "surprise" when he says "They do" (239). Albert's evolution from patriarchal tyrant who dominated by force to benign househusband capable of love is only possible with a reworking of the mechanisms – gender roles, heterosexuality, female subordination – that previously buttressed his position of power in the family.

In 1986, Stephen Spielberg's film adaptation of *The Color Purple* was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. It ultimately failed to win any, but its numerous appearances on the nominee list speak to its popularity among the predominantly white male Academy members. But while critics – black feminist critics in particular - lauded Walker's novel for its complex exploration of a black woman's self-actualization and sexual empowerment, many were less impressed with Spielberg's interpretation of these themes in the film. Of particular to concern to critics were the downplaying of Celie's sexual relationship with Shug and the film's failure to portray Celie's inner quest for emotional, physical, and spiritual fulfillment.

A significant limitation of the film is its inability to replicate the epistolary form of the novel. Whereas the novel grants us exclusive access to Celie's thoughts through a series of letters to God and her sister Nettie, the film relies more heavily on the visual cues of body language and facial expression to communicate what Celie is thinking or feeling. Celie's intermittent voiceovers fill in narrative ellipses as opposed to revealing her motivations or advancing the audience's understanding of her psychological development.

The epistolary form that Walker utilizes in the novel allows for what Gérard Genette terms "internal focalization," when the perspective of a story "comes from one

fixed character or variable or multiple characters" who "only know what they are able to know as characters" (qtd. in Zhou 288). Readers of the novel are granted intimate and unmediated access to Celie and are subject to her interpretations of events only. The film, however, in opting not to use more comprehensive voiceovers or, say, point-of-view filming techniques, displaces Celie as the omniscient narrator. As a result, Celie is forced to relinquish control of how the narrative is presented. Therein lies a major point of contention for critics of the film, who accused Spielberg of stripping the novel of its most salient purpose: granting a marginalized figure – in this case a poor, black, queer southern woman - agency to explore her evolving sense of self. McMullen and Solomon claim that "without the letters or their cinematic equivalents, the viewer has no access to Celie's consciousness which is essential for the viewer to track evolution," and that Spielberg's film "results, perhaps unintentionally, in the obscuring of a black woman's voice" (168). The novel's use of internal focalization means that Celie's identity development is not subject to interruptions or misinterpretations by outside forces. Walker allows Celie to tell her own story, and in doing so she contests the dominant process by which black women's identities, especially sexual identities, have historically been defined by sexist, racist, and homophobic systems of oppression, and by members of socially dominant (white/male/heterosexual) groups. Furthermore, critics such as McMullen and Solomon have taken issue with how Spielberg's silencing of Celie does not explain how her private desire for Shug and her exploration of sexual intimacy with another woman results in her physical and emotional liberation.

While the arguments of these critics do have merit, I want to offer a more generous reading that highlights some of the film's accomplishments, especially its

sensitive - albeit overly cautious - rendering of female-bodied queerness. At first glance, the film does not appear to prioritize desire between women, shying away from explicit depictions of sex and erasing Celie's vivid descriptions of her feelings for and encounters with Shug. As such, one might be inclined to argue that *The Color Purple* contributes little to queer counter-narratives of the South, choosing instead to tell one woman's story of incest, domestic abuse, and her longing to be reunited with her sister and children. Indeed, in interviews with black female viewers, Jacqueline Bobo found that several did not even recognize that there was lesbian content in the film. One participant in Bobo's study states that "[lesbianism] was just suggested. If you had not read the book, it's possible that you missed the point" (119).

The reading of the film I suggest here insists that queerness in multiple forms is a central feature of Spielberg's *The Color Purple*. In her study of lesbian representability in classical Hollywood cinema, Patricia White says that looking at narrative alone is not enough. Rather, one should consider "studies of stars, costuming, reception, source material, and authorship" (xvii) when excavating lesbian meaning from films. While White's work is focused on the classical era, her suggested method yields fruitful queer readings when applied to contemporary films such as *The Color Purple.* Thus, my reading finds queerness manifesting not just in the narrative but in Spielberg's choices regarding form and aesthetics as well.

Such a reading does require viewer investment in the form of an intention to queer the film or, to use Whatling's term, to "lesbianise" it; it also insists that we adopt a capacious definition of "queer" that incorporates not only sex and desire between women but certain political maneuvers as well. As with the novel, I read the film of *The Color*

Purple as queer because it subverts the authority of heterosexist and patriarchal power structures by privileging affective bonds between women that displace male-female relationships as women's primary source of security and fulfillment. My aim is to identify and analyze cues in both form and content that lend themselves to a queer reading rich with radical possibilities for rethinking and representing southern black women's sexuality, especially same-sex desire.

While critics have been right to point out that the film does not accurately adapt the explicit dialogue and sexual behavior found in the book, the film does not fail to tell a queer story or depict female-bodied queerness. Despite being subject to the constraints of Hollywood convention and MPAA ratings, *The Color Purple* still manages to represent desire between women in recognizable ways, subtle though they may be. Terry Castle's theory of the apparitional lesbian offers a useful framework for understanding how a queer presence appears and operates in the film. While Castle focuses on eighteenth and nineteenth century art and literature, her concept of the apparitional lesbian can be readily identified in the character of Shug Avery. Jan Whitt also employs Castle's term to talk about *The Color Purple* in her essay "What Happened to Celie and Idgie?: 'Apparitional Lesbians' in American Film," but only to describe the uncertainty that surrounds Celie's lesbianism in the film adaptation. Here, I propose that Shug is an apparitional lesbian because she is made to appear quite literally as a ghost, and so I depart from Whitt's use of apparitional as a metaphor for sexual ambiguity.

Castle finds that the purpose of the apparitional figure in literature was to "obliterate, through a single vaporizing gesture, the disturbing carnality of lesbian love" (63), in essence suggesting a lesbian presence while simultaneously denying its

corporeality and thus its reality. Castle claims that "lesbianism, or its possibility, can only be represented to the degree that it is simultaneously 'derealized' through a blanching authorial infusion of spectral metaphors" (34). Shug's presence in the film is marked by incompleteness, ambivalence, and a concealment or absence of her corporeal self. By constituting Shug as an apparition and denying her bodily actualization, the film can allow Celie's desire for her to manifest while sidestepping the taboo of screening explicit sexual activity between women. Many of Shug's appearances throughout the film construe her as a spectral figure, employing a range of deliberately obscuring camera angles and lighting and costuming techniques that minimize her corporeal presence.

We first see Shug during a sex scene between Celie and Albert. Shug's photograph is on the nightstand in the background as Celie submissively endures passionless and even painful sex with her husband. Her head thrown back in laughter and with her face partially concealed by shadow, Shug is both desirable and enigmatic. Celie's voiceover describes her efforts to dissociate from sex with Albert by thinking about how much she misses her sister, and then reveals that, in order to distract herself, she thinks about "that pretty woman in the picture." Shug's picture is at first shown in fleeting glimpses but then the viewer's gaze and Celie's come to rest on it. Celie fixates on the image before even knowing who Shug is; the mysterious woman who captivates Celie so completely is unnamed and intangible, a commanding presence without a body. The position of the photo in the bedroom means that Shug stares at Celie as she lays in bed, drawing her in and demanding her attention and desire. Shug's ethereal presence thus not only interrupts heterosexual coupling by distracting Celie from sex with Albert,

it offers her an escape and a means of detachment by providing an alternative fantasy object to fixate on.

Shug's disembodied presence re-enters the film several years later when a flyer announcing her show at the Lucky Star juke joint appears to fall from the sky and, as if by some supernatural force, is carried by a breeze all the way to Celie's house. These portents of Shug's first physical appearance perpetuate Celie's curious fascination with her while allowing Shug to remain in the realm of fantasy. As such, Shug becomes a figure who is always anticipated but never fully materializes. Shug appears and disappears throughout the film, her random and fleeting visitations to Celie further compounding the sense that her presence is not containable or tangible. Significantly, many of the occasions when she does appear onscreen are characterized by techniques that preserve her mystery and make her ghostlike.

On the night of Shug's arrival, Celie is filled with a sense of foreboding. The night is dark, stormy and ominous. The farm animals begin to get restless and agitated, mimicking a familiar trope of horror films in which unusual animal behavior implies that they sense the onset of something supernatural. Celie's voiceover warns, "I know something's there. Yes indeed, Lord. I know something's coming." The scene in which Shug arrives is dimly lit, the characters illuminated only by the flickering glow of the lantern. The discordant music heightens the sinister tenor of the scene as a blues refrain jars with menacing strings.

Viewers first get a glimpse of Shug when she is in in the back of a carriage with only her ankles showing. Albert carries her up the steps to the house where a breathless Celie stands frozen in place. Albert commands Celie to "fix up the spare room" for Shug,

but Celie's responds in voiceover, "I can't move. I can't move! I need to see her eyes. I feel like once I see her eyes, then my feets can let go of the spot they stuck in." Shug's head is bowed, concealing her face, and when she raises it, our gaze turns to Celie. Celie is staring at Shug as though mesmerized, like she has seen a ghost. The big moment when Shug is revealed to the audience, however, is frustratingly incomplete as even with her head raised, the dim light ensures that shadow obscures her face, especially her eyes.

According to Castle, the recurrent attempts to transform a potential lesbian character into a spectral form are based on a need to "derealize lesbian desire" (63). In other words, the intangibility of the apparition removes from a text the possibility that lesbianism can be realized through erotic bodily contact. Indeed, Shug does not fully materialize in corporeal form in several subsequent scenes. The next shots of Shug are of her sick in bed, seen from Celie's point of view, which both the door and Albert obscure. When Celie and Albert take breakfast up to Shug, she remains behind a closed bedroom door, a disembodied voice shouting out her displeasure at the quality of food and her annoyance at being disturbed. Next, in the scene where Celie attends to Shug in the bathtub, Shug again appears as a voice without a body. The camera is positioned behind the tub, granting the audience a view only of Shug's arms that hold aloft a drink and a cigarette. Eventually, the camera cuts to Celie's point of view looking down at Shug, revealing Shug's face for a few brief moments before cutting back to the angle behind the tub.

Castle notes a tension that persists in texts in which the apparitional lesbian appears, namely the text's inability to fully suppress the materializing potentiality of the spectral form. She states that "embedded in the ghostly figure…was inevitably a notion

of reembodiment: of uncanny return to the flesh" (63). The film certainly struggles to contain the threat of Shug's reembodiment, particularly in the scene where Shug and Celie kiss. The source of much dissension among viewers of the film, the kissing scene depicts erotic physical intimacy between Shug and Celie but stops short of showing them having sex. For some fans of the novel, the omission of sex between the two female characters meant denying that the exploration of Celie's queer sexuality was at the core of her liberation from sexist oppression. One critic describes the scene "as a series of chaste, motherly kisses and hand-holding" (Koresky web).

In the documentary feature, *Cultivating a Classic: The Making of The Color Purple,* Spielberg himself admits that he did not show "the deflowering of Celie by Shug" because he "didn't think audiences would be able to achieve an understanding," presumably implying that he did not expect audiences to approve of explicit lesbian content. Furthermore, in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly,* Spielberg says,

> I was shy about it. In that sense, perhaps I was the wrong director to acquit some of the more sexually honest encounters between Shug and Celie, because I did soften those. I basically took something that was extremely erotic and very intentional, and I reduced it to a simple kiss. (Kinser)

Spielberg's rendering of Walker's pivotal love scene is undoubtedly stripped of its most graphic content, but nonetheless, a series of narrative and formal metaphors allow for the scene to be read as an affirmation of Shug and Celie's sexual desire for each other. The moment in the book in which Shug forces Celie to look at her own vagina is rewritten in the film so that Shug instead forces Celie to look at her own smile. While Celie's examination of her vagina in the novel is integral to her discovery of pleasure, the moment that she reveals and confronts her smile for the first time in the film plays no less

significant a role in her sexual development. The uncovering of Celie's smile is an erotically charged moment between the two women, with Shug embracing Celie from behind as she pulls her hands away from her mouth. Although initially Celie is hesitant to reveal such an intimate part of herself, she becomes emboldened as Shug convinces her of her beauty and dispels her insecurities about her body. Moreover, once Celie learns to overcome her discomfort with her body and accept her smile, she can express her pleasure with kissing Shug.

The much debated kiss itself is couched in erotic visual cues, starting with a set saturated in red and pink hues that connote romance and passion. The camera lingers on a cigarette in Shug's hand that leaves a trail of smoke that, together with a diegetic blues song playing in the background, creates a richly sultry and seductive atmosphere. When Shug first kisses Celie on the cheek and then the forehead, it is almost maternal in nature. However, her firm kiss on Celie's lips prompts Celie to kiss Shug back, leading the two women to continue kissing with increased intensity. Shug as the apparitional lesbian has, at least temporarily, achieved reembodiment or, to use Castle's term, has experienced "a return to the flesh" (63).

But, true to Castle's claims that "one woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one," and that "passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized" (34), Shug's corporeality does not last long. As the two women move into a sensual embrace, the camera pans away to a shot of a windchime before the scene – and Shug's brief materialization – comes to an end. The culmination of the scene is suggestive of further sexual activity but Shug's return to apparitional form precludes the possibility of that activity being actualized onscreen. Shug is later shown

in her entirety without the use of techniques to obscure her physical presence, but the more obvious sexual intimacy between her and Celie is never replicated. Shug thus exists at the boundaries between the real and the unreal, between what can be shown or suggested and what must remain invisible or intangible. By positing Shug as a specter, the film allows for a subtle queer narrative to develop without affronting an audience that might be resistant to watching a film about lesbianism liberating a black woman from racist and sexist oppression.

Shug's slippage into human embodiment must be countered in one of two ways: Either Shug must be disembodied once again so that physical intimacy between her and Celie cannot reoccur, or future instances of her embodiment can only take place in scenes from which any possibility of sex has been expunged. In short, "homophobia exorcizes" the "phantoms" of "love, female pleasure, and the possibility of women breaking free – together – from their male sexual overseers" (Castle 34). The film's penultimate scene lends credence to Castle's theory when it shows Shug quite literally undergoing an exorcism. She leads a crowd into her father's church where he is conducting a sermon on finding redemption through God. Shug joins in with the choir singing, "Speak to me, Lord…something has gone wrong…maybe God is trying to tell you something." While Shug ostensibly seeks forgiveness for a life of drinking, hard living, and abandoning her children, it is also significant that this scene signals the end of her onscreen coupling with Celie.

Jacqueline Bobo lambasted the decision to prioritize Shug's relationship with her father in the narrative, accusing Spielberg's Shug of being "obsessed with winning her father's approval" (69). Certainly, it would appear that Shug is recuperated into

heterosexuality when her desire to seek her father's forgiveness displaces her attachment to Celie. Celie, however, seeks no such retribution, nor does the film culminate in her finding love or validation with a man. Instead, the conclusion to Celie's story caps a queer thematic thread that has run throughout the film, namely the positioning of affective bonds between women as the impetus for their emancipation from sexist oppression and the constraints of heterosexual marriage. When Albert separates Celie and Nettie as teenagers, Celie is left vulnerable to her husband's violence and intimidation. The scene in which Albert violently rips Nettie from Celie's arms, forcing himself physically and figuratively between them, is juxtaposed with the final scene that sees the sisters run through a field of flowers to meet each other in a passionate embrace. Albert stands off to the side, expelled from the reunion that signals the completion of Celie's journey to liberation and healing.

In the scenes depicting the intervening years between the sisters' separation and reunion, women are shown time and again providing each other with mutual support and validation when their husbands fall short. The film stays true to the novel by illustrating the cooperation that takes place between Celie, Sofia, Shug, and Squeak as they work towards economic independence, creative expression, and personal autonomy. In particular, the dinner scene shows Shug, Celie, and Squeak announce to the men that they plan to go on the road together and pursue their own career interests, while Sofia, silent for so many years following her abuse in prison and servitude, speaks up to thank Celie for everything she's done for her. The women in the film collaborate selflessly to secure freedoms for and with each other, parenting each other's children, freeing Sofia from prison, encouraging Celie to start her own business, and giving Squeak the confidence to

pursue her dream of being a singer. The film situates these empowering relationships front and center in the narrative, and as a result, it exposes the tenuousness of the men's claims to patriarchal authority, and the assumption that the nuclear family is necessarily at the center of a stable, successful community.

The film adaptation of *The Color Purple* is not without its problems. Some scenes border on comedic farce when they should arguably deal more sensitively with what is ultimately harrowing subject matter, and Walker herself laments the "slick, sanitized" (*River* 160) feel of Spielberg's production. It also succumbs to the limitations of audience expectations and Hollywood convention by not adapting the sexual content of the novel faithfully.

Yet still, it is possible to read the film as remaining close to Walker's novel in its overall message. Although Castle's theory was not initially applied to film, it nevertheless functions as a useful approach for understanding the formal and aesthetic mechanisms that bring about a queer presence in the adaptation of *The Color Purple.* Castle's work opens up a line of inquiry for exploring how the processes of invoking and then derealizing lesbianism might operate in a visual medium where lighting, mise-en-scène, diegetic and non-diegetic music, sound, editing, costuming, and other factors determine if or how something appears. Both versions of *The Color Purple* present queer counter-narratives based on black women's erotic and affective bonds with one another, and reveal these bonds to be revolutionary in a time and space where black women's sexuality was reduced to lewd stereotypes or silence. The film and novel divest black women of the harmful myths and images that ensured their subjugation, and in doing so,

both texts produce a radical revision of sexual and racial representation in the Jim Crow South.

Chapter Four

"Share Our Anger and Our Love": Imagining Queerness in Hostile Spaces in Ann Allen Shockley's *Say Jesus and Come to Me* and Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller*

The Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the growth of the Gay Liberation Movement coincided with the rise of an increasingly visible and vocal feminist movement in the United States. Both the Gay Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement demonstrated their commitment to challenging institutional oppression through rallies and marches, community gatherings, and self-produced media.

Yet despite both movements being predicated on principles of liberation and acceptance, some feminists who were also lesbians struggled to find their footing in either one. Queer women often experienced sexism in gay liberation organizations dominated by men (Brown 235), while they faced "attempts to exclude or closet them in mainstream feminist organizations" (Freedman 88). In her memoir about her life as an activist, Karla Jay recalls how "lesbians whose only involvement was with the Women's Liberation Movement were generally no better off than those of us connected with the Gay Liberation Front" (137). Lesbians who were women of color or working-class women experienced exclusion from feminist spaces to an even greater degree because of "outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself" (Combahee 211).

Whereas Betty Friedan's landmark text, *The Feminine Mystique,* had been an empowering call to action for many white, middle-class, heterosexual women, others balked at Friedan's disregard for women experiencing multiple oppressions such as women of color and working women. Lesbians were especially incensed upon reading her description of "the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky fog over the

American scene" (265). When Friedan went on to become a major feminist icon and president of the National Organization for Women, she made no secret of her displeasure with lesbians joining the movement, even omitting the Daughters of Bilitis from a list of sponsors for NOW's First Congress to Unite Women in 1969. One year later, Friedan went so far as to call lesbians the "Lavender Menace" (Brown 235) of the women's movement, a move that prompted a lesbian feminist collective calling themselves Radicalesbians to take over the proceedings at the Second Congress to Unite Women and distribute copies of their now legendary polemical piece, "The Woman-Identified Woman" (Jay 137). The action of the lesbian feminists garnered them notoriety among Friedan and her followers but did not immediately translate into inclusion of lesbians' issues in mainstream feminist organizations.

Instead, the dissension and heightened tension between lesbians, heterosexual feminists, and gay liberation organizations meant that "lesbians formed separate consciousness-raising groups and caucuses" (Freedman 88) such as the Radicalesbians and The Furies in order to address their own unique concerns. As a result, a separate but overlapping lesbian feminist movement "emerged as a result of two developments: lesbians within the Women's Liberation Movement began to create a new, distinctively feminist lesbian politics, and lesbians in the Gay Liberation Front left to join up with their sisters" (Jeffreys 19).

Lesbian feminists differed from the lesbians who had been involved in the largely apolitical and clandestine homophile groups such as the Daughters of Bilitis, which Rita Mae Brown claims "had served a useful purpose for those involved, especially giving one another emotional support" but otherwise "might as well have come from the Paleolithic

Age" (234). Lesbian feminists believed visibility and solidarity were necessary for effecting social change, and that choosing to partner with women instead of men was the ultimate rejection of patriarchy and heterosexist oppression. Lesbianism became more than a sexual identity. It became an avowed political position, especially among those feminists whose racial and class privilege allowed them to turn away from normative ideals of marriage and family and still maintain a reasonable degree of economic and social stability.

Cheryl Clarke emphasizes how the politicization of partnering with women ensured lesbian feminism in the 1970s had a "radicalizing impact" that "distinguishes this era of feminism from the previous eras" ("Failure" 74). Few were more radical in their vision of what lesbian feminism could achieve than Jill Johnston. In her 1973 treatise on separatism, *Lesbian Nation,* Johnston writes, "within just two years the meaning of the word lesbian has changed from private subversive activity to political revolutionary identity" (275), and claims that lesbian feminism signifies "the envisioned goal of a woman committed state" (278). Referencing Ti-Grace Atkinson's claim that "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice," Johnston asserts, "when theory and practice come together we'll have the revolution. Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution" (166).

However, Johnston's vision of a lesbian-revolutionized state was as problematic as it was unrealistic. One of the biggest drawbacks of Johnston's utopic fantasy and with lesbian feminist politics in general is that they failed to resonate with many groups of women for whom separation from men and immersion in lesbian feminist communities are impossible. For example, in the cases of poor women and women of color, going to

work was and had always been a matter of survival rather than liberation, and neither they nor their families could afford to lose their incomes. There were many women who lived in places where being openly queer posed serious threats to their safety. Some lesbian feminist spaces denied entry to males of any age, meaning that women who could not afford childcare for their sons were excluded. For women such as these, lesbianism was more about an apolitical, sometimes concealed attraction to other women than a revolutionary stance.

Sherrie Inness concurs that Johnston's vision fails to account for the differences between women and also critiques the "expectation of a universal gayness that denies the profound differences between gay cultures in different regions" (137). Inness emphasizes the importance of location in determining whether women could or would want to access lesbian feminist communities. She writes,

> efforts to build a single community to represent the needs of lesbians across the United States are always doomed to failure not only because of the class, socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and age differences that fissure any large group but also because of the differences in community caused by differences in geography. (155)

The lesbian feminism that Johnston and her peers touted required networks of likeminded women who could provide each other with social, emotional, and even financial support. However, lesbians living in the South, especially those in isolated rural areas, may not have known many or even any other women like them. With many of the most active organizations, gatherings, and consciousness-raising groups based in bi-coastal urban metropolises such as New York, Washington D.C., Boston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, lesbians and feminists living in other regions were detached from much of the action.

That is not to say that lesbians living in the South had no contact whatsoever with each other or that they remained unaware of what their northeast and west coast counterparts were doing. The Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) was founded in 1972 and provided educational programs, support groups, social events, and opportunities for activism among its members, while its spin-off group, Dykes for the Second American Revolution, was short-lived but brought together socialist and other anti-capitalist lesbian feminists. Other notable lesbian feminist communities existed in Chapel Hill, Raleigh, Athens, Durham, and Charlotte (Sears).

But for women living in rural areas, lack of time, transportation, or money made participation in such communities difficult. Furthermore, the lesbian feminist rhetoric about separatism, sisterhood, and a lesbian-led revolution to overthrow patriarchy that groups in the bi-coastal cities promoted often got lost in translation by the time it reached the South, especially for rural women, women of color, and working-class women. While some lesbians eagerly embraced the emancipatory message of lesbian feminism, others did not find it as relevant or engaging (Allison *Skin*). Given the economic circumstances and family commitments of many poor and rural lesbians of all races, as well as the social and cultural climates of the towns in which they lived, they may have been less concerned with politicizing their sexual identities and more concerned with meeting other women for socializing, relationships, and support.

Recognizing that the South had a significant but scattered lesbian population, some women began producing magazines and newsletters that women anywhere in the region could access. One purpose of these publications was to offer comfort, support, news, and information to lesbians who might have been cut off from other women like

them. For women in the rural South, lesbian publications such as *Sinister Wisdom,* founded in Charlotte, would have been "an oasis" that signaled "the beginning of a community for them" (Nicholson qtd. in Sears 249). Likewise, ALFA's monthly newsletter, *Atalanta,* and the Durham-based *Feminary* were publications that allowed rural southern lesbians a means of connecting to women just like them, and both had a focus on issues relevant to the region.

Upon switching *Feminary* from a newsletter to a journal, the editors emphasized why it was so important to have a publication that dealt specifically with the concerns of southern lesbians instead of simply adopting the politics of lesbians from other regions. Their editorial reads, "as southerners, as lesbians, and as women, we need to explore with others how our lives fit into a region about which we have great ambivalences – to share our anger and our love." They go on to write,

> We feel we are products of Southern values and traditions but that, as lesbians we contradict the destructive parts of those values and traditions; and we feel it important to explore how this Southern experience fits into the American pattern." (1970s North Carolina Feminisms web)

The editors' reasons for adopting a regional focus acknowledge the fundamental differences in how lesbians from the South conceive of oppression, liberation, community, and identity compared to lesbians elsewhere. *Feminary*'s insistence that southern lesbians acknowledge and affirm their unique regional circumstances is a rebuttal to the totalizing lesbian feminist discourse that groups in other regions, especially the northeast, were promoting at this time.

This chapter discusses two novels about southern women who have been almost entirely neglected by mainstream lesbian feminist politics. Both novels are set in the early

1980s and feature main characters who experience the post-Stonewall South in different ways but who nevertheless share a resistance to the ideologies that the white, middle-class women who dominated the lesbian feminist movement advocated. The characters in these novels explore how to navigate or develop queer subjectivity in spite of the structural limitations of their locales that preclude their acceptance into or awareness of lesbian feminist communities.

Ann Allen Shockley's novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me,* takes place in Nashville and follows a black, lesbian feminist minister's forays into political activism with her church and local feminist groups while remaining closeted about her sexuality. The protagonist's ability to reconcile her identities as a lesbian and a church leader becomes an essential component of her queer self-actualization. Significantly, her faith and her church community are at the root of her sexual liberation as a black lesbian more so than any feminist movement or ideology.

Dorothy Alllison's *Cavedweller* features a poor white teenage girl who seeks to understand her sexual identity in rural Georgia, a place that seemingly provides no opportunities for her to develop a political consciousness. In Allison's novel, the queer teenager comes to understand her queerness despite the distance – physical, ideological, circumstantial – from any lesbian community or awareness of lesbian feminist politics.

What follows is an examination of how those novels reject the universalizing rhetorical strategies of mainstream lesbian feminism and instead create counter-narratives in which queer female characters experience liberation and self-actualization within socio-political contexts specific to the South. I analyze the personal, literary, and political

contexts within which Shockley and Allison were writing in order to understand their investments in rewriting the scripts about lesbian identity in the post-Stonewall South.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of several prominent African American lesbian and bisexual feminists publishing across a range of genres. Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Barbara Smith, Lorraine Bethel, Sapphire, Alice Walker, and Donna Kate Rushin put the issues of queer women of color front and center in many of their novels, short stories, poems, memoirs, and essays. Their work reflected a growing need among queer women of color to see racism, sexism, and homophobia discussed and challenged as part of a wider public discourse that included men of color, white women, and heterosexuals.

In addition, their attention to representing queer women of color, particularly black women, in their writing performed the crucial functions of undoing the silence and invisibility around their lives and communities, and offering a corrective to existing derogatory images. Prior to the Women's Movement and a visible Gay Liberation Movement, images of queer black women in literature and popular culture were extremely scarce. In her overview of black lesbian literary representations, Jewelle Gomez lists only one novel in the pre-women's movement era that contains a black lesbian character, and expresses her disdain for the way that character is portrayed. Of *Twilight Girl*, the 1961 lesbian pulp novel by Della Martin, Gomez writes, "the final message is that Lesbianism is somewhat akin to leprosy and that associating with Black Lesbians can be fatal" ("Legacy" 111). The double pathologization of homosexuality in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and black socio-familial structures in the 1965 *Moynihan Report* converged to render the queer black woman a

sick and sinister cultural figure, endowed with the ability to pervert and destroy the moral foundations upon which U.S. society rested. As such, the queer black woman was pushed to the margins, her color precluding her from total inclusion in queer and feminist liberatory spaces that harbored racial prejudices, and her sexuality othering her within the black community (Smith and Smith).

However, by the mid-1970s, the growing popularity of the feminist and gay liberation movements had drawn together enough queer black women to form a critical mass that insisted on the need to organize around the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. As a result, much of the black feminist writing that emerged from this era sought to expose and contest multiple interconnected oppressions, while offering visions of what feminist organizing in particular and society more generally should look like.

Ann Allen Shockley is one such black feminist writer whose novels and short stories deal with the subjects of black lesbian identity and relationships. Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1927, Shockley went on to become a prolific journalist, essayist, and bibliographer. She devoted much of her adult life to librarianship and archival work with a focus on compiling bibliographies and reports on African American literature and library usage while occasionally writing her own novels and short stories. Although Shockley was married to a man for many years and apparently never publicly identified as a lesbian, a significant amount of her fiction writing centers around portrayals of black lesbians. Shockley's first novel, *Loving Her,* was published in 1974, and focused on an interracial lesbian relationship between a black woman who was escaping an abusive heterosexual marriage and a wealthy white woman. Her 1980 short story collection, *The Black and White of It,* featured no fewer than five stories about lesbians. While much

lesbian feminist writing at this time reflected the dominance of white women in the movement and a bi-coastal bias that ignored the concerns of queer women in more socially and politically conservative regions, Shockley became one of the few authors to write about queer black women in the South.

Shockley's 1982 novel, *Say Jesus and Come To Me,* weaves together a number of plots and sub-plots, the common denominator among them being the Reverend Myrtle Black, a black evangelical minister who travels to churches throughout the South and uses her rapturous sermons to seduce young women in the congregation. After many years of fleeting sexual encounters with young women, Myrtle eventually settles down with a blues singer named Travis Lee who is so captivated by the minister's charm and charisma, she converts first to Christianity and then to lesbianism. Running parallel to the romance narrative is a story about Myrtle's efforts to plan a multi-faceted Women's March that addresses vice and corruption in Nashville's police department and local government. Throughout the novel, Shockley utilizes a jarring combination of scripture and lesbian feminist rhetoric to denounce institutional oppression in the black church, the women's movement, and Nashville's patriarchal leadership. Often heavy-handed in her use of polemical language, Shockley does not shy away from using fiction as a vehicle for political commentary about what she perceives as corruption and discrimination in communities that preach an ethics of liberation.

Despite being one of the few writers to take on a topic as controversial as lesbianism in the black church, Shockley has received little critical or scholarly attention. A handful of black feminist critics have written articles about Shockley but as yet there exist no book-length studies of her work. The small amount of criticism that does exist

focuses on her treatment of the Queen B figure (Bogus) or on her contributions to black lesbian literature more broadly (Gomez; Dandridge). In these critical works, much of the attention is on *Say Jesus and Come To Me,* although few of them have been complimentary about Shockley's abilities as a writer of fiction. Jewelle Gomez panned the novel, criticizing Shockley's "inability to place a Black Lesbian in a believable cultural context in an artful way" (*Legacy* 114). Gomez does concede that the novel has value if read as "comic fiction" in which the characters and plot take on "melodramatic proportions" (*Imagine* 267), but I read value into this work of fiction that goes beyond Gomez's backhanded compliment.

In this chapter, I want to examine *Say Jesus and Come to Me* in the context of its contribution to cultural narratives about female-bodied queerness in the South. In particular, I am concerned with the ways in which Shockley repositions the Black Church as a natural and necessary agent in combating sexism, racism, and homophobia across a range of social movements and communities in the South. I am less concerned with how competently Shockley writes about southern lesbian feminism and the Black Church, and more concerned with the fact that she wrote about these subjects at all. *Say Jesus and Come to Me* intervenes in the conversation between a number of conflicting institutions and shifts it to the South where the region's unique religious, social, and political histories offer different perspectives on commonly rehashed arguments. The black church and the Women's Movement serve as prime examples for how queer black women experience a triple bind of racism, sexism, and homophobia within their own communities. Shockley's treatment of these institutions not only exposes their hypocrisy,

it also offers possibilities for reconceptualizing them as sites of inclusion, justice, and liberation.

Barbara Smith, the black lesbian feminist critic, has been especially outspoken about the effects of interconnected oppressions on herself and her peers, and has written extensively about her experiences with racism and homophobia in the feminist movement, and sexism and homophobia in the black community. In her introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology,* Smith writes, "The oppression that affects Black gay people, female and male, is pervasive, constant, and not abstract. Some of us die from it." Lamenting her own ostracism from black and feminist communities, she writes, "there's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own" (xxi-lix).

Cheryl Clarke offers a concrete example of Smith's sentiments in her 1983 essay, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community." Clarke points to prominent black community leaders who are unabashedly homophobic and who incite other blacks to renounce queer community members as a means of furthering the race as a whole. She quotes a flyer that was disseminated at a 1981 Black Liberation Conference:

> Revolutionary nationalists and genuine communists cannot uphold homosexuality in the leadership of the Black Liberation movement or uphold it as a correct practice. Homosexuality is a genocidal practice…Homosexuality does not produce children…Homosexuality does not birth new warriors for liberation…The practice of homosexuality is an accelerating threat to our survival as a people and as a nation. (62)

The flyer's reference to homosexuality being a "genocidal practice" stems from a belief propagated by some black liberation activists that being gay or lesbian was "a white thing" (Smith and Smith 124), a type of behavior that white people encouraged black

people to engage in to prevent the black population from growing. Shockley herself recalls a conversation with a black female gynecologist who "off-handedly remarked that lesbianism was acquired from white women" ("Overview" 134-5). Barbara Smith also claims that denigrating queer identities was an effort by blacks to promote a politics of respectability within the race in the hope that it would lead to greater acceptance by whites. She suggests that blacks working for racial equality may want to avoid addressing queer issues so as not to associate themselves with the negative "Black bulldagger" stereotype (Smith and Smith 124).

Even within black feminist groups, straight feminists treated lesbians with suspicion and hostility out of fear that they made the already arduous struggle for acceptance even more challenging by adding an extra layer of otherness to their cause. Michele Wallace recalls the founding meetings of the National Black Feminist Organization at which the women present "got bogged down in an array of disputes, the primary one being lesbianism versus heterosexuality" (11). In spaces in which they should have felt safe and valued, queer black feminists were kept silent and their issues marginalized, with some women being "loathe to identify themselves as lesbians" because, according to Cheryl Clarke, "some of us feel we don't need another handicap" ("New Notes" 85).

Black lesbians had not fared much better in predominantly white feminist groups and communities, experiencing homophobia that was compounded by racism. The Combahee River Collective that grew out of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1974 was one of the few groups for queer women of color that also had an explicitly feminist

agenda and that saw the potential for collaboration with white lesbian feminists as long as they made efforts to address racism and white privilege in their organizations.

For example, the Collective addressed the ways in which the separatist politics of some white lesbian feminists described earlier in this chapter were antithetical to the needs of black lesbian feminists. Whereas some white women envisioned women- and lesbian-only spaces as inherently more safe and liberating than spaces in which men were present, black lesbians had formed essential partnerships with black men in their efforts to combat racism and could not so easily abandon them. The Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" that first appeared in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981 rebuffed white women's calls for separatism, pointing out that "although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand." They went on to write, "we struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism" (213). The Collective's statement reflects just a few of the ongoing arguments and divisions between feminists of different races and sexual orientations throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

I summarize the inter-community conversations that characterized anti-oppression activism during this period because Shockley reproduces them in *Say Jesus and Come To Me* and then imagines how those conversations might have played out in feminist organizations and black churches in the South. By placing the black church at the center of the political and romantic narratives, she identifies the institution as an integral part of community organizing and social interaction for black southerners. The result is a novel that offers a speculative take on the profound influence that this institution has had on the

status and perception of black lesbians in the region. More than just a place to visit on a Sunday morning, “the black church wields a potent influence, on many levels, in the lives of churchgoers” while church affiliation “is often a significant element of the social lives and networks of blacks” (Ward 494). Elijah Ward finds that, in fact, the institution’s reach is so extensive, it even wields an indirect influence in the lives of non-churchgoing blacks (495).

Shockley’s novel therefore critiques the oppressive institutional dynamics of the black church itself while simultaneously positioning it as a microcosmic representation of black society as a whole, particularly in the South where religion – and evangelical Christianity in particular – have contributed significantly to cultural narratives about the region, and continue to inform social attitudes and even political opinions. Reverend Myrtle Black struggles with chauvinistic ministers in the churches she visits, reflecting Combahee’s claim that, as black feminists, they often have to combat the sexism of black men. Myrtle’s experiences also align with Jacquelyn Grant’s findings that black male ministers in the late 1970s were prejudiced against their female counterparts in ways that “resulted in unfair expectations and unjust treatment of women ministers” (144).

To prove her competence as a minister and secure her role as a community leader, Myrtle is deliberate and confident in her interactions with her male peers. Upon arriving in Nashville, Myrtle joins the Reverend Cross and his family for dinner. Cross is the family patriarch and the minister of the church that Myrtle will be preaching at the following week. She greets him by shaking his hand, “deliberately gripping it firmly to convey that she could hold her own” and quietly appreciating the fact that she is taller than Cross, “a decided advantage since height commanded respect” (25).

Myrtle is careful to ingratiate herself with her male peers and stroke their egos while cloaking her demanding and calculating tendencies in excessive politeness and gratitude. Wanting to raise her profile in the community so she can eventually build a loyal congregation of her own, Myrtle takes every opportunity to tell people about her "divinely inspired crusade to rid [Nashville] of sin" and tells Cross that she wants "a *big* article in the Sunday paper" (31). When Cross tells her he will put her in touch with a local journalist tomorrow, she smiles "sweetly" and says, "it is just that I would like very much to talk with him. To tell him of *our* work to save souls for Jesus. We don't have too much time, do we?" (26) Myrtle's careful manipulation of Cross ensures that she gets her own way but nevertheless makes him feel threatened as the male head of his church. She further rankles him when she proves to be a more popular preacher than he is, capturing the devotion of his congregants with her impassioned sermons. Given that some black churches still practice "a belief in a 'natural' male headship" (McQueeney 164), Myrtle's usurpation of the Reverend's authority in his own home and church "seeded jealousy in his heart" (Shockley 96).

The discriminatory assumptions about women's ability or divine right to lead emerge from the same ideas about gender role conformity and the superiority of the nuclear family that also promote (or are perceived to promote) homophobia within the black church. The sexist and homophobic church leaders promote a culture of intolerance that maligns and silences Myrtle, keeping her closeted in order to preserve her reputation and legitimacy as a minister. Although an outspoken champion of marginalized people, Myrtle does not admit her own sexuality, even to other lesbians with whom she is organizing the march. She justifies her silence "by weighing the burden of the

consequences" because "for her to come out now, declare her lesbianism, could be disastrous for both herself and her church. The core of her existence was rooted in black life. Black people had not yet come fully to grips with homosexuality" (133). As a result of her need to remain silent, Myrtle does not form lasting romantic relationships with women, instead preferring to take women back to her hotel room for one-night stands before hastily leaving town the next morning.

Many scholars have put forth a range of theories that attempt to explain the perceived pervasiveness of homophobia within the black community and the black church in particular. Theologian Aquarius Gilmer suggests that "homophobia was introduced as a wedge issue to divide the black community during the Civil Rights movement" because "the idea was if white, conservative politicians could get blacks to focus more on personal piety and social justice, then they could distract us" (qtd. in Simon web). Any focus on sexuality, especially that which might be considered deviant, raised "questions regarding how close individuals really were to God" (Simon web), and so queerness – along with its most deviant hallmark, non-procreative sex – implied a lack of authentic Christian belief or identity. Along those same lines, Elijah Ward surmises that "black people in the USA have been profoundly affected by the persistent efforts of whites to demonise them and their sexuality" and so they have distanced themselves from engaging in behavior that would "confirm the stereotypes that whites have long held" (495) about black sexual deviance. Indeed, Reverend Cross groups lesbians with prostitutes when he chastises Myrtle for bringing "certain sorts of saved sinners" (Shockley 94) to his church. He tells her, "'I cannot have reformed prostitutes…or perverts' – for there were *those* now swishing up and down his aisles – 'sitting next to

children and the good old brothers and sisters who have for years been the foundation of my church'" (95).

The need for black people to uphold a politics of respectability in their private and public lives also results in the creation and preservation of idealized heteronormative relationships and family structures. Shockley takes up this idea in the novel when Iffe Degman, a black lesbian feminist who is helping Myrtle organize the march, scoffs at the idea that there might be other women like her in the Bible Belt who would be willing to work for radical change. Iffe explains that the black feminist group in Nashville voted to change their name to the Black Women's Improvement Club because "the word feminist was anathema. It antagonized their black men, and men *are* important to black southern women, you can believe it!" Furthermore, "they equate the word feminist with man-haters, white women, and lesbians. And, like wow! Lesbians are something that can't be dealt with in the black community – queers and funny people" (133). Iffe describes sexist and homophobic oppression as intertwined because they both stem from the demand that black socio-familial structures adhere to high standards of normativity and decency in order to avoid their ongoing marginalization and pathologization.

Lesbianism in particular is seen as antithetical to the gender and family norms that shore up black people's claims to respectability and legitimacy in a racist society. According to some scholars, lesbianism has been an especially contentious issue for the black church because, being at the center of much black social and political life in the South, it has taken on the responsibility of promoting the ideal of the nuclear family within its communities. Douglas cites a sermon by a black pastor who argues that "black lesbianism is a result of strong black women who believe that they can survive without a

man" (15), and that lesbians were a threat to the family because they could not reproduce, supply an appropriate male influence, or accept their rightful position of social and familial subordination.

Similarly, Cassandra Jackson argues that the church has stigmatized lesbianism even more than male homosexuality. She notes, "there has always been a specific place cut out for gay men in black churches" (web) in a musical capacity. Sure enough, when Travis Lee's gay male pianist Bobby goes to the Gospel Music Jubilee with a gay pastor named Ralph, he is shocked to learn how many of the male gospel singers are also gay, with some even moonlighting as drag queens. Ralph explains, "there's *plenty* of us on the gospel circuit and in the churches. Choir practices take the place of gay bars for some!" (Shockley 176) Relative to Myrtle, Ralph can enjoy a certain degree of outness and participation in queer public life even though his sexual identity might not comport with a black masculine ideal and a heteronormative family structure. According to Jackson, the disparity between the church's treatment of men and women is due to the fact that lesbianism represents "the ultimate rejection of the patriarchal structures that are the mainstay of the church" (Jackson web). Thus, fears of female leadership and independence manifest in a combination of sexism and homophobia that attempt to keep Myrtle silent and subdued.

Shockley states that one of her aims in writing *Say Jesus and Come To Me* was to "bring out the homophobic hypocrisy of the black church, which is filled to the pulpit with closet gays and lesbians from all walks of life" (qtd. in Dandridge, 161), but her project does much more than simply expose the church's hidden queer culture. She envisions the black church as an institution necessarily capable of fostering acceptance

and liberation for its queer members. In Myrtle's case, the church actually becomes the site of her queer sexual awakening. Her "initiation into sex was subtly given by other lady ministers, churchwomen, and gospel singers who loved to hug, pet, kiss, and furtively fondle the 'cute little girl preacher," and she first has sex at the age of sixteen with a female reverend (Shockley 3).

However, the religious context within which Myrtle learns to experience sexual pleasure also attempts to reorient her to heterosexuality. As a young woman indoctrinated into a church that proclaims homosexuality to be a sin, Myrtle is distraught at the realization that she might be a lesbian, in spite of her positive experiences with other women. Myrtle succumbs to the pressure of being told to pursue normative heterosexual relationships by having sex with a male classmate, deciding to "do *it* to help rid her of the private demon" and offering her body "as a sacrificial lamb" (18). During his "invasion of her body," she imagines that his penis is "a sorcerer's wand inside, ridding her of sin, expelling a depravity." Afterwards, Myrtle considers the "exorcism" to be over, and she prays to God to have no more sexual feelings about women (18).

Only when Myrtle's prayers are not answered and she continues to be attracted to women does she begin to look for bible passages that condone her desires so that she can mesh these two seemingly incompatible aspects of her life. Unlike her peers who preach that homosexuality is a sin, Myrtle emphasizes scripture that promotes inclusiveness, understanding, and open-mindedness. Her personal quest to free herself of guilt and shame becomes the impetus for her to lead a community-wide movement against discrimination that also frees and empowers others. When she does finally reveal her sexual orientation to her congregation at the end of the novel, she reminds them of the

message in chapter 1, verse 3 of John: "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made." She uses this as the springboard for her sermon on acceptance, during which she tells her audience,

> *You* were made by God, and *I* was made by God in God's image. There are some who might say that all people are *not* made in God's image because they are *different*…But are they not of God, too? We are all-l-l a part of God – each and ev-v-ery one of us. *Made by God!* (279)

Myrtle goes on to suggest that the church's treatment of people who are different has been contrary to God's word, quoting Timothy, chapter four, verse four: "For every creature of God *is* good, and nothing to be refused" (281).

Whereas Simon suggested that blacks might see homosexuality as evidence of a failed commitment to God and their Christian faith, Myrtle says the same about homophobia: "If God were standing here at this-s-s moment, I *know-w-w* God would *not* say I want this-s-s person to come unto me, but *not* that one. God is not a discriminating God, nor an incriminating one" (281). She tells her congregation that their society has formed movements to fight for the rights of women, black people, and gay people, and to "challenge freedom and acceptance in all aspects of life," but that their church has failed to respond appropriately. According to Myrtle, "the church has not lib-er-ated itself!" and declares that in order "to survive in this changing society, the church must meet the needs of people who are different racially, politically, and sexually" (280).

Myrtle therefore demands that the role of the church should be to heal the wounds of society's marginalized rather than exacerbate them. For Myrtle, the church is more than a place of worship. It is a social justice organization. Because of the church's devotion to a God that Myrtle defines as benevolent and loving, Myrtle insists that it is

logically aligned with other movements working towards justice and liberation for vulnerable populations. For example, Myrtle suggests that the church and feminism should be compatible, uniting the two groups in organizing the Women's March because of their shared concern for how vice and corruption in Nashville impact vulnerable women in the city.

Shockley attempts to overcome the antagonism between the black church and feminism by challenging interpretations of the bible that justify the subordination of women. In one sermon, Myrtle references the essential roles that women have played in key moments of Christian history. She asks her congregation what would have become of Christianity if "the woman of Samaria, the first to get the message from Jesus about his being the Messiah, had kept silent?" She answers by saying, "This was a *woman* who spread the *word,* and it was a *woman* to whom Jesus spake. If Jesus had wanted women to keep silent, he would not have chosen a *woman* to deliver that important message, but a *man!"* (142).

There are obvious parallels between Myrtle's sermon and the speech that Sojourner Truth gave to the crowd at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. In her speech, "Ain't I A Woman?" Truth famously asked, "Den dat little man in black dar, he say woman can't have as much right as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman. *Whar did your Christ come from?* Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him" (Truth qtd. in Painter 168). Myrtle's sermon recalls Truth's speech both in terms of its rhetorical style and its strategy of using the bible as the basis for an argument in favor of women's rights. Myrtle reaches out to black

churchwomen who may be hesitant to embrace feminism by telling them that it is their divine right to be treated equally.

Like Truth, Myrtle is posited as a charismatic and devoutly religious figurehead for women's rights and antiracist organizing. Myrtle invokes the specter of Truth by insisting that the church and feminism are not mutually exclusive. In doing so, she situates herself within a legacy of black women activists who drew on their experiences living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities to become pioneers of social change. In fact, Myrtle believes the ethos of liberation that the black church espouses is absolutely compatible with feminism and related anti-oppression movements because "if the theology, like the church, has no word for Black women, its conception of liberation is inauthentic" (Grant 144). She connects disparate movements with her vision for the march, "a pilgrimage of liberation – under God's banner against the unjust evil forces of this city" (Shockley 144).

The novel hearkens back to a long history of civil and human rights activism in the black church when the church became the epicenter of organizing and served as a readymade social network that fostered a collective identity among members and galvanized them into action around a common cause. Women had a defined role in the church that enabled them to become active participants in the church's political efforts to secure civil rights for blacks in the South. According to Glenda Gilmore, in the period of disfranchisement in the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century, "using women's church organizations to press for community improvement incurred less risk than preaching inflammatory sermons on civil rights." She explains that "while white political

leaders kept their eyes on black men's electoral political presence and absence, black women organized and plotted an attack just outside of their field of vision" (150).

But whereas the churchwomen that Gilmore describes worked primarily on civil rights for southern blacks, the women in *Say Jesus and Come To Me* are encouraged to work for a more holistic view of community togetherness and enfranchisement. Myrtle tells the other organizers of the march, "I am going to *insist* that there be moralistic and humanitarian objectives" because "we must not lose sight of intrinsic human values" (130). She intends for the march to not be about a "one-dimensional issue like the old Civil Rights movement" (169) but about a more expansive conception of justice. As a queer black woman, Myrtle understands what it means to exist at the nexus of overlapping systems of oppression. But what further compounds her subordinated social status and that of women like her is that she lives in a South that Shockley portrays as predominantly socially and politically regressive.

In planning the march, Myrtle declares that it is "especially significant that it's taking place in the bastion of the South where black and white women will publicly join together to assert themselves" (169). To Myrtle, the location of the march is significant because the South has historically been portrayed as a region that is fraught with racial divisions and antiquated ideas about gender roles. Shockley suggests that the Women's Movement was slow to make a widespread impact on the conservative socio-cultural norms of the South, in part because southerners viewed progressive political movements as a product of the North. Iffe Degman explains that, "black women elsewhere are ahead of the southern sisters in the women's thing" (134), while she attributes the lack of

involvement from white women to their belief that "the Women's Movement is a Yankee invasion!" (182)

Two white feminists named Rita and Wilma who are also helping to organize the march echo Iffe's sentiment that southern women's reluctance to join the Women's Movement stems from a regional suspicion of outside interference in their culture and politics. Coming from an active feminist scene in California, Rita laments what she perceives to be the political backwardness of southern women, and describes their tendency to cling to archaic customs and beliefs as "a regional tragedy" (163). As a lesbian, Rita is frustrated that the pervasive social conservatism of the South, buttressed by church-sanctioned homophobia, creates further divisions between feminist groups that welcome lesbians and potential allies who balk at the idea of being associated with them. When talking to Wilma about how to reach more women, Rita remains "mindful that Wilma didn't like to discuss lesbians in connection with the movement, claiming that the word 'feminist' was sufficient to frighten off southern women" (165).

Wilma also hypothesizes that "white southern women seem slow in upsetting the apple cart" because they see feminism as "basically a northern, eastern, and western women's movement." To adopt northern political philosophies would be a betrayal of the South's fierce claims to regional individuality and independence. Wilma speculates that white women's resistance to feminist organizing "may be a throwback to the old antebellum days of white male chivalry, which they want to retain in their fancies" (162). She also claims that, "some southern white women, unlike myself, are anachronisms" (163), seemingly oblivious to her own hypocrisy as a wealthy white southern woman who still employs a black maid. Although possessing "an inherent rebelliousness against the

conservatism of the South" and being regarded as "one of the South's pioneer leaders" (101) in the Civil Rights movement, Wilma fails to recognize her own privilege. As Travis puts it, "[Wilma] may be a new breed of southern woman, but she still holds on to the convenience of the past. Namely her black maid" (137).

In the characters of Wilma and Rita, Shockley creates precisely the kind of well-intentioned but clueless "smiling white feminists" that Michele Wallace says black women told her to be "wary" of. Wallace's peers warned her that "the women's movement enlists the support of Black women only to lend credibility to an essentially middle-class, irrelevant movement" (10). Lorraine Bethel's poem, "What Chou Mean *We* White Girl?," reiterates Wallace's message and responds to the kind of tokenizing strategies that white feminists like Rita and Wilma use when trying to give their organizations the appearance of diversity and inclusivity. Bethel rages against white women's repeated invitations to appear on panels as "THE BLACK/LESBIAN/FEMINIST/CRITIC/because *they* want to represent Third World women and lesbians/on *their* feminist criticism panel," labeling herself "*such* a convenient package." She accuses white feminists of not taking the time to get to know women of color, instead "selecting their victims from a rolodex labeled feminists, Black/or lesbians, Black/or better still, lesbian feminists, Black" (86-7). She suggests that women of color "print up cards" that read: "Tired of people asking why there weren't any Third World women at that event? Local Black woman available to be representative token Black feminist/lesbian…See what it's like to be doubly or triply oppressed" (88).

Rita in particular has disingenuous reasons for wanting to partner with Myrtle in planning the march, her sentiments echoing those that Bethel mimics in her poem.

Despite her outspoken commitment to “women power” (129), Rita seeks out only those women who might help the feminist cause by promoting a respectable public image. It is feminists like Rita that Bernice Johnson Reagon addressed when she claimed, “you don’t really want Black folks, you are just looking for yourself with a little color to it” (359). Although Rita tells Wilma, “*we* welcome black women,” she “had been selective” in which ones she had invited to join her organization because “there were some blacks she felt more comfortable with than others” (164).

As an educated, articulate, confident, closeted, and outwardly pious pillar of the community, Myrtle is just the kind of black woman that Rita believes can bridge the gaps between divided communities and raise the profile of the Women’s Movement. She calls Myrtle “a phenomenal *black* southern woman” and a “triple jeopardy symbol” who could “prove to them all that the movement is not racist, classist, or elitist!” (163-4) She asserts that Myrtle is “just the black image we need for attracting black women to our national organization,” and explains to Wilma that, “we have to get more black women’s support to counteract the notion that ours is essentially a white women’s movement” (162). Wilma challenges Rita’s superficial approach to inclusivity by telling her “I don’t like your implications of using somebody” (164) and suggesting that “[Myrtle] may not be interested in acting as our token black” while looking “furtively in the direction of the kitchen” (163), nervous that her maid might overhear.

Rita is proven correct, however, in identifying Myrtle as the key to uniting antagonistic groups. Myrtle cites scripture to heal divisions between those women who are resistant to feminist political rhetoric, and uses her multiple identities as cultural capital to gain respect and authority in different social spaces. When she finally tells the

members of her congregation that she is a lesbian, they "embrace her and shake her hand in union" (282), transformed by Myrtle's vision of a fully inclusive and accepting Christian theology and practice.

Myrtle's act of coming out politicizes lesbianism, framing its acceptance as contingent upon visibility, community, and a discourse of unity in interconnected struggles. Her march speaks to the needs and priorities of southern women, and its success lies in her ability to find a shared language and a common goal that women can unite around while still maintaining their core values and beliefs. Whereas the lesbian feminists of the northeast and west coast promoted a solution for liberation that was implausible for women everywhere, Shockley suggests creating a movement that meets women where they are. Myrtle's queer self-actualization stems not from her ability to come out and live her truth among other lesbians *or* feminists *or* black women *or* her church but to have her identity accepted by all of these groups simultaneously. Ultimately, her message is that a movement to liberate queer, black, southern women must respect and speak to the particular concerns of those women, even if that means bridging gaps between populations and institutions that have historically been at odds with one another.

The second text under discussion in this chapter deals with the regional contextualization of queer subjectivity in markedly different ways. Whereas *Say Jesus and Come to Me* presents a model of lesbian identity development that is dependent upon visibility, interaction with a queer community, a grasp of the language that describes one's identity, and finding acceptance upon coming out, *Cavedweller* explores what happens when all of those things are unattainable. Shockley sees Myrtle's coming out as

necessary for her to achieve self-actualization; Myrtle's sense of wholeness and her emotional wellbeing are tied to her ability to synthesize her identities as a black community leader, a minister, a feminist, and a lesbian, and to own all of these identities publicly. Conversely, Allison frames the queer identity development of Cissy in *Cavedweller* as a private, introspective process that involves Cissy's comparing herself to others, engaging in long periods of isolated self-reflection, and eventually deciding that labels and definitive conclusions are unimportant to her. Allison's novel describes a process of developing a queer identity in a rural space that lacks the social and political influences of urban queer communities. A significant feature of *Cavedweller* is also its commentary on the intimate connections between queerness and poverty in the rural South. Therefore, in this chapter, I am especially interested in how the concept of white trash modifies queerness to produce sexual identities that are unique to the South, and how Allison creates possibilities for reading marginalized subject positions as emancipatory.

Dorothy Allison is perhaps as well known for her personal life as she is for her literary works, not least because she has documented her life story in novels, short stories, memoir, spoken-word performances, poetry, and essays. Allison's first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina,* was based in part on her own experiences of being physically and sexually abused by her stepfather, and her memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure,* describes her childhood in frank, unflinching detail. Allison, who thinks of herself as a "southern working-class writer" (qtd. in Birnbaum 103), has dedicated much of her career to telling stories about herself and people like her: poor white southerners, queers, survivors, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, and the despised. She writes,

> the central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. (*Skin* 15)

Allison's experiences of growing up in abject poverty and living at the margins of society have led her to "try to make an emotional connection for readers with people that they don't ordinarily have an emotional connection to" (Allison qtd.in LeMahieu 658). Her work has explored the intersections of queerness, gender, whiteness, and class, particularly within the context of the rural South. Her characters are often caught at those intersections in ways that render them disadvantaged and socially stigmatized, but rather than caricaturize them *à la* Erskine Caldwell, Allison humanizes them, explaining that "the need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction." Her sustained and sympathetic treatment of poor whites in the South stems from her desire to see that population's stories honored and valued in "a world that despises the poor" (Allison, *Skin* 14) and lampoons southerners as shiftless, stupid, ignorant, and violent.

Cavedweller contains several interwoven stories, but the one that most concerns this project is the story of Cissy, a "young woman who, through the course of the novel, develops a sexual consciousness" (Allison qtd. in Keehnen, 24) and tries to come to terms with starting her life over in a small town in rural Georgia. Cissy is living in Los Angeles with her rock star parents when her father is killed in a car accident. Her mother, Delia, decides to move back to Cayro, Georgia, "the ass-end of the universe" (Allison, *Cavedweller* 29), and takes Cissy with her. In Cayro, they find themselves borderline destitute and dependent on handouts from a few close friends. The main motivation behind Delia's decision to return to the small, dead-end, rural town is that she wants back

her daughters, Dede and Amanda, whom she abandoned when they were toddlers because she was trying to escape her abusive husband. Over the course of the novel, Delia wins back her daughters and the respect and acceptance of the Cayro residents.

Cissy, however, remains an outsider and a loner for the most part. While Delia is preoccupied with rebuilding her life in Georgia, Cissy spends her time exploring caves, sometimes on her own and sometimes with two college women, Jean and Mim. The caves are the site of Cissy's deepest reflections and meditations on her body, her sense of self, and her relationship to others. They are central to her transformation from a naïve and innocent child to an ambitious, curious, queer young woman. I read *Cavedweller* as a story of a queer girl coming of age among the sometimes competing, sometimes overlapping scripts of southern identity, whiteness, evangelicalism, and poverty. It is a story in which "queer" takes on a capacious definition, encompassing Cissy's growing understanding that she is different from her sisters, her affinity for Jean and Mim who are lesbians even though she does not know it, and her class status that sets her outside the parameters of white normativity. Allison herself states that,

> being queer is a piece of it. And there's all kinds of queer, not just lesbian and gay, but essentially strange, like [Cissy's best friend] Nolan. He ain't no faggot, but he's essentially queer, and comfortable with it in a way this culture doesn't understand – and fears. (qtd. in Wilkinson, web)

Cissy's realization that she might be queer is framed within the context of white, southern, rural poverty; she comes to understand her sexuality as a marker of difference that, along with her class and her new status as a southerner, might subject her to estrangement and contempt from those who more adequately embody normativity.

Of particular interest to this project is the way in which queerness works with the concept of white trash in Allison's novel to create new cultural narratives about the relationship between poverty and sexuality in the rural South. By identifying the subjects of Allison's work as white trash, one can view them within a context of oppression that refuses the presumption of sexual normativity and naturalness that the image of whiteness invokes. Reading Cissy as queer white trash prompts an examination of how she comes to understand and accept her sexuality within a matrix of multiple oppressions and without internalizing the fear and shame associated with them.

White trash is associated with many grotesque images and undesirable characteristics. It implies uncleanliness and untidiness - just think of the rundown house or trailer, its yard overrun with weeds, old cars, scrap metal, and garbage. White trash also connotes corporeal monstrosity or excess in the form of unfettered breeding, the obese body, the malnourished body, the diseased body, the body abused by drugs and alcohol, violent bodies, and bodies subjected to violence. "White trash" is a term that "dates back to the early part of the nineteenth century" when slaves "used it as a contemptuous reference to white servants" (Newitz and Wray, 3), so although it is often used to describe poor whites across the United States, its origins make it most closely associated with the South.

White trash is way of marking whiteness as something other than dominant and normal, racializing "this group as white, when usually whiteness is the unracialized, invisible normative position" (Gaffney 44). It contests the notion that whiteness is a monolithic category or a universal hallmark of power and privilege by separating out and subordinating those whites whose class status, behavior, living conditions, and

appearance fail to meet conventional normative standards of normativity. Richard Dyer explains that “white power…is not seen as whiteness, but as normal.” In order for white power to be noticeable as a construct instead of a naturally occurring phenomenon, “white people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange” (10). Trash makes whiteness strange by calling attention to instances of white failure that reveal the tenuousness of whiteness as an unmarked hegemonic category. White trash others whiteness, stripping it of its associations with purity and normalcy and rendering it “dirtied, defiled, and decentered” (Cunningham 170). Unlike the word “poor” which “implies a solely economic designation, ‘trash’ is more general, implying debasement in all categories whether economic, sexual, moral, or intellectual” (Reynolds 365).

The people of Cayro see Delia as trash because of her seemingly casual attitude towards sex – she has three daughters by two different men – and disregard for the sanctity of family and the sacred responsibility of motherhood, as evidenced by her apparently callous abandonment of her children. When Delia arrives in Cayro, she overhears a waitress refer to her as “that bitch [who] ran off and left her babies” (39). Delia’s perceived moral failings, coupled with her poverty and race, designate her as white trash.

As Delia’s daughters, Cissy, Amanda, and Dede are automatically subjected to the same designation but Amanda attempts to distance herself from the family’s status by demonstrating a piety that frequently crosses over into puritanism, sermonizing to her family about their various sins, protesting abortion clinics, and marrying a minister. However, in a narrative twist that exemplifies the inescapability of being born white

trash, Amanda eventually abandons her dutiful and God-fearing lifestyle and begins leaving her children at home during the day so that she can go to bars and drink by herself. According to Allison, one cannot shed one's white trash designation by attaining wealth or living by a higher moral standard. White trash is a status that Delia's family carry with them, inevitable and absolute, but unlike Amanda, Cissy does little to challenge it, refusing to attend church and remaining stubbornly antisocial with her peers. Her only friend is Nolan, a strange, nerdy, science fiction fan. Cissy goes out of her way to antagonize her female peers, even going so far as to blow spit on another girl in marching band, an act that gets her expelled from the band, the one group endeavor she had been a part of.

The locals revile Cissy in particular because not only is she not one of them, she is also the illegitimate child of Delia and a hedonistic, drug abusing rock star. Allison presents an image of Cissy as an outcast that is wretched and pitiful: "No talent. Not special. She was like those bugs caught in amber, stuck in time. She'd never been in love, never dated. No boyfriend, no friends except Nolan and Dede, and Dede didn't count" (258). Allison writes that people "looked at Cissy like she was some dog who might bite, some girl who didn't matter at all" (Allison 113), yet Cissy's story is not a tragic one. Cissy embraces her outsider status, gradually distancing herself from social interaction and retreating into the caves with her new queer friends. Jean and Mim adopt Cissy as their protégé, perhaps because they see their lesbianism reflected in her, or perhaps because they understand what it means to be ostracized for socio-sexual non-conformity.

Queers and white trash are aligned through their associations with immorality and their perceived sexual and corporeal deviance. The sexuality and embodiment of both

queers and white trash have been imagined within a framework of monstrous erotics in which bodies may be predatory, non-procreative, overly procreative, profane, animalistic, debased, or dangerous. Representations of white trash in rural spaces have frequently drawn connections between non-normative sexuality, poverty, and horror. In film, *I Spit On Your Grave, Last House on the Left,* and *Mother's Day* all feature unsuspecting city folk who retreat to the peace and quiet of the country, only to find themselves pitted against deranged rapists and murderers. In literature, Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* and James Dickey's *Deliverance* situate stomach-churning stories of necrophilia and male-on-male rape respectively in rural southern locales, while *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Allison describes one girl's experience of incest in South Carolina. In all these cases, the bucolic idyll of rural spaces is absent from these texts. Instead, their rural settings connote primitivism, savagery, destruction, and the grotesque.

Cavedweller, however, rewrites the script by depicting Cissy's queerness as non-violent, and the caves as protective and restorative. In an interview with Allison, Owen Keehnen asks, "what do you want people to recognize about poor people, queers, and Southern women?," and Allison replies, "That we're human." Not content with being "infinitely complicated caricatures" and being "seen through that filter of other people's fear and expectations" (22), Allison writes about herself and people like her in ways that do justice to their humanity and complexity. Cissy's growing queer consciousness and her immersion in the remotest of rural locales do not lead her to violence and sexual depravity but rather form an integral part of her developing mature subjectivity.

Cissy's forays down into the caves with Jean and Mim allow her to explore her inner sense of self and undergo a transformation. For Cissy, the process of realizing and

embracing her queer consciousness is dependent on two intertwined factors. First, the caves themselves provide Cissy with a space to attune to her own body and undergo a period of intense self-reflection. Second, her relationship with Jean and Mim allows her to observe queer ways of being and relating, which helps her understand who she is and how she is situated in a society and culture that privilege heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

Initially, the caves force Cissy into an almost animalistic state as she burrows underground, becoming non-verbal, melding with the earth and dirt, and allowing her senses to adapt to the darkness, silence, smells, and feel of the caves. But instead of remaining in a primitive state, Cissy finds that the darkness and silence create an atmosphere that is almost amniotic, allowing her to look inward and remake herself without the distraction of external sensory triggers. During her first time in the dark, Cissy welcomes the protection from the outside world that the cave provides, thinking to herself, "I am safe here. Nothing can find me that I do not want to find me" (Allison 244). She finds herself in a pre-birth state, not yet fully formed and ready to emerge into the world, but she has faith in the generative and incubational properties of the caves. She believes that, "if I do not move, the dark will fill me up, make me another creature, fearless and whole" (244). Sure enough, her final caving trip with Jean and Mim coincides with the completion of her queer development. When the three girls get lost overnight in the caves, Cissy is the one who draws on her instincts and knowledge of the caves to lead them out. She emerges from the darkness and mystery of the caves into the light, ready to claim her sexual identity, her rebirth complete.

Cissy's evolution from ingénue to self-actualized queer woman would not, however, be possible without the influence of Jean and Mim. The lesbian couple guide Cissy through a series of phases that help her understand her new and confusing feelings. Cissy begins by being fascinated with Jean and Mim, then experiences a sense of belonging with them, and finally identifies with them. At the end of this process, Cissy has achieved an internal wholeness and an understanding of who she is and how she fits into the world.

Cissy's relationship with Jean and Mim is essential to her comprehension of how she relates to the world as a queer woman. Her disconnect from any queer community or images means that she "is a budding dyke" who "doesn't understand herself or her own lesbianism" (Wilkinson, web). Allison explains how the context for Cissy's lack of understanding is based on her own reality of growing up queer in a small town:

> [Cissy's] in the dark in more ways than one. In this decade there is a lot of information about lesbians. But there wasn't before this, especially not in small towns. And so what happened is that you couldn't quite get it. It didn't quite register. You knew you were weird. And the first time Cissy gets a spark is with these girls, but she hasn't got any language or any concept to understand why she is mad for them. (Allison qtd. in Miller web)

When she first meets Jean and Mim, she reads them as good friends, despite their physical intimacy. Jean and Mim have an otherness about them that is indescribable and unnamed but that causes Cissy's family to be concerned about her "surprising friendship with those strange girls" (Allison 278). Jean and Mim's queerness comes to be characterized with euphemisms that emphasize their difference from the rest of Cayro's residents who, without evidence to the contrary, are all heterosexual. Upon seeing Jean for the first time, Delia asks, "Where's that girl from? She doesn't look like any of the

families around here." Amanda insists that "she don't look remotely Christian to me" (273), presumably implying that Jean is lacking in morality, especially sexual morality.

Cissy herself notes Jean and Mim's strangeness, but whereas her family sees it as suspicious or threatening, Cissy is drawn to it, comparing them to "those heroines in the science fiction books she used to share with Nolan" (272). The association between otherworldliness and queerness is further underscored when Amanda tells Cissy repeatedly, "you are from another planet. There is not an ounce of normal human being in you." Amanda sees in Cissy what everyone sees in Jean and Mim, connecting the three of them through their queerness even though they can only read this as strangeness or alienness. Cissy concurs that Amanda must be right because "what else would explain how different she was from everyone she knew?" (281)

At home, Cissy is caught between two extremes of female heterosexuality. At one end, the promiscuous and hypersexual Dede has "this little weakness of the flesh" and "she never saw a boy she didn't wanna try" (Allison qtd. in Wilkinson web). At the other end is Amanda who is so prudish, she pulls down a rack of adult magazines at the gas station "after some of the boys had deliberated pulled down the brown paper sheaths that were supposed to spare the Christian eye" (Allison, *Cavedweller* 290).

Unable to identify with either Dede or Amanda, and having witnessed her mother's own failed, abusive relationships, Cissy is mesmerized by Jean and Mim even though she does not know why at first. She considers them to be "exotic," "nothing like the sallow, towheaded, narrow-faced girls of Cayro" (273). She is incredulous when they approach Cissy about going caving together because "they not only were talking to her but were talking to her about the thing she loved most in the world." Cissy craves Jean

and Mim's acceptance and admires them so much that she is simultaneously overjoyed and anxious when they invite her to form a women's caving group. She is painfully aware of how unsophisticated she is and how inappropriate her feelings for them are, so "when Jean looked at her, Cissy blushed as if the woman could read her mind, and felt a kind of panic that made her say yes to everything they asked (272)."

Initially, Cissy cannot explain her attraction to Jean and Mim. Her feelings are a tangled mix of identification and desire that inspires an awkward self-consciousness and produces involuntary bodily arousal. Allison describes their first encounter as one in which Jean and Mim looked at Cissy and "heat swept right up her spine and flashed at the base of her neck" (272). Their ease with each other and with Cissy is far removed from the complicated and hostile relationships that Cissy has witnessed between the women in her family. Jean and Mim "touched as easily as they talked," and when Mim kisses Cissy platonically "right on the mouth," Cissy is "startled and delighted at the intimacy," wishing "to be that free, that easy in her body, that cosmopolitan and grown-up and exotic all at the same time" (272-3).

Cissy's relationship with Jean and Mim changes when they begin to treat her as a peer, impressed by her calmness and mature self-sufficiency navigating the underground tunnels. As she blossoms under their attention and develops a deep interdependent bond with them during their caving trips, Cissy begins to explore the root of her affinity for them. First, she understands her relationship to them as one of belonging, finding that "talking to Jean and Mim was like slipping on a second skin" (280). Cissy also realizes that, "for the first time in her life, she did not feel alone" (278), although at first attributes this to nothing more than Jean and Mim's friendliness and their shared interest in caving.

But eventually, Cissy's connection to them shifts again, and she moves from wanting to be *with* them to wanting to *be* them. She sees herself reflected in Jean and Mim, noting that, "they behaved as if she were exactly like them" (280). She does not realize they are lesbians until Amanda tells her, a fact that comes as a surprise to Cissy who, being so disconnected from any queer community, has never had cause to think about lesbians. It prompts her to reexamine her relationship with them and ask herself, "I know two lesbians, and what does that say about me?" (409) Cissy comes to understand that her identification with them stems not only from having shared in the same caving adventures but from recognizing a queer likeness between herself and them. Cissy accepts this revelation without internalizing fear or shame about her difference and instead embraces the fact of her queerness with a willful resilience. She declares, "I don't care…I don't care what they are. I don't care who I am…I can be anybody" (409). The potential social hardships associated with being the only queer in a small town are inconsequential to Cissy who has already lived as an outsider for her entire life.

Nevertheless, she finds that upon reaching a conclusion about how to define herself, she is less alone than before. She has bonded fully with Jean and Mim and is able to connect with them on a level that is deeper than a mutual appreciation for caving. Cissy also discovers that she can now better interact with her family because she has overcome her period of stunted emotional development and grown into maturity. Whereas her relationship with Delia had previously been fraught with resentment and judgment, it is now predicated on mutual respect and forgiveness. Cissy grew up not witnessing kindness and love in her family's relationships, and so she had no positive model upon which to base her own relationship with Delia. However, after spending time

with Jean and Mim whose relationship is affectionate and egalitarian, Cissy begins to demonstrate generosity towards her own family, helping care for Amanda's children and telling Delia that she loves her (429). The novel ends with Cissy deciding to move back to California to attend UCLA and explore the possibilities for a career in archaeology or geology (405).

Yet despite Cissy's eagerness to leave Cayro once she comes of age, her story is not a typical urban migration narrative that implies queer self-actualization can only occur after movement to the big city and integration into a queer community. Rather, Cissy's self-actualization occurs when she is immersed in surroundings that should be antithetical to such development. Cayro is a static and dated small town with no career prospects, political activism, or diversity. Living in a place so socio-culturally stagnant, Cissy is far removed from the queer scenes of the big cities.

In *Cavedweller,* Allison suggests that the city, with its anonymity, vibrant social scenes, and political consciousness, is not the only space capable of producing queer subjects. Urban migration narratives fail to account for the possibility that queers can exist and thrive in non-metropolitan areas, with small towns like Cayro appearing to be especially incompatible with fostering queer identities. Allison's novel explores how ideas of embodiment, sexual consciousness, desire, and marginalization coalesce around rural spaces and white trash erotics to generate possibilities for new queer narratives. Although *Cavedweller* and *Say Jesus and Come to Me* share almost no similarities in terms of locale, characters, expression of political ideologies, or narrative, they perform similar work on dominant narratives of female-bodied queerness in the South. In an era when some queer people were finally beginning to shed their associations with pathology

and enjoy an increased level of visibility and acceptance, those queers who lacked racial or class privilege continued to live with the burden of multiple oppressions.

In Chapter Two, I problematized the tendency to reduce southern queer history to binaries that ascribe visibility, community, and liberation to one set of conditions (urban, post-Stonewall) while ascribing silence, isolation, invisibility, and repression to their opposite conditions (rural, pre-Stonewall). The novels by Shockley and Allison challenge these binaries by showing the queer rural and urban spaces in the post-Stonewall South as unstable and evolving. James Sears reads the queer climate of the post-Stonewall South as being "marked by networks and activism, immediacy and confrontation, openness and revelry" in contrast with the "isolation and accommodation" (1) that characterized the pre-Stonewall era. Shockley and Allison expose the limits of Sears' generalization. Stonewall did not immediately transform the conditions of certain spaces in the South. Queers who had ties to the black church or lived in rural communities continued to experience practical and ideological barriers to publicly claiming a queer identity, and both Myrtle and Cissy exemplify those struggles. But Shockley and Allison also do not construct the black church and rural communities as necessarily permanently inimical to queer identity development. Rather, they posit their characters' queer transformations as occurring not in spite of the spaces they inhabit but because of them.

Afterword

In dominant cultural narratives about the South, queer histories have often fallen through the cracks, becoming hidden, forgotten, or displaced. Heterosexual romance narratives appear front and center in nostalgic representations of the majestic plantation, bucolic landscapes, and the pleasing simplicity of small-town life. Histories of the South's less desirable moments and characters have centered around slavery, lynching, white trash, and rednecks, while queers remain conspicuously absent. Although recent oral histories by James T. Sears and Patrick E. Johnson reveal that non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming southerners existed and even thrived throughout the twentieth century, they "are just a tad too perverse" (Howard, *Carryin' On* 4) to claim any notable place in the historical record, including imagined histories.

Even non-queer southerners have been reluctant to claim their queer neighbors as their own. In 2012 alone, Georgia legislators failed to pass employment protections for LGBT-identified workers, North Carolina residents voted for an amendment to the state constitution banning same-sex marriage, and tens of thousands of southerners turned out to support Chik-Fil-A Appreciation Day after the CEO of the Atlanta-based fast food chain made homophobic remarks to the press. Yet the region also enjoys a vibrant queer culture with Pride festivals, inclusive and affirming places of worship, and thriving organizations devoted to securing rights and acceptance for LGBT-identified southerners such as The Campaign for Southern Equality and Southerners on New Ground.

The texts discussed in the previous four chapters encapsulate these tensions between competing regional narratives by transforming spaces commonly represented as hostile to queerness – the black church, rural locales, the plantation home – into spaces of

freedom, inclusion, and progress. In each of the novels and films I have discussed, fear, intimidation, and prejudice are malevolent but ineffectual forces that fail to penetrate or disrupt the close-knit communities and kinship systems that queer and other traditionally stigmatized characters form with each other. These texts are all concerned with imagining spaces in which female-bodied southerners could find love, achieve acceptance, and develop a queer subjectivity without the threat of ostracism or retribution. In such spaces, queers use their difference as a means to understand and connect with other marginalized characters instead of allowing themselves to remain divided and antagonistic.

At outlined in each of the chapters, the films and texts I have examined all feature some idealistic view of the South that borders on fantasy. In the authors' and filmmakers' visions of the region, queer genders and sexualities are often normalized and queer characters fully integrated and actualized. When non-normative sexual identity is forbidden, as in *House of Clouds*, it nonetheless remains a source of pleasure for queer characters who, in a clichéd ending, ride off into the sunset together where a more welcoming world awaits. Read and viewed collectively, these texts are aligned through a shared preoccupation with fantasizing about a South in which queer identities and communities are always already present and flourishing. In their imaginary southern spaces, discrimination based on difference is either foreclosed as a possibility or distant and therefore inconsequential.

In creating idealized fantasy spaces, these texts are reminiscent of utopias found in feminist science fiction novels. In particular, these texts align with novels in which actual hegemonic ideas about race, gender, class, and sexuality are replaced by ideologies of egalitarianism and unity in alternative spatial and temporal realms. For example,

Joanna Russ' *The Female Man,* Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time,* Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground,* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* all imagine that social equality can exist on distant planets or faraway futures. In these novels, utopian states are premised on an absence of patriarchal control brought about either by the erasure or exclusion of maleness, or by radical reworkings of the gender binary. In feminist utopias, patriarchy, white supremacy, class, and heterosexism do not exist, either because a rebellion of the oppressed overthrew the governing structures that upheld such systems of subordination, or because inhabitants of these alternative worlds have evolved socially, emotionally, and even physiologically into enlightened beings who have no need for inequality. These texts suggest that in order for a utopia to flourish, it must invent social and political structures predicated on equity and inclusion instead of the stigmatization of minority groups.

The novels and films discussed in this dissertation envision communities where characters living at the margins of southern society – the queers, the blacks, the poor, the female – engage in processes of restructuring their spaces so that oppressive politics and individuals are excluded. The belle's queer sexuality in *House of Clouds* allows her to draw parallels between her own oppression and that of her slaves. Her newfound status as an outsider transforms her way of thinking about racial inequality, leading her to align herself with slaves who are trying to escape to freedom.

In *High Hearts,* the plantation mistress voluntarily enters into a process of downward mobility to by marrying a poor white man and working in the fields with her former slaves. In doing so, she discards the privileges that have kept her apart from those with a lower social status. Ruth and Idgie in *Fried Green Tomatoes* are respected leaders

of their small-town community, and they encourage their neighbors to extend that respect to their black employees, disabled son, and the impoverished hoboes that pass through looking for work. When violent white supremacy and patriarchy become too much to bear for the women in *The Color Purple,* they establish a tightknit gynocentric kinship system in which they support each other emotionally and financially, eliminating their dependency on men and white employers. In *Say Jesus and Come to Me,* Myrtle Black's vision for a feminist community that unites across differences in race, class, faith, age, and sexuality to combat the oppressive forces of racism and sexism comes to fruition in the Women's March at the end of the novel. Lesbian-separatist and radical feminist rhetoric about women-run and women-only societies appears throughout the novel, as though the characters are looking to the kind of futuristic society that Russ, Piercy, and others describe.

Finally, *Cavedweller*'s Cissy finds kinship with the "exotic" Jean and Mim who, with their "dark hair, high cheekbones, clear skin, and long necks," and "thick, finely shaped lashes" that "caught the light and drew you to their shining eyes" (Allison 273), sound ethereal and otherworldly. Cissy achieves a queer subjectivity by entering into another (underground) world where the expectations and rules about gender and sexual conformity that govern society above ground do not exist.

Feminist science fiction and fantasy invoke utopias to make cultural and political statements about the causes, nature, and effects of systemic oppression. Yet what sets apart my primary texts from these science fiction novels is that they imagine idealized societies in the past instead of in the future, focusing on what could have been instead of

what could be. To understand what work the utopias in these southern texts perform on queer narratives about the region, I refer to this definition by Chris Ferns:

> Rather than a monolithic ideal, whose unquestionable superiority to existing society is taken for granted, utopia becomes more a matter of exploring possibilities, indicating new directions, offering glimpses…of how things might be otherwise. (x)

In the novels and films I have discussed, alternative worlds are created in southern pasts where we can envision something better than what we currently know or have. Fantasy moments in these texts map on to the region's queer history, urging us to replace dominant narratives of silence, obscurity, and suppression with counter narratives of queer liberation and inter-community cooperation. Oppressive structures are not eliminated altogether, but the characters and their communities find ways to function and thrive in spite of them. The southern spaces that characters inhabit are infused with ideas about social justice that are still relevant in the present but that have arguably still not been realized. By normalizing and celebrating queerness and inter-racial friendships in the past, these texts make present day homophobia, heterosexism, and racism appear abnormal and regressive.

In addition to using imagined pasts to think through contemporary social problems, these texts also force us to engage with questions about the ways in which queer history has or has not been recorded, and the resulting impact on our understanding of southern queerness. How might the South now be understood, seen, or experienced if queerness had been more visible and important in the historical record? What have been the effects, both tangible and theoretical, of the systematic erasure of queer lives from dominant cultural narratives about the South? And how might those narratives now be

different if same-sex relationships and gender non-conformity had been identified and embraced as queer instead of explained away or ignored entirely? Rather than thinking of female masculinity as a necessary byproduct of tough agricultural labor, we might read it as an expression of butch identification. Where historical accounts of the civil war suggest that female crossdressing soldiers were motivated simply by a sense of patriotic duty, we might ask whether these soldiers could also have been transgender.

This dissertation examines texts that tell stories and explore perspectives that are not found in the historiography because "the keepers of Southern history, the archivists, have sometimes actively worked to thwart us, to exclude us from the fold" (Howard, *Carryin' On* 4). Indeed, historians Martin Duberman and Margaret Gladney have written essays describing their difficulties in trying to obtain and publish archival materials that revealed same-sex relationships between deceased southern aristocrats. The author Sarah Waters has admitted that in writing lesbian novels set in Victorian England, her "purpose was not to be authentic, but to imagine a history that we can't really recover" (qtd. in Poubelle). I read these novels and films about queer southern pasts as working towards a similar goal. While fiction cannot stand as an authentic representation of actual events, it can highlight gaps in the historical record and force us to confront the power structures that silence queer and other marginalized voices. In doing so, fictional texts such as the ones I have examined insist that in the absence of queerness in dominant cultural narratives about the South, counter-narratives must be created.

Fictional texts contest and subvert southern ideologies about gender and sexual conformity by insisting that a queer southern past exists and that queers can infiltrate even the most unlikely of locales such as the church and the plantation. The novels and

films explored in this project envision a history that is more liberating than the past and perhaps even the present that we have come to know. Furthermore, they provide glimpses of what a liberatory southern future might look like if only the dispossessed – the queers, the people of color, the women, the poor – would work together to overturn a social order that keeps them subordinated. Although fantastic and idealistic in their visions, in the absence of a recorded history, these fictional texts offer an alternative way of engaging with the past *and* the future, allowing us to speculate or fantasize about the lives of southern society's most invisible and oppressed.

Works Cited

Abate, Michelle Ann. *Tomboys : A Literary and Cultural History.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008. Print.

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina.* New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.

---. *Cavedweller.* New York: Penguin Books, 1998. Print.

---. *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature.* London: Pandora, 1995. Print.

Allsop, Kenneth. *Hard Travellin': The Story of the Migrant Worker.* London: Penguin, 1972. Print.

Anderson, Nels. *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man.* 1923. 2nd ed. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1967. Print.

Applebome, Peter. *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture.* Orlando: Mariner Books, 1996. Print.

Armstrong, Elizabeth. *Forging Gay Identity: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 2002. Print.

Barker, Deborah. "The Southern-Fried Chick Flick: Postfeminism Goes to the Movies." *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies.* Eds. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. New York: Routledge, 2008. 92-118. Print.

Bell, David. "Farm Boys and Wild Men: Rurality, Masculinity, and Homosexuality." *Rural Sociology* 65.4 (2005) : 547-61. Print.

Berglund, Jeff. "'The Secret's in the Sauce': Dismembering Normativity in *Fried Green Tomatoes.*" *Camera Obscura* 14.342 (1999) : 125-159. Print.

Bethel, Lorraine. "What Chou Mean *We,* White Girl?" *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* 2.2 (Autumn 1979) : 86-92. Print.

Bibler, Michael. *Cottons Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. Print.

Birnbaum, Robert. “Dorothy Allison.” Claxton 102-117. Print.

Blanton, DeAnne, and Lauren M. Cook. *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002. Print.

Bobo, Jacqueline. *Black Women as Cultural Readers.* New York: Columbia UP, 1995. Print.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films.* New York: Continuum, 2001. Print.

Bogus, SDiane. “The Queen B Figure.” *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions.* Eds. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow. New York: New York UP, 1990. 275-89. Print.

Breckinridge, Lucy. *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864.* Ed. Mary D. Robertson. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994. Print.

Brown, Rita Mae. *High Hearts.* New York: Bantam Books, 1987. Print.

---. *Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser.* New York: Bantam Books, 2009. Print.

Brownmiller, Susan. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution.* New York: Dell, 2000. Print.

Caldwell, Erskine. *Tobacco Road.* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1932. Print.

Cash, Wilbur. *The Mind of the South.* New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946. Print.

Castle, Terry. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture.*

New York: Columbia UP, 1993. Print.

Censer, Jane T. *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2003. Print.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940.* New York: Basic Books, 1994. Print.

Chesnut, Saralyn, and Amanda C. Gable. "'Women Ran It': Charis Books and More and Atlanta's Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1971-1981." Howard, *Carryin' On* 241-284. Print.

Church, Jennifer Ross. "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes.*" *Vision/Revision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film.* Ed. Barbara Tepa Lupack. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996. Print.

Clarke, Cheryl. *The Days of Good Looks: The Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980 to 2005.* New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006. Print.

---. "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community." Clarke. 61-80. Print.

---. "New Notes on Lesbianism." Clarke. 81-90. Print.

Claxton, Mae Miller, ed. *Conversations with Dorothy Allison.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012. Print.

Clinton, Catherine. *Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend.* New York: Abbeville Press, 1995. Print.

Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity.* New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Combahee River Collective. “A Black Feminist Statement.” Moraga and Anzaldúa. 210-218. Print.

Cook, Pam. *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema.* New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005. Print.

Corber, Roger. “Queer Regionalism.” *American Literary History* 11.2 (Summer 1999) : 391-402. Print.

Cox, Karen. “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Ya’ll.” *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages.* The New York Times Company, 3 Oct. 2012. Web. 10 Jan. 2013.

Cragin, Becca. “Post-Lesbian-Feminism: Documenting ‘Those Cruddy Old Dykes of Yore.’” Howard, *Carryin’ On* 285-330. Print.

Cunningham, Daniel M. “New Queer White Trash Cinema.” *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television.* Ed. Thomas Peele. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 169-182. Print.

Cytron, Sara. “Butch in a Tutu.” Rottnek 209-225. Print.

Dandridge, Rita. “Shockley, the Iconoclast.” *Callaloo* 22 (Autumn 1984) : 160-164. Print.

Davis, Angela. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday.* New York: Random House, 1998. Print.

---. *Women, Race, and Class.* New York: Random House, 1983. Print.

D’Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983. Print.

Dews, Carlos, and Carolyn Leste Law, eds. *Out in the South.* Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. Print.

Dickey, James. *Deliverance.* New York: Dell, 1970. Print.

Douglas, Kelly. "Black Church Homophobia: What to do About it?" *Reflections* (Spring 2006) : 12-17. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

Donovan, Josephine. *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Evil, Affliction, and Redemptive Love.* N.p.: Cybereditions, 2002. Print.

Dowd Hall, Jacquelyn. *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniels Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching.* New York: Columbia UP, 1993. Print.

Duberman, Martin. *Stonewall.* New York: Plume, 1994. Print.

---. "'Writhing Bedfellows' in Antebellum South Carolina: Historical Interpretation and the Politics of Evidence." Howard, *Carryin' On* 15-33. Print.

Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture.* London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Eastman, Mary. *Aunt Phillis's Cabin.* Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1852. Print.

Edwards, Laura. *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Print.

Eggleston, Larry. *Women in the Civil War: Extraordinary Stories of Soldiers, Spies, Nurses, Doctors, Crusaders, and Others.* Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2003. Print.

Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life In Twentieth-Century America.* New York: Penguin Books, 1992. Print.

---. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present.* New York: Perennial, 2001. Print.

Faust, Drew Gilpin. *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Print.

Feimster, Crystal. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009. Print.

Fellows, Will. *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. Print.

"Feminary." *1970s North Carolina Feminisms.* Duke WordPress Sites, n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2012.

Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Print.

Ferns, Chris. *Narrating Utopia.* Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1999. Print.

Flagg, Fannie. *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café.* London: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Freedman, Estelle B. *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women.* New York: Ballantine, 2002. Print.

Gaffney, Karen. "Excavated from the Inside: White Trash and Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller." Modern Language Studies* 32.1 (Spring 2002) : 43-57. Print.

Gallo, Marcia. *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement.* Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007. Print.

Gearhart, Sally M. *The Wanderground.* New York: Alyson, 1984. Print.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland.* New York: Pantheon, 1979. Print.

---. *Women and Economics : A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Print.

Gilmore, Glenda. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Print.

Gladney, Margaret Rose. "Personalizing the Political, Politicizing the Personal: Reflections on Editing the Letters of Lillian Smith." Howard, *Carryin' On* 93-106. Print.

Gomez, Jewelle. "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women." Barbara Smith, *Home Girls* 110-123. Print.

---. "Imagine a Lesbian, a Black Lesbian." *The Columbine Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics.* Ed. Larry Gross and James Woods. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. Print.

Grant, Jacquelyn. "Black Women and the Church." Hull, et al. 141-156. Print.

Grantham, Dewey. *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001. Print.

Gray, Mary. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America.* New York: New York UP, 2009. Print.

Grimsley, Jim. "Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South." Dews and Law 229-235. Print.

Grisham, John. *A Time to Kill.* New York: Wynwood, 1989. Print.

Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity.* Durham: Duke UP, 1998. Print.

---. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.* New York: New York UP, 2005.

---. "Oh Bondage Up Yours!: Female Masculinity and the Tomboy." Rottnek 153-179.

Hall, Richard. *Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War.* New York: Paragon House, 1993. Print.

---. *Women on the Civil War Battlefront.* Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2006. Print.

Hammonds, Evelyn. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. Eds. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997. 136-156. Print.

Hentz, Caroline L. *The Planter's Northern Bride.* Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1854. Print.

Hollinger, Karen. *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Print.

Holloway, Pippa. "Searching for Southern Lesbian History." *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader.* Ed. Christie Farnham. New York: New York UP, 1997. 258-302. Print.

hooks, bell. "Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 454-470. Print.

Howard, John. *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South.* New York: New York UP, 1997. Print.

---. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History.* Chicago: The University of Chicago

Press, 1999. Print.

Hull, Gloria, et al. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies.* New York: The Feminist Press, 1982. Print.

Inness, Sherrie. *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. Print.

Jackson, Cassandra. "Homophobia in the Black Church is Patriarchy in Drag." *Huffington Post.* TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. 25 May 2012. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

Jay, Karla. *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation.* New York: Basic Books, 2000. Print.

Jeffreys, Sheila. *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003. Print.

Jenkins, Candice. "Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple.*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.4 (2002) : 969-1000. Print.

Johnson, E. Patrick. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, An Oral History.* Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008. Print.

Johnston, Jill. *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution.* New York: Touchstone, 1973. Print.

Jones, Lu Ann. *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South.* Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002. Print.

Kabir, Shameem. *Daughters of Desire : Lesbian Representations in Film.* London: Cassell, 1998. Print.

Kameny, Frank. Foreword. By James T. Sears. *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001. Print.

Kaufman, Will. *The Civil War in American Culture.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006. Print.

Keehnen, Owen. “Literary Heroine: Talking with Dorothy Allison.” Claxton 21-25. Print.

Kempley, Rita. “Fried Green Tomatoes.” *Washington Post.* The Washington Post Company, 10 Jan. 1992. Web. 18 Jun. 2012.

Kennedy, Elizabeth L. and Madeline Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community.* New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.

Kinser, Jeremy. “Steven Spielberg Says He Softened Lesbian Sex In *The Color Purple.*” *The Advocate.* Here Media Inc., 5 Dec. 2011. Web. 1 May 2012.

Knowlton, Elizabeth. “’Only a Woman Like Yourself’ – Rebecca Alice Baldy: Dutiful Daughter, Stalwart Sister, and Lesbian Lover of Nineteenth-Century Georgia.” Howard, *Carryin’ On* 34-53. Print.

Koresky, Michael. “A World of Difference.” *Reverse Shot.* Issue 31. n.p. n.d. Web. 5 May 2012.

Kyriakoudes, Louis. “Southern Black Rural-Urban Migration in the Era of the Great Migration: Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930. *Agricultural History* 72.2 (Spring 1998) : 341-351. Print.

LaGrone, Kehven. *Alice Walker’s* The Color Purple. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. Print.

LeMahieu, Michael. “An Interview with Dorothy Allison.” *Contemporary Literature* 51.4 (Winter 2010) : 651-676. Print.

Lieb, Sandra. *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981. Print.

Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader.* Eds. Henry Abelove, et al. New York: Routledge, 1993. 339-343. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God.* New York: Random House, 1973.

McIntosh, Maria. *The Lofty and the Lowly.* New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1853. Print.

McMullen, Wayne, and Martha Solomon. "The Politics of Adaptation: Steven Spielberg's Appropriation of *The Color Purple.*" *Text and Performance Quarterly.* 14 (1994) : 158-174. Print.

McPherson, Tara. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South.* Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

McQueeney, Krista. "'We Are All God's Children, Y'all': Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Lesbian- and Gay-Affirming Congregations." *Social Problems* 56.1 (Feb. 2009) : 151-173. Print.

MacKethan, Lucinda. "Genres of Southern Literature." *Southern Spaces.* 16 February 2004: n. pag. Web. 15 January 2013.

Martin, Sarah Hines. *Walking Atlanta.* Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2002. Print.

Miller, Laura. "The Salon Interview: Dorothy Allison." *Salon.* Salon Media Group, Inc., 31 Mar. 1998. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color.* New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983. Print.

Newitz, Annalee, and Matt Wray, eds. *White Trash: Race and Class in America.* New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Niven, Steven. "Ma Rainey." *African American Lives.* Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

Ott, Victoria. *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age During the Civil War.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.

Page, Thomas Nelson. *In Ole Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895. Print.

Painter, Nell Irvin. "Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotypes." *Race-ing Justice, En- gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality.* Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Pantheon, 1992. 200-214. Print.

---. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996. Print.

---. *Southern History Across the Color Line.* Chapel Hill: UNCP, 2002. Print.

Perry, Carolyn, and Louise Weaks. *The History of Southern Women's Literature.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002. Print.

Piercy, Marge. *Woman on the Edge of Time.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976. Print.

Poubelle, Blanche. "Tom Foolery: What Did Victorian Dykes Call Each Other?" *The Guide.* Fidelity Publishing, July 2006. Web. 2 Feb 2013.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century." Barbara Smith, *Home Girls* 343-356. Print.

Reed, John Shelton. *My Tears Spoiled my Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993. Print.

Reynolds, David. "White Trash in Your Face: The Literary Descent of Dorothy Allison." *Appalachian Journal* 20.4 (Summer 1993) : 356-366. Print.

Roberts, Giselle. *The Confederate Belle.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. Print.

Rockler, Naomi. "A Wall on the Lesbian Continuum: Polysemy and *Fried Green Tomatoes.*" *Women's Studies in Communication* 24.1. (Spring 2001) : 90-106. Print.

Rosen, Hannah. *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Print.

Rottnek, Matthew, ed. *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood.* New York: New York UP, 1999. Print.

Rubin, Gayle. "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole." *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*. Ed. Mark Thompson. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991. 119-141. Print.

Russ, Joanna. *The Female Man.* New York: Bantam Books, 1975. Print.

Sangwan, Uplabdhi. "Significance of Sisterhood and Lesbianism in Fiction of Women of Color." LaGrone 173-194. Print.

Sears, James T. *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1997. Print.

---. “Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Pre-Stonewall Charleston: Perspectives on the Gordon Langley Hall Affair.” Howard, *Carryin’ On* 164-202. Print.

---. *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001. Print.

Segrest, Mab. *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture.* Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985. Print.

Shockley, Ann Allen. *Say Jesus and Come to Me.* Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1987. Print.

Simon, Mashaun. “Is the Church to Blame for Homophobia in Black America?” *The Grio.* NBC News. 22 May 2012. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

Smith, Barbara, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology.* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000. Print.

---. *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom.* Piscataway: Rutgers UP, 1998. Print.

Smith, Barbara and Beverly Smith. “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue.” Moraga and Anzaldúa 113-127. Print.

Smith, Clifford L. *History of Troup County.* Atlanta: Foote and Davis, 1935. Print.

Smith, Donna Jo. “Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity.” Howard, *Carryin’ On* 370-386. Print.

Sommerville, Diane M. *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Print.

Stein, Marc. *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972.* Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004. Print.

Stowe, Harriet B. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893. Print.

Thompson, K.I.. *House of Clouds.* New York: Bold Strokes Books, 2007. Print.

Thompson, Lee. Interview by Topher Payne. “Honey Boo Boo’s ‘Uncle Poodle’ Speaks Out for Gay Rednecks.” *GA Voice.* Christina Cash, 10 Oct. 2012. Web. 12 Jan 2013.

Thorpe, Thomas. *The Master’s House.* New York: T. L. McElrath, 1854. Print.

Tsui, Bonnie. *She Went to the Field: Women Soldiers of the Civil War.* Guilford: Globe Pequot, 2006. Print.

Valk, Anne, and Leslie Brown. *Living With Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.

Vetrano, Maria. “Chopped Tomatoes.” *Gay Community News*. 23 Feb. (1992) : 10. Print.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple.* London: The Women’s Press, 1986. Print.

---. *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult: A Meditation on Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film* The Color Purple *Ten Years Later.* New York: Scriber, 1996. Print.

Walker, Melissa. “The Changing Character of Farm Life: Rural Southern Women.” *Southern Women at the Millennium.* Ed. Melissa Walker. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. 145-175. Print.

Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. Print.

Wallace, Michele. “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood.” Hull et al. 5-12. Print.

Ward, Elijah. “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity, and the Black Church.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7.5 (Sep. – Oct. 2005) : 493-504. Print.

Wells, Ida B. *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900.* Boston: Bedford Books, 1997. Print.

Weston, Kath. “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration.” *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 2 (1995) : 253-77. Print.

Whatling, Clare. *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. Print.

White, Patricia. *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. Print.

Whitt, Jan. “What Happened to Celie and Idgie?: ‘Apparitional Lesbians’ in American Film.” *Studies in Popular Culture.* 27.3. (April 2005) : 43-57. Print.

Wilkinson, Kathleen. “Dorothy Allison: The Value of Redemption.” *Curve Magazine.* Frances Stevens, 2008. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

Williams, Kathie. “Louisville’s Lesbian Feminist Union: A Study in Community Building.” Howard, *Carryin’ On* 224-240. Print.

Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Print.

Zevy, Lee. “Sexing the Tomboy.” Rottnek 180-198. Print.

Zhou, Ping. “Focalization Theory and the Epistolary Novel: A Narrative Analysis of *The Color Purple.*” LaGrone 287-304. Print.

Zinn, Howard. *The Southern Mystique.* Cambridge: South End Press, 2002. Print.

Filmography

After Stonewall. Dir. John Scagliotti. First Run Features, 2010. DVD.

Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community. Dirs. Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg. First Run Features, 1985. DVD.

The Color Purple. Dir. Stephen Spielberg. Warner Home Video. 1987. DVD.

Cultivating a Classic: The Making of The Color Purple. Dir. Laurent Bouzereau. Warner Home Video. 2003. DVD.

Fried Green Tomatoes. Dir. Jon Avnet. Universal Pictures. 1991. DVD.

Fried Green Tomatoes: The Moments of Discovery. Dir. J.M. Kenny. 1991. DVD.

I Spit on Your Grave. Dir. Meir Zarchi. Elite, 2002. DVD.

Last House on the Left. Dir. Wes Craven. MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD.

Mother's Day. Dir. Charles Kaufman. Troma Team Video, 2000. DVD.

Stonewall Uprising. Dirs. Kate Davis and David Heilbroner. PBS. 2011. DVD.

You Don't Know Dixie. The History Channel. 2011. DVD.