RICE UNIVERSITY

Tomboys & Sissies: Queer Childhood in the Fiction of the Southern Renaissance, 1929-1961

by

Matthew W. Walker

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Dr. Scott Derrick, Chair
Associate Professor of English

Dr. Wesley Morris
Professor of English

Dr. Cymene Howe
Associate Professor of Anthropology

HOUSTON, TEXAS
May 2016
ABSTRACT

Tomboys & Sissies: Queer Childhood in the Fiction of the Southern Renaissance, 1929-1961

by

Matt Walker

My thesis considers representations of childhood in the literature of the 20th Century American South. During the Southern Renaissance period, such authors as Harper Lee, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams looked to the child – often the tomboy, or her male counterpart, the sissy – as a figure of resistance against adult society. In a region that still clung to antebellum ideals of female chastity, white supremacy, and benevolent paternalism, these characters served to interrupt the dominant cultural script, and thus reimagine queer counternarratives of racial, sexual, and gendered subjectivity.
Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, Bernadette and Paul Walker, for their unwavering support, guidance, and love. Without them, none of this would be possible.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Colleen Lamos, who has been my academic advisor and mentor since the beginning. I cherish your wisdom and your friendship.

Special thanks to my committee chair, Scott Derrick, for your time, patience and consideration. I would also like to thank my committee members, Wes Morris and Cymene Howe, for your commitment and contributions to my work.

I would also like to thank my brothers, Ben and Jim Walker, and my friends (in alphabetical order) Brett Ireland, Brian Feller, Dan Patterson, David Alexander, Miguel Contreras, Patrick Jones, Richard Leonard, and Timothy Cilley, who have all offered me moral support, encouragement, and have in many ways inspired me as a person, a teacher, and a scholar.

Finally, thank you Mia, for loving and protecting as only a golden retriever can. Our walks along the bayou have been the perfect antidote for writer’s block.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
1

**Part I**  

Chapter 1  
Spinsters & Mammies: Queer Mentorship and the Tomboy in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*  

Chapter 2  
A Harp of Other Voices: The Avunculate, The Amitate, and the Queer Sissy in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and *The Grass Harp*  

**Part II**  

Chapter 3  
The Joy of the Castrated Boy: The Asian Sissy in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*  

Chapter 4  
"Land of the Kike Home of the Wop": The Queer Italian Tomboy in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*  

**Conclusion**  
242

**Bibliography**  
250
Introduction

On December 15th, 1939, schools and businesses across Atlanta closed so that all could partake in the festivities celebrating the opening of the movie *Gone with the Wind*. No expense was spared, as Mayor Hartsfield had invested a great deal of energy and finance to ensure that Margaret Mitchell's Civil War epic would be premiered in his city, rather than New York.\(^1\) This was Atlanta's opportunity to present itself as a model city of the "New South," a bastion of white paternalism, noblesse oblige, and female purity, which still flourished in the age of 20th Century modernism. Events surrounding the film championed the antebellum period as an era of chivalry, civility, wealth, and honor, a time when white gentlemen ruled with ease and grace, while defending the flower of southern womanhood. While the volunteer corps of two-hundred negro servants attracted considerable attention, however, it was the parade of the many "Scarlettesque" white adolescent debutantes that ultimately stole the show.

It was no coincidence that Margaret Mitchell's female protagonist captured the limelight at the film's premiere. As Susan K. Cahn explains in *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (2007), "it was Scarlett who accomplished what southern politicians and business leaders had been attempting to do for decades." She exemplified the proper embodiment of female masculinity, and "provided a fantasy in which teenage girls could imagine themselves as both the classic southern belle, emblematic of goodness and beauty, and a modern girl who might pursue her impassioned desires without being expunged from the roster of respectable and marriageable girls."\(^2\) She was a "modern" girl still devoted to the values of feminine white

---


womanhood, as her intelligence and assertiveness were masked by her charm, manners, and fashionable beauty.

This powerful narrative, though heralded for its authenticity, not only distorted the past but created a deceptive view of the present. The canonical status of *Gone With the Wind* (1936) in American culture engendered a lasting image of the southern belle, an image updated through time as the fashionable debutante. Indeed, while the lives of women changed dramatically from the antebellum era to the "Southern Renaissance" period, as Anne Firor Scott observes in *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970), the myth of southern womanhood was particularly "slow to die" in the region's cultural imaginary. In his defence of southern culture, *The Mind of the South* (1941), for example, W.J. Cash draws on religious and mythological imagery to iconify the southern lady:

She was the South's Palladium, this Southern Woman – the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard for its rallying, the mystic symbol of its nationality in the face of the foe. She was the lily-pure maid of Astolat and the hunting Goddess of the Boetian hill.

This idealized portrait of the "lily-pure maid of Astolat," however, belies the true purpose and implications behind the making of southern womanhood. From the early-19th Century, the plantation system and the institution of slavery fostered the development in the southern states of a particularly strong patriarchal family culture. As Scott's analysis argues, "Women, along with

_________________________

3 For more on Scarlett's modernism, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Scarlett O'Hara: The Southern Lady as New Woman," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 391-411


children and slaves, were expected to recognize their proper and subordinate place and to be obedient to the head of the family," for "Any tendency on the part of any of the members of the system to assert themselves against the master threatened the whole, and therefore slavery itself" (17). Indeed, as Anne Goodwyn Jones explains in *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* (1981), "The image wearing Dixie's Diadem" has historically offered a cartography for racist fears. This image, writes Jones,

is not a human being, but a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still.

In that, southern womanhood is not alone. It has much in common with the ideas of the British Victorian lady, and of American true womanhood. All deny to women authentic selfhood; all enjoin that women suffer and be still; all show women sexually pure, pious, deferent to external authority, and content with their place in the home. Yet southern womanhood differs in several ways from other nineteenth-century images of womanhood. Unlike them, the southern lady is at the core of the region's self definition; the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady.6

Racial dominance was thus inextricably linked to the South's view of women as pliant and submissive creatures. From girlhood – as critics such as Ritchie Devon Watson Jr. and Kathryn Lee Seidel have similarly argued – children were taught that "properly bred belles" were to be

---

pure, submissive, modest, self-denying, and pious. As adults, these traits supposedly validated their role as the symbolic repository of the region's antiquated ideals.

While his presence was not nearly so conspicuous during the Atlanta premiere, Rhett Butler – Scarlett's swashbuckling beau – introduced a similarly "modern" interpretation of the traditional southern gentleman. The plantation aristocrat was traditionally "Aristocratic at heart, Victorian in manners," to quote critic Emmeline Gros; "the southern man was characterized by autonomy, self-discipline, and integrity, combining all the elements of older chivalric codes with an acute sense of private and caste power." This antebellum gentleman, as represented in such works as William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollection of a Planter's Son* (1941), was a member of the white male elite, one who possessed a self-contained image of masculinity in that his "manhood" was based on inward strength, rather than outward behavior. In contrast, Rhett Butler is instead depicted as flamboyant and daring, an adventurer who takes great pride in heterosexual virility. He is described in the text as having a "dark face, as swarthy as a pirate, and his eyes were as bold and black as any pirate's appraising a galleon to be scuttled or a maiden to be ravished." Even though Rhett is not himself black, he embodies the image of

---


"black masculinity" as primitive and hypersexual, an image that has historically generated white paranoia, and been used to justify violence against black southern men.\textsuperscript{11}

In the "modern" 20\textsuperscript{th} Century South, therefore, Rhett Butler became the new masculine ideal for white southern men of the upper-class. Indeed, he represented a new form of individualized honor, to quote critic Craig Thompson Friend, "one that revered drinking, hunting, swearing, cunning, physical pleasure with women, and even fighting as a powerful remedy for weakened southern masculinity."\textsuperscript{12} In the new industrialized South, as self-made entrepreneurs began to displace the aristocrat elite, a new emphasis was placed on projecting an image of virile hypermasculine selfhood.

In the case of both Scarlett and Rhett, as Mitchell's novel and its Atlanta premiere demonstrated, the popularity of \textit{Gone with the Wind} was a testament to the staying power of such patriarchal myths as the masculine "beau" and the feminine "belle." Despite his modern qualities, for example, Rhett Butler still possesses a quality that defined the antebellum gentleman, a belief that his white lineage, wealth, and heterosexual prowess legitimizes his privileged position in southern society. Meanwhile, at the Atlanta premiere, the selection of female debutantes similarly illustrates how the southern belle was defined against racial and socioeconomic Otherness. To even be considered, these modern-day Scarlett O'Haras had to


provide firm evidence of their family ties to the old Confederacy, while African American teens and poor whites were excluded altogether.\textsuperscript{13}

In reality, both girlhood and boyhood in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century South was hardly as simple and unproblematic as these southern myths suggest. Female adolescence alone served as a particularly volatile site of cultural conflict and contestation. As Susan Cahn writes,

The perceived instability of adolescence – and particularly adolescent female sexuality- came to stand for larger instabilities of the region. Southerners living between 1920 and 1960 saw their world undergo tremendous changes, of which some were interpreted as progress, but others were seen as signs of social and moral breakdown […] Adolescent girls played a significant role in many of the controversies that wracked the south in these decades. (8)

It was during this time, too, that the South struggled with what critic Miho Matsui calls "the crisis of southern masculinity": "During the period between the two world wars, masculinity was a highly sensitive issue among southern men."\textsuperscript{14} This claim is further supported by Grace Elizabeth Hale in \textit{Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940} (1999), who argues that "a changing political economy undermined older forms of male power" at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, and "The South did not escape this failing of patriarchal authority."\textsuperscript{15}


This crisis of masculinity only escalated in the 1920s and 30s, when H.L. Mencken's article "The Sahara of the Bozart" and the dispute of the Scopes Trial in 1925 led to increased criticism of the region's cultural, economic, and religious backwardness.\textsuperscript{16} From the perspective of the rest of the nation, southerners were increasingly perceived to be degenerate and demasculinized. It was only a matter of time, as Flannery O'Connor would lament, before "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader."\textsuperscript{17}

In the following chapters, I argue that it is the figure of the queer child in adolescence – a child who refuses to conform to the expectations of heteronormative adulthood – that works to foreground the instabilities and anxieties at the heart of patriarchal culture in the 20\(^{th}\) Century South. In the literature of the Southern Renaissance, a period that I locate from roughly the 1920s to the 1960s, I argue that childhood provided the terrain on which southern authors negotiated conflicts over modernity, class relations, gender identity, sexual mores, and racial inequality.

While I acknowledge the powerful influence of William Faulkner over the southern literary canon, and indeed over American literature in general, my dissertation places his work in conversation with such authors as Carson McCullers, Harper Lee, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams. By working to extend and thus redefine the boundaries of this literary period, I undertake the project called for by Gary Richards in \textit{Lovers & Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961} (2005): "to interrogate works produced during the years broadly understood as the Renaissance but that have been deliberately depreciated or

\textsuperscript{16} For more on the Scopes Trial, see H.L. Mencken, \textit{A Religious Orgy in Tennessee: A Reporter's Account of the Scopes Monkey Trial} (1925; reprint, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2006).

excluded from the southern canon, and to probe the reasons for this exclusion." In conjunction with Faulkner, these authors offer the reader a more expansive and dynamic understanding of childhood than has previously been considered by both literary and cultural critics, an understanding that recognizes the child as a critical site of cultural contestation.

I have called attention to the Atlanta premiere of *Gone with the Wind* to demonstrate how portrayals of gender and sexual deviance in "modern" southern literature are not necessarily invested with queer potential. To the contrary, the tomboyish Scarlett and the dandefied Rhett illustrate how representations of racial, sexual, and gender transitivity can still be brought to heel within a prevailing cultural logic. Thus, by existing at the threshold of adulthood, I argue that the adolescent child reflects the ambiguity of what Victor Turner calls "liminal personae": "transitional beings" who must "pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" in symbolic preparation for adulthood. In other words, the adolescent may serve as a site of cultural reinscription, the place where difference is made to conform to prevailing social norms. In contrast, I consider the tomboys, sissies, and other liminal personae of my analysis to be "queer" by virtue of their refusal to conform to the restrictive demands of normative adulthood. Instead, I argue that these tomboyish adolescents and their effeminate male counterparts came to symbolize an eroding social order, and signaled the potential for new alliances of support, new ways of being, and new forms of desire in the modern American South.

I have divided my introduction into three sections, in which I outline the historical and geographical scope of my analysis, the conceptional and theoretical paradigms I deploy, and the

---


central claims presented in the following chapters. In Part 1, I begin by placing my analysis within its proper historical, cultural, and regional context, while examining the origins of the Southern Renaissance, and considering which texts and authors have been conspicuously omitted from its canon. Having defined the parameters of my study, I work in Part 2 to outline the important theoretical paradigms I deploy over the course of my research. This section also establishes working definitions for what constitutes and defines such terms as "queerness," "childhood," and "adolescence" in my analysis. Finally, Part 3 offers a structural overview of my dissertation, and examines the logic behind its organization. It is in this sections – as well as in Parts 1 and 2 – that I establish my critical interventions and contributions to queer theory, childhood studies, and southern literary discourse, among other fields of inquiry.

_______________________________________

**Part 1 – The Magnolia Closet: Redefining the Southern Renaissance**

In the aftermath of the Civil War, southern writers, politicians, and the remnants of the plantation elite searched desperately for a rationale that could both justify the Confederacy and explain their current predicament. As Daniel Joseph Singal observes in *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (1982), "it did not take them long to find an answer: their main purpose in going to war had been the preservation of an aristocratic way of life." This was the message of a new generation of "plantation school" novelists led by Thomas Nelson Page. Indeed, Page's sentimental depictions of the Old South – a landscape populated by noble gentlemen, chaste maidens, and devoted servants – contributed to the development of the "moonlight and magnolias" myth that authors such as Ellen Glasgow would

struggle to debunk. As a result, southern literature, with the notable exception of such writers as Glasgow, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, and Charles W. Chesnutt, would remain mired in cultural backwash. Within its pages, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown declares in *Heart of Darkness: Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition* (2003), "What we discover is an almost unchanging intellectual continuity spanning the nineteenth century – and going somewhat beyond."

It was not until the end of the First World War that southern culture would undergo a seachange, with the emergence of a cultural and literary renaissance. This transition into the modern era was largely catalyzed H.L. Mencken's 1917 essay "The Sahara of the Bozart," a scathing indictment of the region's "arrested cultural development." With characteristic hyperbole, Mencken declared that, in contrast to a highly romanticized antebellum South, the modern region was "almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally as the Sahara Desert." The result was a veritable outburst of literary productivity over the following years, as writers, artists, and intellectuals in the region began exploring the implications of southern history and identity in the modern era. By 1922, even Mencken had begun to acknowledge a developing critical spirit in the South, and in 1925 declared that "Just what has happened down there I don't know, but there has been an immense change of late. The old sentimental snuffling

---


24 For more on H.L. Mencken's profound effect on southern culture, see Fred Hobson, *Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken and the South* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1974).
and gurgling seems to have gone out of fashion; the new southern writers are reexamining the
civilization they live under and striking out boldly."

The most significant – and hostile – response to Mencken's indictment came from the
Nashville Agrarians, a group of twelve writers, poets, essayists, and novelists who, as Gary
Richards asserts, "arguably instigated modern southern literary studies" (9). Composed in part
by former Fugitives and eventual New Critics, the Agrarians countered Mencken's accusations in
their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) to assert, as
contributor Donald Davidson does, that the years following World War I featured southern
writers "whose work reveals richness, repose, brilliance, [and] continuity." For the Agrarians,
however, these works were only appreciable so long as they advanced a particularly conservative
political agenda, one which emphasized the importance of religious piety, the patriarchal family,
and traditional gender codes. In addition, Gary Richards argues that "[the] Agrarians
implemented a homophobic agenda that had as its primary tactic the subtle yet persistent
exclusion of gays, lesbians, and other persons of nonnormative sexualities from the accepted
Renaissance canon" (16). Thus, the southern literary establishment still clung fiercely to the last
vestiges of the antebellum era, and worked to preserve and reify the myth of an idyllic,
preindustrial, and blissfully heterosexual South.

Unfortunately, the centrality of a conservative Agrarian legacy and its formulation of the
Renaissance within southern literary studies has been slow in waning. Consider, for instance,
how the Renaissance is handled in *The History of Southern Literature* (1985), the anthology
acclaimed by critic Michael Kreyling as "[that] skyscraper on the landscape of southern literary

---


26 Donald Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*
The list of editors alone – Louis D. Rubin Jr., Rayburn S. Moore, Lewis P. Simpson, Thomas Daniel Young, and Blyden Jackson – reflects the powerful white male bias that has dominated literary discourse in the South. Only one of the aforementioned editors, Blyden Jackson, is African American, while all five, as Rubin notes in the volume's introduction, were heavily influenced by Agrarian thought.\(^28\)

One of the most pervasive tactics instigated by the Agrarians and their proponents has been to declare the Renaissance over at precisely the moment when southern writers were increasingly and more explicitly representing racial, sexual, and gender deviance in their fiction. Allen Tate, one of the South's most influential poets, authors, and critics, for example, would declare the end of the Renaissance in 1945.\(^29\) Meanwhile, Richard H. King argues in *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (1980) that "one might conveniently locate the end of the main phase of the Renaissance somewhere around 1955."\(^30\)

Regardless of the specific date, the Renaissance is most often figured to end in the 1940s or 50s, just as writers such as Lillian Smith, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams were establishing their significance. Indeed, by claiming that "the South was preoccupied with other voices, other rooms" after 1955, King intentionally alludes to Capote's


novel of the same title, a book that addresses themes of homoerotic desire, male effeminacy, and childhood sexuality in explicit detail (3-4).\textsuperscript{31}

I disagree with this conservative consensus advanced by King and his contemporaries, however, for two primary reasons. First, the authors I consider in this dissertation share a great deal in common, in both their lives and work, with William Faulkner, a figure whose "importance to to southern literature can scarcely be overstated. He was like Michelangelo to and earlier Renaissance, heaven-sent," as Michael Kreyling observes in \textit{Inventing Southern Literature} (1998).\textsuperscript{32} Like Faulkner and his contemporaries, southern writers in the 1950s and 60s may have begun to explore "other voices, other rooms," as King argues, yet continued to focus on issues of southern history and cultural identity, both of which were central preoccupations during the Renaissance era. The exclusion of these authors therefore demonstrates the ideological implications of canon formation in southern literary studies, and constitutes nothing less than academic colonialism.

Secondly, and most importantly, the conservative nostalgia of the Agrarians was contradicted American literary and cultural discourse in general, as writers and critics north of the Mason-Dixon ironically perceived the Renaissance to be an inherently queer phenomenon. According to Gary Richards,

\begin{quote}
While first- and second-generation Agrarians and New Critics were codifying the Renaissance as a canon relatively devoid of transgressive sexualities, whether in its
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} See Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of Truman Capote's \textit{Other Voices, Other Rooms} (1948), with a focus on Capote's sissy protagonist.

writers or their representations, many American artists and critics from outside the South tacitly agreed [...] [that] southern literature at midcentury not only contain[ed] the very same sexualities that the Agrarians argued were absent but also consisted of nothing but these representations. Moreover, this line of thought suggested that southern literature was unique among the various arenas of national literary production in featuring this sexual depravity. (22)

In other words, nonsoutherners effectively quarantined the South as one of the few allowable sites of fictionalized deviancy, thus assuring themselves of their own normativity by comparison to the abject regional Other. This conflation of southern literature with sexual deviancy is evident, for example, in Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), as the narrator warns an elderly lady that "the kind of stories Mr. Faulkner writes" – "tales of abnormality" about "those unfortunate people" – would offend her delicate sensibilities.33 Within critical discourse, too, Leslie Fiedler's influential *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) places particular emphasis on what he calls "the true Magnolia Blossom of Southern homosexual style," a style he believes was pioneered by Faulkner and his contemporaries.34 In his analysis of Carson McCullers's work, Robert Phillips echoes these sentiments in particularly grim detail: "[she] belongs within that body of our literature which is Gothic in theme and method. Instead of romantic couples or brave heroes or heroines we find homosexuals and lesbians, flowers of evil dotting a grotesque landscape."35


This quarantining of deviance to the South should not, however, be considered a
detriment to southern literary production. Instead, I argue that works by Carson McCullers,
Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams, in conjunction with the more "canonical" fiction of
William Faulkner and Harper Lee suggests that this pejorative designation may have ironically
allowed these writers to envision some of the most nuanced representations of gender, racial, and
sexual deviance in modern American fiction. In other words, the quarantining of deviance
encouraged the region's writers to not only represent Otherness in their fiction, but to reconfigure
these representations with extraordinary depth and complexity. When one compares these queer
discourses to the centrality of conservative Agrarianism, as Gary Richard does in his article
"'With Special Emphasis': The Dynamics of [Re]Claiming as Queer Southern Renaissance," it
becomes apparent that

These simultaneous critical moves worked together to create something of an open secret
for both individual authors and the region as a whole, one in which queerness was often
not directly addressed [...] and yet was crucial in the negotiations of these authors, their
texts, and Southern culture.36

In a nod to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's groundbreaking Epistemology of the Closet (1990),
therefore, I argue that the South functioned as the queer Other – the magnolia closet, if you will –
in the American literary and cultural imaginary.37

For the purposes of this study, I focus primarily on queer representations of race, gender,
and sexuality in the fiction of Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams,

36 Gary Richards, "'With Special Emphasis': The Dynamics of (Re)Claiming a Queer Southern

Subsequently cited in text as Epistemology.
while comparing these texts to the more canonical works of William Faulkner and Harper Lee. In doing so, I also acknowledge that there are important differences between these authors with regards to both their personal lives and literary works. While all of these authors were born south of the Mason-Dixon, for instance, they were each raised in markedly different subregions. Capote and Lee spent their childhood in southern Alabama, for example, while McCullers was raised in central Georgia, and Williams and Faulkner both hailed from the Mississippi Delta. Only two – Faulkner and Lee – would spend the majority of their lives in the South, however, and both would themselves spend significant periods of time outside the region. Meanwhile, the other three authors left the Deep South for locations such as Paris and New York, and only return periodically to, in Carson McCullers's words, "renew their sense of horror." 38 There is also an age gap separating William Faulkner, who was born in 1897, and Harper Lee, who was born a generation later in 1926.

Despite their differences, however, these writers all share a central preoccupation in their fiction, a desire to explore issues of southern history and identity, and – to differing degrees – to deconstruct the mythic South of the Agrarians. It is also through their depictions of children – often at the threshold of adulthood – that these writers consider the transgressive potential of gender-transitivity, racial interstitiality, and the grotesque body for imagining alternative modes of subjectivity; new ways of being and "becoming" that defy the restrictions of an oppressive patriarchal culture.

While I recognize that, as Gary Richards aptly observes, the deployment of the term queer in its contemporary usage "ironically threatens to reinforce a binarism of normative/queer

and thus the notion that there is a stable, finite, knowable normativity," I argue the term more accurately describes the constantly shifting and dynamic bodies and desires I consider, as well as their often intersecting and overlapping representations of race, gender, and sexuality in southern culture (2). In addition, as a work of queer scholarship, this study does not argue that these authors constitute a coherent and traceable homosexual tradition, as some critics have sought to delineate. To advance a political agenda, for example, Mab Segrest has argued in My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture (1985) for a "southern lesbian tradition" including such authors as Carson McCullers, Lillian Smith, Rita Mae Brown, Dorothy Allison, Adrienne Rich, and Angelina Weld Grimke, to name but a few. Segrest can only stabilize this precarious configuration, however, by reducing these women's complex identities to same-sex desire, overstating their often tangential relation to the South, and dismissing the myriad differences that mark both these writers and their texts.

To the contrary, while I recognize the important place of male and female same-sex desire in southern fiction, I argue that the "queerness" of these authors lies in their ability to interrupt rather than reinforce hetero- and homonarratives of conformity. During the period that can loosely be defined as the Southern Renaissance – which, for the purposes of this study I locate between the publication of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (1929) and Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1961) – these writers' representations of childhood are often contradictory and disruptive of critical continuities.

Part 3 – Critical Methodologies: On Queerness, Childhood, and Adolescence

While conservatism has dominated southern literary studies over the course of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, there have been efforts in recent decades to turn the tides of discourse. Since the 1980s, as Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones's collection of essays \textit{Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts} (1997) demonstrates, there has recently been an outpouring of southern feminist criticism, a trend which has continued into the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century.\textsuperscript{40} Queer theory has added to these discourses, as well, with notable works by Gary Richards, historian John Howard, and literary critic Tison Pugh.\textsuperscript{41} This dissertation adds to the critical canon of both queer theory and southern literary studies by offering the first sustained examination of the role and significance of children in a broad range of southern literary texts. In doing so, I argue that dynamic representations of two recurring characters – the masculine tomboy and the effeminate sissy – work to expose and subvert an adult society based on compulsory heterosexuality, male privilege, and racial prejudice.

Considering the critical role of the child in southern literature – and, indeed, of the southern child in American literature in general – this study addresses an important gap in the existing critical discourse. In his comprehensive study \textit{Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood} (2004), for example, Steven Mintz asserts that the Mississippi Delta "occupies a special place in our collective imagination as the setting of two of fiction's most famous depictions of childhood" in Mark Twain's \textit{The Adventures of Tom Sawyer} (1876) and \textit{The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn} (1884). "For over a century," Mintz argues, "Huck has served

\textsuperscript{40} Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson, eds., \textit{Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts} (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

as a lightning rod for popular fantasies and anxieties about childhood.\textsuperscript{42} In the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, too, the tomboyish Scout Finch in Harper Lee's \textit{To Kill a Mockingbird} (1960) stands alone as perhaps the most recognizable child character in American literature. This claim is articulated at length by Mary McDonagh Murphy's collection of interviews, \textit{Scout, Atticus, and Boo: A Celebration of Fifty Years of To Kill a Mockingbird} (2010), in which entertainer Oprah Winfrey calls the text "our national novel," and author Lee Smith claims that Scout, "who is funny and curious and passionate as a tomboy […] has done more for Southern womanhood than any character in literature. She's turned girls into the kind of women we want," though Smith's idea of "the kind of women we want" remains unclear.\textsuperscript{43}

While writers, scholars, and cultural icons have acknowledged the importance of these child characters in American literature, southern literary critics have begun to emphasize the central role of children in depicting and questioning the South's societal norms and gender relations. This study, for example, works to elaborate on Patricia Yaeger's notion that the child in southern fiction can serve as a "tragic center for exploring the effects of the political in everyday life." In her essay "Beyond the Hummingbird: Southern Women Writers and the Southern Gargantua," Yaeger argues that

Children play a double role in southern women's writing. Marginal to mainstream culture, but also caught up in its process of indoctrination, the child may question her society's values and provide a narrative space for challenging its beliefs […] As the focus of adult rules and regulations, the child is a victim and seismologist who registers the the


\textsuperscript{43} Mary McDonagh Murphy, \textit{Scout, Atticus, and Boo: A Celebration of Fifty Years of To Kill a Mockingbird} (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) 163, 145.
cost of a classist and sexist ethic; she becomes a vivid, painful pressure point, a site of
strain and unrest within an unjust social system.\textsuperscript{44}

Yaeger's argument is further supported by critic Suzanne Jones, who similarly contends in \textit{Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties} (2004) that "the child's perspective allows a writer to question a society's shortcomings from a vantage point of someone incompletely trained in a society's assumptions and customs."\textsuperscript{45} Thus, I argue that the child – as a subject "incompletely trained" – dramatizes what Leo Bersani describes as "the sickness of uncompleted narratives," the failure of the Freudian developmental narrative to control "the inherently antinarrative psychoanalytic notion of [childhood] sexuality."\textsuperscript{46} It is precisely in "incompletion" that the queer child disrupts and destabilizes the dominant heteronarrative, and that adolescence serves as a site invested with queer potential.

By adopting the queer child as my primary conceptual lens, my study contributes to the critical canon of both queer theory and childhood studies, two fields of inquiry that have increasingly begun to converge in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century. This convergence is particularly evident in Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley's collection of essays, \textit{Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children} (2004), in which theorists such as Leo Bersani, James Kincaid, Judith Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick all contribute towards an epistemology of the "queer child" in literary, cultural, psychological, and sociopolitical discourse. "In this collection, as in much contemporary criticism," as Bruhm and Hurley note in their introduction,

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
the term *queer* is intended to be spacious. The authors (ourselves included) use the term *queer* in its more traditional sense, to indicate a deviation from the "normal." In this sense, the queer child is, generally, both defined by and outside what is "normal." [...] In this collection, the figure of the queer child is that which doesn't quite conform to the wished-for way that children are supposed to be in terms of gender and sexual roles. [...] These essays look to the dominant heteronarrative to see how normalizing language itself both produces and resists queer stories of childhood sexual desire.47

While my study appropriates Bruhm and Hurley's concept of the queer child, the child who resists the confines of traditional "sex and gender roles," I also argue for a more expansive definition of what constitutes *queer* subjectivity. In doing so, I work to foreground alternative markers of difference – markers such as race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and language – that are often uncritically subsumed into the framework of sexual difference. With regards to race, as Ian Barnard argues, "work done under the auspices of 'queer' has tended to deploy mono-faceted categorizations that erase the localized presence of queers of color, establish an imperialistic teleology for queer politics, and white wash Queer Theory."48 This dissertation therefore asks how "Queer Theory" can address this conceptual blind spot by interrogating the role that queer sexualities play in understandings of race in southern culture – and vice versa – and by exploring the productive potential of *queer* to signify race and ethnicity as much as it signifies gender and sexuality.


My other purpose is deploying "queerness" as a conceptual lens lies in its ability to acknowledge desires and relationships that, while deviating from conventional heteronorms, are not necessarily characterized by sexuality. Indeed, as each of the following chapters demonstrate, such relationships play a central role in the development of the queer child, whether it be the dynamic friendship between the tomboy and the sissy, or the intergenerational influence of an adult mentor. By forging a queer continuum of support, these queer children illustrate Michel Foucault's contention in "Friendship as a Way of Life" that affective relationships between individuals pose more of a disruption to normative society than homo- or heterosexual acts. According to Foucault,

To imagine a sexual action that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there's the problem. The institution is caught in a contradiction; affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up. […] Institutional codes can't validate these relations with multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements and changing forms. These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit.49

In particular, as the fiction of McCullers, Lee, and Capote demonstrate in Chapters 1 and 2 of my study, it is the relationship between the masculine tomboy and the effeminate sissy that constitute the most empowering childhood relationships in southern fiction. This is not to say that the tomboy/sissy dyad is unique to the Southern Renaissance, for, as Michelle Ann Abate notes in Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History (2004), "more often than not, a tomboy's closest friend is a 'sissy' boy" in American literature, and "Countless tomboy narratives […]

intended for both child and adult audiences – contain this dyad."\textsuperscript{50} Two of Abate's main examples, however – Scout and Dill in \textit{To Kill a Mockingbird} (1961) and Frankie and John Henry in \textit{The Member of the Wedding} (1946) – demonstrate how the South has produced perhaps the most enduring and memorable tomboy/sissy partnerships in American literature. It is the queer dynamic between these children that enables them to parody, denaturalize, and thereby subvert the heteronormative conventions of southern society.

In addition to the conceptual paradigm of "queer friendship," this study foregrounds another relationship that is equally critical to the development of the queer child; that is, her intergenerational affection for a queer adult mentor. More often than not, this "queer tutelage," as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes it, is provided by a figure outside the nuclear family, like the effeminate Cousin Randolph in Truman Capote's \textit{Other Voices, Other Rooms} (1948), or the matronly Aunt Dolly and Verena in \textit{The Grass Harp} (1951). These queer cousins, uncles, aunts, and other extended relations – including those not linked by blood or marriage – speak to the power of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "Queer Avunculate." As she elaborates in her essay "Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in \textit{The Importance of Being Earnest}," the avunculate functions to project into the future a vision of "family" elastic enough to do justice to the depth and sometimes durability of nonmarital and/or nonprocreative bonds, same-sex bonds, nondyadic bonds, bonds not defined by genitality, "step" bonds, adult sibling bonds, nonbiological bonds across generations, etc. At the same time, [projecting this] avuncular angle onto the family of the \textit{present} can show how this heterosexist structure is

always already awash with homosexual energies and potentials.51

While I instead characterize these "energies and potentials" as queer rather than homosexual, I am also interested in considering the avunculate in conjunction with its feminine counterpart, the "materteral" influence of aunts, spinsters, mammies, and maternal surrogates that guide their young charges on the road to adulthood.52 Whether avuncular or materteral, these intergenerational relationships, while they may contain erotic undercurrents, are never overtly sexual in nature. Thus, they cannot be adequately articulated through the logic of gay/lesbian identity politics, nor through Gary Richard's conception of "sexual otherness."53

While this dissertation contributes to a host of queer theoretical discourses that have emerged in the 21st Century, the figure of the "queer child" has itself remained a locus of fear and fascination in American culture, a subject where critics may be hesitant to tread. As Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley observe, "There is currently a dominant narrative about children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions" (ix). At the same time, as James R. Kincaid argues in his study of modern childhood, Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting (1998), the very "innocence" of the child is always saturated with latent eroticism:

as time went on, the idea of innocence and the idea of "the child" became dominated by sexuality – negative sexuality, of course, but sexuality all the same. Innocence was filed down to mean little more than virginity coupled with ignorance; […] The irony is not


52 For a recent study on the queer function of the avunculate in childhood development, see Rasmus R. Simonsen, "Dark Avunculate: Shame, Animality, and Queer Development in Oscar Wilde's 'The Star-Child'," Children's Literature 42 (2014): 20-41.

53 See Richards, Lovers & Beloveds 2.
hard to miss: defining something entirely as a negation brings irresistibly before us that which we're trying to banish.\(^54\)

The modern child is therefore a paradoxical figure of "erotic innocence," and, as Kincaid quips, "Innocence is a lot like the air in your tires: there's not a lot you can do with it but lose it" (53). From the late-19\(^{th}\) Century onwards, in other words, the eroticization of children in our culture proceeds by way of their emphatic de-eroticization, a cultural doublespeak that allows society to imagine and perpetuate the victimization of children, while emphasizing the need for new modes of protection and discipline. Innocence, as theorized by Kincaid, is a rhetorical category that constructs childhood by voiding it of content:

The new thing, the modern child, was deployed as a political and philosophical agent, a weapon to assault what had been taken as virtues: adulthood, sophistication, rational moderation, judicious adjustment to the ways of the world. The child was used to deny these virtues, to eliminate and substitute in their place a set of inversions: innocence, purity, emptiness. Childhood, to a large extent, came to be in our culture a coordinated set of have nots, of negation: the child was the one who did not have. (15)

According to Kincaid, the innocent child "becomes an empty signifier, or rather, and infinitely plural one," for the child is perceived as a victim, one incapable of interpreting its own story. Consequently, as Lee Edelman contends in his 1998 essay "The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," the child has emerged as a defining symbol of adult nostalgia and utopianism. Projecting the child into futurity, Edelman reads this figure as the "anti-queer," the ubiquitous icon of heteronormative family values at the turn of the century.

---

In the 21st Century, he darkly concludes, "The cult of the child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls."  

By projecting the child into a heteronormative future, however, Edelman appears to accept the teleology of the child, and narrative itself, as heterosexually determined. Still, it is worth noting that the narrative pressure on producing the proper end of the story – the heteronormative adult – allows for a liminal period of development prior to the moment of ascention into adulthood. To quote Bruhm and Hurley, "Childhood itself is afforded a modicum of queerness when the people worry more about how the child turns out than about how the child exists as a child" (xiv). Thus, in contradistinction to Edelman, I argue that the utopian projection of the child into the future actually opens up a space for childhood queerness, so long as these queer tendencies can be rationalized as child's play, and ultimately tamed in adolescence. In this sense, the child is not the anti-queer at all, for childhood is itself a space of queer potential.

My study is focused not so much on childhood, however, as it is on the queer child at the threshold of adulthood. Indeed, with the exception of the Italian girl who follows Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the characters I consider are almost without exception struggling through their adolescence, a critical period of development in which the child is expected to abandon its queer tendencies and transition into adult society. As Lydia Kokkola explains in *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants* (2013), the increased separation between adults and children at the turn of the 20th Century "was

---

partly made possible by the emergence of a buffer zone of adolescence; a period when one is not a child, but is not an adult either.\textsuperscript{56}

The concept of adolescence is itself a relatively recent phenomenon. In the age of sexology, when, as Michel Foucault describes in \textit{The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction} (1978), "all around the child, indefinite lines of penetration were disposed," the adolescent emerged as a trope for turn of the century anxieties about the maintenance of gender and class hierarchy in a changing cultural landscape.\textsuperscript{57} The term itself was popularized by psychologist G. Stanley Hall – dubbed "the father of adolescence" – whose landmark study, \textit{Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education} (1904) defined adolescence as a period of \textit{sturm und drang}, a time of "storm and stress" that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood.\textsuperscript{58}

While much of Hall's work has been discredited – particularly his notion that childhood development mirrors the evolution of the human race, from "savage" childhood to "civilized" adulthood – his theories were embraced at the time by medical and scientific professionals, as well as educators and a growing population of youth workers in the early-20\textsuperscript{th} Century.\textsuperscript{59} Adolescence was, after all, a period of \textit{sturm und drang} characterized by inner turmoil, emotional upheaval, sexual awkwardness, and vulnerability, all phenomena that demanded adult


intervention, supervision, and control. These professional discourses not only defined adolescent as a "buffer zone" between what Sigmund Freud considered the "polymorphous perversity" of childhood and the normative stability of adulthood in his _Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality_ (1905), they also consolidated the control of what Lydia Kokkola refers to as the "adultrarchy" (37). Maria Nikolajeva has called this power imbalance a form of "aetonormativity," the subjugation of children through the institutional authority of the parent, the teacher, and other adult professionals.

In the following chapters, however, I focus instead on adolescence as an interstitial space, a rupture in the fabric of the dominant heteronarrative that has defined childhood development. The queer adolescent is still a "child" insofar as she continues to misbehave, to defy the normative codes of southern society, but she is also a child-in-transition. It is at this point that the child's tomboyhood, effeminacy, and other forms of deviance can no longer be dismissed as mere child's play. No longer protected under a blanket of innocence, these girls and boys are expected to metamorphose into proper southern belles and gentlemen, a _telos_ the child rejects in favor of remaining in a queer space of "becoming." As Sarah Gleeson-White observes in _Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers_ (2003), for example, "the female adolescent is even more 'grotesque' than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood and [...] between

60 Freud's seemingly counterintuitive notion that "normal" sexual development entails a necessary deviance that precedes normality participates in what Jonathan Dollimore has called the "paradoxical perverse." According to Dollimore, Freud's sexual theory subverts the metaphysics of "essence, nature, telos, and universal," for it "retain[s] and intensif[ies] the major paradox [that] [...] the shattering effect of the perversions arises from the fact that it is integral to just those things that it threatens." See Jonathan Dollimore, _Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault_ (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 171, 172, 183.

femininity and masculinity. To exist on the threshold obtains within it grotesque possibilities of becoming."

In my thesis, I extend this idea of "grotesque" adolescence – which draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) as an overflowing and excessive body in "flagrant contradiction" to the classic body, "as a strictly completed and finished product" – to include the sissy as well as the tomboy. Rather than regressing back to the safe haven of childhood, or stagnating in a state of arrested development, I argue that these queer children instead script their own counternarratives of queer desire, community, and selfhood. In so doing, these adolescents are able to cross the lavender threshold to queer adulthood.

The history of childhood and adolescence demonstrates that neither are "natural" categories, but rather exist as cultural constructs subject to social and historical variation. However, there are important biological differences between adults and children, not all of which can be dismissed outright. While puberty has historically been associated with the onset of adolescent development, for example, there have recently been studies by Michelle Roberts and Chai Woodham arguing that the process can begin in children as young as seven. For this reason, I have included prepubescent characters such as Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*;


characters who have not yet reached their teens, yet still demonstrated the growing pains traditionally associated with adolescence. As my study considers adolescence within the context of the American South, I locate the "end of adolescence" somewhere between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. It was around these ages that, as Kathryn Lee Seidel and Anne Firor Scott observe, that girls were expected to marry a suitable beau, and boys were to assume their roles as southern gentlemen.66

Part 4 – Tomboys & Sissies: An Itinerary

Like the queer narratives under consideration, this thesis is itself marked by its distinctly nonlinear trajectory. In the words of scholar James Clifford, an itinerary can offer a "way into" the various chapters of a book by presenting them not as a series of tightly chained ideas, but rather as a more dispersed "history of locations and a location of histories." In this vein, each chapters in my dissertation speaks to against each other, and work to offer a multitude of voices rather than a cohesive account of queer childhood in southern literature.

To place these chapters in conversation with one another, I have divided this study into two parts. In Part I, which includes Chapters 1 and 2, I examine the literary and cultural history of childhood in the American South, and focus on two ubiquitous child characters in the southern canon: the masculine tomboy and her effeminate "sissy" companion. In particular, I consider the implications of these deviant children in the fiction of Carson McCullers, Harper Lee, and Truman Capote, and the ways in which these characters enact strategies of queer resistance in southern society.

66 See Seidel 3; Scott 7.

In Part II, which includes Chapters 3 and 4, I address the racial bias implicit in fictions by these admittedly white, middle-class authors, as well as their efforts – often with mixed success – to represent racial and ethnic Otherness in an increasingly global 20th Century South. In fiction by such authors as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams, I consider how the immigrant child served as a locus of fear and fascination in southern culture, and how these "interstitial" subjects worked to challenge, destabilize, and ultimately redefine southern identity from the 1880s to the 1960s and beyond.68

While these chapters all focus on different permutations of literary childhood in Southern Renaissance fiction, they are all united by similar thematic concerns. First, by focusing primarily on sissies and tomboys, each of these chapters considers either female masculinity of male effeminacy as a transgressive code of conduct in heteronormative society. As adolescents, too, each of the characters I consider can be said to have reached a liminal state of development between childhood and adulthood, and thus may serve as potential sites of queer revisioning or cultural reinscription. Finally, each of the following chapters works to examine sex, gender, and race not as independent categories of inquiry, but rather as mutually constitutive of one another, and always interwoven into the fabric of southern culture.

Chapter 1 exemplifies the "non-linear trajectory" of my study by comparing the tomboy figures in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961) and Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), both of which were written in different time periods and set in markedly different locations. Despite their cultural differences – with McCullers's novel set in Georgia during World War II, while Lee's story is based in Alabama during the Cold War era – the tomboy protagonists in these texts both share a remarkable amount in common. For instance, as

68 While he is generally not considered within the Southern Renaissance canon, I also consider the fiction of Mark Twain. See Chapter 4.
Michelle Anne Abate notes, McCullers's twelve-year old Frankie Addams and Lee's eight-year old Scout Finch have endured as two of the most popular tomboys in American literary history (xvii). While both girls embody such positive qualities as strength, ambition, independence, and assertiveness – qualities that, while condoned in childhood, are no longer tolerated in adolescence – they both struggle against the prejudices of small-town southern society, and face mounting pressures to abandon their tomboyish ways and conform to the rigid codes of southern womanhood.

In both cases, I argue that the success or failure of these tomboys depends largely on the influence of the queer mentor, an adult role model who has learned, through experience, to carve a niche for herself within the very framework of heteronormative society. While Scout Finch learns strategies of "lesbian" resistance and community from her spinster neighbor, Scout's close friendship with her black mammy demonstrate how, in Abate's words, "the ambiguity of the tomboy's gender mirrors the ambiguity of her purported caucasian identity" (xxiv). In both cases, this "queer tutelage" empowers the tomboy, and enables her to cross the threshold into queer adulthood, even as they appear – at least on the surface – to have assumed their proper roles as southern belles. While my analysis of *The Member of the Wedding* contributes to the existing scholarship on McCullers's tomboys, which includes such critics as Louise Westling and Sarah Gleeson-White, my queer reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* significantly offers the first critical appraisal of the tomboy as well as the spinster in Lee's *magnum opus*.

While a great deal of queer and feminist scholarship has been published concerning the tomboy in American literature, however, there has been remarkably little written about her constant companion, the effeminate "sissy" boy," who serves as male counterpart. For example, while Michelle Anne Abate acknowledges "the tendency for tomboys to form close relationships
with effeminate male characters," and that "more often than not, a tomboy's closest friend is a 'sissy' boy rather than another tough girl," she is quick to dismiss him: "By the close of the novel, the previously sissy boy has been transformed by his tomboy friend into a strong and even powerful man" (xvii, xviii). By associating effeminacy with weakness and masculinity with strength, however, Abate and other critics unwittingly participate in the further marginalization of effeminate males in American culture, a problematic trend that continues to persist in queer, gay, and feminist studies. In her essay "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that "the gay movement has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys," a fact evident in the "marginal or stigmatized position to which even adult men who are effeminate have often been relegated in the movement."69 As the first study of boyhood effeminacy in southern literature, I work to address what has become, in Sedgwick's words, "the haunting abject of gay thought itself," and works to revaluate "sissyhood" as a code of conduct invested with a great deal of queer potential. Thus, by opening up new avenues of inquiry into effeminate subjecthood, my analysis offers a corrective to the pathologizing discourse that has dominated queer literary and cultural theory.

Chapter 2 addresses important issues concerning "male femininities" and "effeminophobia" by foregrounding the role of the empowered sissy protagonists in Truman Capote's Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948) and The Grass Harp (1951). In Other Voices, Other Rooms, for example, sixteen-year old Joel Knox is neither dominated nor "masculinized" by Idabel, his tomboy companion. Instead, from the perspective of the sissy, the negative aspects of

tomboyhood – anger, frustration, violence, and aggression – are cast in stark relief. By counterbalancing her masculine energies, the sissy serves as a positive influence over the tomboy, for it is he who introduces her to the imaginative power and inner strength of the mind.

Joel's most important relationship is with his cross-dressing Cousin Randolph, just as sixteen-year old Collin Fenwick is intimately attached to his two aunts, the masculine Verena and eccentric Dolly Pardo in The Grass Harp. In both Joel and Collin's case, I argue that Capote recognizes the power of the avunculate, a form of mentorship which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in her essay "Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in The Importance of Being Earnest." By finding guidance outside the confines of the Oedipal family triangle, Collin and Joel appear to anticipate the strategy suggested by Sedgwick: "Forget the Name of the Father, think about your uncles and your aunts," and, in Joel's case, your cousins as well ("Avunculate" 59). As Capote's fiction demonstrates, the presence of the avunculate exponentially increases the forms of desire and identification available to the child.

While the authors in Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the ability of the tomboy and the sissy to subvert normative codes of gender and sexuality, however, these writers rarely address issues of race in southern society. Writing from positions of privilege, they often draw from traditional stereotypes to depict racial Otherness in their fiction – consider Scout's submissive mammy in To Kill a Mockingbird, for example, or the exotic shaman "Little Sunshine" in Other Voices, Other Rooms – "colored folk" who exist to support a white protagonist. For this reason, Part II works to recognize and explore the "hidden history" of what Leslie Bow refers to in Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South (2010) as the "partly-colored" populations of the American South: "those individuals and communities who came to represent a supposed third caste within a caste system predicated on the distinction between black and
white.” Identifying as neither black nor white, these peoples existed at the interstices of Jim Crow society, and thus represent Mae Ngai's conception of the "impossible subject": "a person who cannot be, and a problem that cannot be solved.”

As global migration to the American South increased over the course of the century, a number of ethnic and racial communities not only survived, but carved a niche for themselves in the region's socioeconomic landscape. For the purposes of my study, I focus primarily on two specific immigrant groups – Asian Americans and Italian Americans – whose cultural impact on the 20th Century South has only begun to receive the critical attention it merits. Not only did both these communities radically redefine the South's cultural and regional identity, but, as I argue in Chapters 3 and 4, it is often the Asian or the Italian child at the margins of southern literature that unveils the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status in segregated society.

In Chapter 3, I examine the role of the Asian sissy in both William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941). After considering the rich history of Asian Americans in the South since the turn of the 20th Century, and how these migrants posed a major challenge to the logic of Jim Crow society, I examine how these subjects were ultimately disciplined through the process of "racial castration," a tactic which, as David L. Eng argues in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001), was deployed throughout America over the course of the 20th Century. Institutional efforts to

---


derogate Asian American men as "feminine" worked to cast the migrant as the abject, foreign Other. By describing the process of castration as an example of "reverse fetishism," an inverted model of Freud's theory of childhood development, Eng argues that the effeminate Asian can be read as a castrated boy – a psychically neutered "sissy" – in the American cultural imaginary (151).

An example of this symbolically castrated subject is identified in Heidi Lee Kim's article, "The Foreigner in Yoknapatawpha: Rethinking Race in Faulkner's 'Global South," which has remained the only study of Asian Americans in Southern Renaissance literature to date.73 As a man of indeterminate origin, the character Joe Christmas in Faulkner's Light in August experiences racial castration as an emasculating process; a process as traumatizing as it is disempowering. According to Kim, "Light in August provides a frightening fictional portrait of what might happen to a man caught between black and white," a situation that was all too real for Asian Americans in the South (207). While I agree with Kim's analysis, for the most part, I argue that it is during Joe's childhood years – a period of development towards which Faulkner devotes several chapters – that the boy is conditioned to accept his status, or lack thereof, as an "impossible subject." Ultimately, it is his refusal to accept his castrated status, and his violent search for identity and validation, that leads to his literal castration and death.

In contrast to Faulkner's pathological description of the racially castrated subject, a depiction motivated by his own prejudices as a member of the white male elite, I argue that it is instead a female author who offers the first positive depiction of the castrated sissy in Southern Renaissance literature. It is through the character Anacleto, the seventeen-year old Filipino

---

houseboy in McCullers’s *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, that the author identifies what transgender critic Joon Oluchi Lee calls "The Joy of the Castrated Boy," the strategy of embracing one's castrated status as a mode of empowerment, rather than bearing it as a mark of oppression. In other words, the absence of the phallic signifier does not necessarily constitute a loss. Instead, something is gained through the process of castration: the Rabelaisian "grotesque" body, and an identity that confounds the either/or logic of patriarchal Jim Crow society. Anacleto exists as a queer subject at the interstices between black and white, masculine and feminine, childhood and adulthood, and thus confounds any attempt to place him within the discourse of identity politics. Indeed, as a supposedly minor character – a character who has until now been completely neglected by critics – Anacleto plays a deceptively critical role in the text, for it is he who observes the "grotesque" reflections in the golden eye, and his disappearance that serves as catalyst for the "queer revelation" of the novel's protagonist.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the castrated boy as a queer "sissy" figure, Chapter 4 returns to the figure of the tomboy – specifically, the Italian tomboy – in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* (1951). Like the Mississippi Chinese, who first arrived in the 1880s, Italian immigrants would quickly emerge as one of the region's largest and most rapidly expanding ethnic communities at the turn of the century. Before addressing the figure of the child, I briefly examine the first representations of the Italian migrant in southern fiction – Luigi and Angelo Capello in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894) – to illustrate how these "partly-colored" subjects were often perceived as a threat to the white male elite in southern society.

---

The southern nativist sentiments expressed in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are explored with greater depth and complexity in Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury*, through Quentin Compson's ambivalent relationship with a nameless Italian tomboy. As the descendant of a Confederate General and the antebellum aristocracy, the adolescent Quentin serves as the inheritor of southern tradition. When he encounters a little Italian girl, however, with rugged, dirty face and dark features, his established perspectives on race, gender, and sexuality are gradually forced into disorientation. The girl never speaks, yet Quentin finds himself increasingly unsettled as she follows him silently through the streets. He is not only unable to place her on either side of the racial binary, but her "dark," "dirty" appearance mark her as a surrogate for Caddy, Quentin's beloved, but headstrong sister, and evokes within him feelings incestuous desire, sexual guilt, and mourning over the loss of female innocence. Thus, without even a word, the Italian tomboy exposes the neuroses and dysfunctionality at the heart of southern history. It is Quentin's inability to reconcile his traditional understanding of the South's identity with the presence of these "impossible subjects" that leads to his tragic and untimely demise.

While Faulkner's own dismay is reflected in Quentin's prophetic fear that the South will become "The land of the kike and home of the wop," however, the proliferation and economic success of Italian Americans – along with other migrant communities – would gradually shift the popular consensus in their favor. By midcentury, Italian Americans had already substantially contributed to the globalization of the South, as international importers and distributors seafood, produce, and other forms of merchandise. One of these communities along the Mississippi Gulf Coast is the subject of Tennessee Williams's play, *The Rose Tattoo*, the first and only work of the Southern Renaissance to focus exclusively on the lives of Italian Americans.
The difference between Faulkner's and Williams's depictions of southern migrants, I argue, lies in their contrasting representations of the Italian tomboy. While the nameless Italian girl in *The Sound and the Fury* is described as an impure figure, a spectre who threatens to contaminate Quentin's mythic idea of the South, the fifteen-year old Rosa Delle Rose in *The Rose Tattoo* is instead depicted as an empowered adolescent, who positively affects the community around her. Rosa is a tomboy who has inherited the emotional independence, enterprising spirit, and physical strength of her mother, the masculine Serafina.

Unlike Quentin – or her own mother for that matter – Rosa's identity is not rooted in the fantasy of an idealized past. Instead, as Jacob H. Adler observes, her cultural "environment has made Rosa not Sicilian, not Southern, but American." Still, even as Rosa rejects the conventional norms of Sicilian and southern society, her independence does not alienate her from her family or her ethnic community. In fact, I argue that her integration into American society by the play's conclusion renders the process of assimilation incomplete, and thus opens a space to negotiate her identity as a queer "transnational" subject.

My conclusion attempts to locate the "close" of the Southern Renaissance somewhere in the mid- to late-1960s, when the civil rights movement and the process of globalization led to the dissolution of the South's distinct regional identity in the national imaginary. By considering how the the "partly-colored" child contributed towards this paradigm shift as a "transnational" subject, I argue that Part II of my project contributes to Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson's call in 2001 for a "new southern studies" – a call echoed in Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn's *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004) – one that resurrects a "civilly disappeared history, the history of indigenous, black, Latino, and Asian laborers and their

---

families” among other marginalized racial and ethnic minorities (236). In addition, my study participates in queer theory's "transnational turn" in the 21st Century, a movement influenced by the work of such critics as Karin Aguilar-San Juan, Jose Esteban Munoz, Gayatri Gopinath, and Martin F. Manalansan IV. These and other scholars have worked to construct the genealogy of what Martin F. Manalansan IV calls the "new queer studies" in *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (2003), with "its investment in a progressive understanding of globalization and transnationalism.”

---


Part I
Chapter 1 – Spinsters and Mammies: Queer Mentorship and the Tomboy in Harper Lee's
*To Kill a Mockingbird* and Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*

Among the authors of the Southern Renaissance, there was arguably no female author who repudiated the model of the southern belle quite as publicly and controversially as Carson McCullers. In her personal life, as her biographers Virginia Spencer Carr and Josyane Savigneau have documented, McCullers preferred to spend her time tramping through the woods, horse riding, and tree climbing. As she once boasted, "I was the best roller-skater for all the blocks around […] I was always coming home with scabbed knees or hurt arms." The author's tomboyish behavior was matched by her equally tomboyish appearance, as she refused to conform to to feminine conventions of dress. She always cut her hair short, as Carr notes, and "wore dirty tennis shoes or brown Girl Scout Oxfords when the other girls were wearing hose hose and shoes with dainty heels." Much like the adolescent tomboys in her fiction, she would constantly challenge gender and sexual norms in southern society.

McCullers's fiercely independent and passionate nature, however, also contributed to her own deep-rooted feelings of depression and inadequacy, which were further aggravated by chronic health issues that plagued her throughout her life. According to Virginia Spencer Carr, Carson McCullers was famously competitive with such southern contemporaries as Truman Capote, Harper Lee, and Flannery O'Connor, all of whom she periodically accused on imitating her work. When a friend asked her opinion on Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), for example, McCullers replied, "Well honey, one thing we know is that she's been poaching on my literary


preserves” (*Lonely Hunter* 433). While the truth of this statement can be neither affirmed nor disproven, I argue that the semi-autobiographical content of *To Kill a Mockingbird* appears to cast at least some doubt on McCullers's accusations of "poaching." As Lee's biographer Charles J. Shields observes in *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (2006), there are a number of people and events from the author's childhood that are represented in the fictional world of Maycomb County.

The purpose of this chapter, however, is not the evaluate the extent to which Lee may or may not have borrowed from McCullers's fiction. Instead, it considers the one character that was almost certainly at the heart of McCullers's complaint. Indeed, it is through the adolescent perspective of Scout Finch, the tomboy protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that Lee explores issues of race, gender, sexuality, and childhood in the small-town South. When this text is read in conjunction with an earlier novel by McCullers, however, the similarities between Scout and the tomboyish Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) are almost uncanny.

While the eight-year old Scout is still a few years younger than twelve-year old Frankie, they are both young adolescent girls struggling at the threshold of adulthood. Both are middle-class white children under the care of their black "mammies," and both spend much of their time exploring the dark corners and alleys of their rural towns in the Deep South. Most importantly, Frankie and Scout are both gender-transitive characters, whose appearance, behavior, and

---


relationships work to defy the traditional codes of southern womanhood. With their male counterparts – the effeminate John Henry and Dill Harris, respectively – these tomboys explore childhood as a space of queer potential, as they refuse to conform to the demands of heteronormative adulthood.

Despite their similarities, there are also important differences between Lee's and McCullers's representations of southern tomboyhood. While both Frankie and Scout are raised under similar conditions, for example, their modes of resistance and personal values are largely influenced by the adult role models in their lives. These adults serve as the tomboy's "queer mentors," and use their wisdom and experience to guide these child characters on the perilous journey through adolescence. My analysis argues that these nonnormative mentors introduce new strategies of selfhood, what Michel Foucault describes as "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being," so as to transform themselves and achieve self-affirmation outside the restrictive confines of heteronormative society.\footnote{Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock P, 1988) 18.} In other words, the queer child is able to transition to a new state of queer adulthood, without having to sacrifice her empowering tomboy tendencies.

Before subjecting The Member of the Wedding and To Kill a Mockingbird to close critical scrutiny, the first section of this chapter works to carefully define the conceptual parameters and historical context of my analysis. In addition to establishing the importance to the figure of the tomboy in American cultural and literary history, I consider how McCullers's tomboy protagonist is herself a product of World War II era society, while Scout instead reflects the paranoid values of Cold War America. Parts 2 and 3 work to foreground the two oft-overlooked "queer mentors"
operating in these texts, and examines their formative influence over the tomboy’s development. Whereas Part 2 focuses on the role of Miss Maudie, the spinster in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as a lesbian figure of resistance, Part 3 considers how Frankie’s mammy Berenice defies dominant racial stereotypes, and thus works to expose race, gender, and sexuality as cultural fictions. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the queer mentor is address in Part 4, where I consider whether adolescence has been harnessed as a space of queer potential, or, conversely, whether if merely functions as a site of cultural reinscription, where difference is made to conform to prevailing social norms. In either case, I argue that the tomboy’s gender-transitive identity works to unveil the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status in southern society.

---

**Part 1 – Taming the Tomboy**

While this chapter focuses on Frankie and Scout, these characters were neither the first nor the only representations of tomboyhood in Southern Renaissance literature. In a short story written in the 1920s but unpublished in her lifetime, for example, Katherine Anne Porter narrates the life of a rebellious, masochistic young woman, who has dedicated her life to art.85 The title character of "The Princess" takes pride in her independence, but also laments the social isolation and childlessness it brings her.86 In *Strange Fruit* (1944), a novel published just two years prior to *The Member of the Wedding*, Lillian Smith explores the experiences of a black tomboy in the Jim Crow South through the character of Nonnie Anderson, an intelligent and educated young


86 For more on the subject of the tomboy in Katherine Anne Porter’s fiction, see Ellen Matlok-Ziemann, *Tomboys, Belles, and Other Ladies: The Female Body-Subject in Selected Works by Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers* (diss. Uppsala University, 2005).
woman who resists the pressures of marriage and motherhood. Indeed, these and other such literary tomboys – the rebellious Virgie Rainey in Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* (1949), for instance, or the belligerent Mary Grace in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Revelation" – established a ubiquitous presence within the southern canon.

It is also true, however, that the popularity of the tomboy extends far beyond the borders of the American South. According to Michelle Anne Abate in *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (2008), "As tomboys emerged in American literature during the nineteenth century, they also became a fixture in its literature" (ix). The Oxford English Dictionary first dates the term "tomboy" to 1592, when it was used to signify a "bold or immodest woman," "a girl who behaves like a spirited or boisterous boy; a wild romping girl; a hoyden." It was not until the late-19th Century that "tomboyhood" came to refer to a code of conduct emphasizing the importance of exercise, proper hygiene, and a healthy diet. Emerging as a product of concerns over the deplorable state of health among upper- and middle-class white women, "tomboyism" was promoted as a lifestyle alternative. From that point forward, as Abate's study of the figure chronicles in rich detail, tomboyism would remain a popular phenomenon in the American cultural imaginary.

---


90 See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898; reprint, Berkeley: University of California P, 1998) 56. This code of conducted was also promoted in literature featuring tomboy protagonists, such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872).
While its popularity has endured, the definition of "tomboyhood" as a code of conduct as a mode of being can vary widely. As Lynne Yamaguchi and Karen Barber write in their introduction to *Tomboys!: Tales of Dyke Derring-Do* (1995), the term "tomboy" may connote "a virtually uniform picture of a girls who – by whatever standards society has dictated – acts like a boy," but how exactly one defines a "transgression into boy's territory" is contingent upon a complex constellation of factors. It is therefore no coincidence that Frankie's "freakish" tomboyhood in *The Member of the Wedding* differs radically from Scout's more subdued tomboy identity in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as both characters are themselves emblematic of very different historical eras. Indeed, it is precisely the fluidity inherent in this code of conduct that has caused tomboyism to have rich and multivalent history.

In the case of Carson McCullers, both critics and biographers agree that her construction of Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* was not only semi-autobiographical in nature, but also heavily influenced by historical circumstances. Written over a five-year period that overlapped exactly with American involvement in the Second World War, the plot, setting, and characters of the novel are inextricably connected with the conflict abroad. It was during this time, as biographer Carr notes, that McCullers spent her leisure hours reading books on battle tactics, scanning newspapers for updates, and listening to radio programs covering the Western Front (84). Like the author herself, the novel's tomboy protagonist is personally affected by the war. Frankie's brother is a Corporal in the army, for example, and "She wanted to be a boy and

---


92 It was during this time that Carson McCullers published a moving personal essay about the hardships facing a wife with a husband overseas. See Carson McCullers, "Love's Not Time's Fool," *Mademoiselle* (1943): 95.
go to war as a marine. She thought about flying aeroplanes and winning gold medals for bravery” (*MW* 23).

For Frankie, as well as for other young women in 1940s America, the war years offered a tremendous opportunity for female advancement. According to historian William H. Chafe, the deployment of millions of men to military positions overseas caused a labor crisis that "led to the employment of women on a scale previously unforseen in U.S. history.”

Whereas the Depression era had insisted that a woman's place was as a mother and a homemaker, the war years asserted that she served best as a tomboyish worker in a number of traditionally male professions. As historian Karen Anderson notes, it was during this time that "Government, industry, the media, women's clubs, and other voluntary organizations joined in urging women to do their patriotic duty by taking a job." Indeed, with a bandana around her head, a fierce look in her eye, and a muscular arm punctuating her declaration that "We can do it," wartime icon Rosie the Riveter is perhaps the most enduring representation of the type of strength and fortitude that was asked of the nation's women.

However, while the transformation of women's gender roles benefited the war effort, the emergence of tomboyhood also came to be perceived as a threat to the dominant ethos. As Chafe observes, "the fact that women were adept at using acetylene torches as well as sewing machines called into question some of the more rigid distinctions that had been established between the type of labor performed by males and that by females" (24). Wartime rhetoric thus began to

---


emphasize that tomboyism was only a temporary condition of the war effort, to be abandoned when the men returned from the front. This code of conduct was necessary during a time of natural crisis, in other words, so long as it was not recognized as a permanent identity. As a result, as Abate notes, "nearly all the books and films released during this era emphasize prevailing beliefs in the situational nature of tomboyism and the accompanying performance of taming" (150). The World War II era tomboy thus served as a locus of both anxiety and attraction in American culture.

Given this historical context, and its profound effect on the author herself, I argue that it is through Frankie that Carson McCullers explores how the seemingly normal and common phenomenon of tomboyism came to be cast as abnormal or "freakish." Indeed, the tomboyish main character in The Member of the Wedding is described by the author as both unnatural and unusual. Echoing Leslie Fiedler's argument in Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self (1993) that "freaks" function as physical manifestations of our own psychological fears and desires, the adolescent Frankie "was afraid of all Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as thought to say: we know you" (MW 20). Her own crisis of identity, as the following passage demonstrates, also reflects the crisis facing a nation and a world at war:

She thought of the world, and it was fast and loose and turning, faster and looser and bigger than it had ever been before. The pictures of the War sprang out and clashed together in her mind […] The world was cracked by the loud battles and turning over a

---

thousand miles a minute. [...] She thought of the huge and turning world until her legs began to tremble and there was sweat on the palms of her hands. (MW 37).

In an era that offered new opportunities not only to women, but, as Allan Berube and Lillian Faderman have argued, to gays and lesbians as well, it seemed that traditional categories of gender and sexual identity had been destabilized, and were now "cracked" and "loose."97 This was similarly the case for African Americans, for it was during these years that blacks gained unprecedented access to employment and successfully lobbied for the desegregation of the military.98 In my analysis of The Member of the Wedding, therefore, I argue that Frankie functions as a symbol of the cultural anxieties that emerged during the flux and instability of the war years.

Written over a decade later, Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird was published in an era when attitudes towards race, gender, and sexuality had shifted significantly. Indeed, with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953), the scientific community appeared to have confirmed societal fears over the effects of wartime changes to traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. As Abate argues, "To a society that was already growing increasingly fearful of female gender iconoclasm, Kinsey's book was the spark that set off the powder keg" (166). In a comment reminiscent of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 observation that "a bold and tomboyish style"

---


was a sure adolescence symptom of adult sexual inversion,\textsuperscript{99} Dr. Harvey E. Kaye and his colleagues claimed in a 1967 paper to the Society of Medical Psychoanalysts in New York that one of the key indicators of adult lesbianism was "a tendency to see themselves as tomboys."\textsuperscript{100}

Thus, while tomboyism was valued as a code of conduct in the 1940s, it became increasingly pathologized and linked to homosexuality in the 1950s and 60s.

As a result of these scientific and medical discourses, the Cold War era ushered in a new culture of biopolitical surveillance. As historian Howard H. Chiang observes, "under the aegis of McCarthyism and its aftermath, any form of gender and sexual expression that did not fit the Cold War ideal of a heterosexual nuclear familial lifestyle were treated as domestic subversions that threatened the moral fiber and national security of mid-20\textsuperscript{th}-Century America."\textsuperscript{101} Rather than being eradicated from the American cultural consciousness, however, Abate notes that "the late 1950s and the decade of the 1960s actually witnessed the release of a considerable number of tomboy-themed novels and films" (167). While tomboyism was not obliterated by the Cold War emphasis on female domesticity, it was radically transformed by it. Representations of tomboys in mainstream film and literature during this period now focused on her more conservative traits.

When one considers, for example, Carolyn Keene's portrayal of Nancy Drew in the 1930s and 40s – a character depicted as being independent, confident, and courageous – to her revised image in the heavily edited 1960s reissues, the contrast between these two representations of


\textsuperscript{100} Harvey E. Kaye, et al., "Homosexuality in Women," \textit{Archives of General Psychiatry} 17 (1967) 633.

American tomboyhood are cast in stark relief. According to critic and author Jackie Vivelo, the revised editions present a protagonist who has been thoroughly "tamed": "They point to a Nancy Drew who has less independence, less assertiveness, less confidence."\(^{102}\) Nancy's relationships with her female peers, for instance, are edited to appear more professional than intimate, while her appearance and behavior have been conspicuously feminized.\(^{103}\)

The extensive alterations made to the Nancy Drew mystery series to "feminize" its masculine heroine were emblematic of the type of tomboyism presented in other novels of the era. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance, Scout may dress in overalls and enjoy participating in sports, but she also willingly dons a "pink Sunday dress, shoes, and a petticoat," and tells her aunt's missionary circle that she wishes to be "a lady" (*TM* 262, 263). While she shares many of the same traits as her counterpart in *The Member of the Wedding*, her resistance to gender and sexual conformity is characterized more by ambivalence than by agony. Whereas Frankie's first sexual experiences are notably traumatic, Scout allows her playmate Dill to kiss her, and even anticipates a future marriage. While Scout claims that "Ladies in bunches always filled me with vague apprehension and a desire to be elsewhere," and that she is "more at home in my father's world," she also appears resigned to her fate: "There was no doubt about it, I must soon enter this world, where on the surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water" (*TM* 262, 266). At certain moments, she even seems to admire the feminine graces of other ladies, as she watches her mammy Calpurnia in the kitchen and admits, "I began to think there was some skill involved in being a girl" (*TM* 132).

---


While Frankie differs in many respects from Scout, however, both girls are united by the same struggle. In spite of the liberatory potential and personal benefits of tomboyism, it is not often seen as a lifelong identity. As Sharon O'Brien notes, this code of conduct is most frequently cast as "a very common phase through which little girls would pass on their way to adulthood." Although the nation may condone, or even value strength, independence, and assertiveness in young girls, it does not generally esteem such qualities in adult women. As a result, as Abate observes, "within a few decades after the emergence of tomboyism, a new phenomenon was created, commonly dubbed 'tomboy taming'" (xix). Young girls were expected to abandon their tomboyish tendencies in adolescence, and thus assume their "proper" roles as wives and mothers. As both *The Member of the Wedding* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* demonstrate, those who resist often suffer severe consequences.

However, the process of "tomboy taming" is neither a universal nor an inevitable phenomenon. In fact, I argue that Frankie and Scout not only retain their tomboyish tendencies, but that these tendencies remain a defining quality of their adult subjectivities. This maturation to queer adulthood is facilitated by the tomboy's nonnormative adult mentors – women outside the nuclear family unit, and in these cases outside the extended family as well – who have carved a niche for themselves within the framework of heteronormative society. Unlike other deviant characters in these texts, who are forced to suffer as victims, these strong, masculine women have learned to operate within, and even exploit a system that has failed to transform them into docile wives and mothers. To quote Judith Butler, who links adolescent tomboyhood to adult

lesbianism, "There is always the dread possibility […] that the tomboy will not grow out of her butch stage and will never become a member of the wedding." 105

Part 2 – The Spinster and the Mockingbird

For over half a century, critics, biographers and filmmakers alike have portrayed Harper Lee as a literary enigma. She published only a single work in her lifetime, and yet that one novel has earned her a reputation of almost Faulknerian proportions. 106 Upon its publication, as Claudia Durst Johnson notes in To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries (1994), Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird received positive reviews in at least thirty national newspapers and magazines. 107 It would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize and be adapted a major motion picture in 1962. Charles Shields opens his biography on Lee with a reference to the Book-of-the-Month Club’s "Survey of Lifetime Reading Habits" in 1991, which found that To Kill a Mockingbird ranked second only to the Bible in terms of "making a difference in peoples lives" (Shields 1). Even now, in the 21st Century, it remains among the most popular texts in American literary history. In 2015, for instance, the release of a "lost" prequel, Go Set a Watchman, 108 would go on to generate a firestorm of controversy. 109 As a study of a young girl's coming of age in 1930s


Alabama, I argue that *To Kill a Mockingbird* provides an intimate, though often sentimental portrait of emerging identities, gender confusion, and childhood sexuality. These issues are explored primarily through the experiences of Lee's tomboyish protagonist, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch.

My queer reading of Scout – and indeed, of the novel itself – serves to challenge the existing critical consensus surrounding Lee's *magnum opus*. Almost without exception, Lee's initial reviewers praised her depiction of small-town life, as well as the conspicuous absence of gothic tropes in her work. In the *New York Times*, for example, Frank H. Lyell describes how "Miss Lee has not tried to satisfy the current lust for morbid, grotesque tales of southern depravity." Critic Eric J. Sundquist has also attributed the continuing popularity of the novel to its "admirable moral earnestness" and "comforting sentimentality." To him, as to its early reviewers, the book offers "a merciless string of moral lessons," which are spoon fed to the reader through "a model of conventional plot and character […] an episodic story of wit and charm."

This popular understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has perhaps led to its critical neglect, a neglect made all the more remarkably by the novel's widespread popularity.

---

109 Several critics have raised concerns over the release of the novel, and cited the author's declining health, her statements decades earlier that she would never release another work, and the death of her sister and caretaker, Alice, to question the validity of her consent. It would go on to rank among the bestselling novels of 2015. See Jonathan Mahler, "The Invisible Hand Behind Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*," *New York Times* 12 Jul. 2015.


According to Gary Richards, Lee's work has "typically [been] dismissed simply as a popular novel or as children's literature" (118). It is barely even acknowledged in *The History of Southern Literature*, which devotes only a single paragraph to the novel. More substantial discussions of the text remain few, with the notable exception of articles by Eric Sundquist and Claudia Johnson.113 Both these critics, however, approach the text through the Scottsboro Trial, Brown v. Board of Education, Rosa Parks, and the desegregation of the University of Alabama, and thus have kept the lens of analysis fixed on racial issues. Besides Smaranda Stefanovic'i's "Gender Roles and Feminism in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird,*" and Gregory Jay's more recent essay, "Queer Children and Representative Men: Harper Lee, Racial Liberalism, and the Dilemma of *To Kill a Mockingbird,*" the importance of gender, sexuality, and childhood in the novel has been left relatively unexamined.114

While I agree, as the case of Tom Robinson demonstrates, that Lee's work functions as a powerful indictment of racial prejudice, I argue that the novel also challenges traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality in southern society. Acts of gender transgression occur throughout the text, and manifest themselves in characters as diverse as Dill Harris, Scout Finch, Miss Maudie Atkinson, and even the patriarchal Atticus Finch. These transgressive performances, however, are constantly threatened by disciplinary figures, such as the matronly Aunt Alexandra, or by overt communal demands for gender conformity. In particular, my reading of the tomboy in the novel examines how Scout's adolescence functions as a liminal


space of potential, a transformative period, and how Scout Finch rejects – and sometimes capitulates – to the demands of heteronormative adulthood.

Scout is notably not the only gender-transitive child in fictional Maycomb County. In fact, of the central trio of young protagonists, only Jem Finch is conventionally gendered. His masculine behavior and appearance serve to underscore the effeminacy of Dill Harris, Scout's diminutive "sissy" companion. Both Scout and Jem are shocked when, after guessing Dill to be four-and-a-half years old based on his size, they discover that he is almost seven. Jem is particularly scornful of the boy's size and appearance, and tells Dill, "You look right puny for goin' on seven," and "Your name's longer'n you are. Bet it's a foot longer" (TM 7). Jem, on the other hand, believes that he lives up to his own full name, Jeremy Atticus Finch, while Dill's size and stature render him undeserving of the name Charles Baker Harris. Instead, Dill is forced into an appropriately truncated nickname.

In addition to his size, Dill's effeminacy is further underscored by his appearance and behavior. Instead of the overalls worn by most local boys, he instead dresses in "blue linen shorts that buttoned to his shirt" (TM 8). Unlike the football-obsessed Jem, Dill is characterized as a gentle, imaginative boy, who prefers acting over athletics. Scout describes him fondly as "a pocket Merlin, whose head teemed with eccentric plans, strange longings, and quaint fancies," "he preferred his own twilight world, a world where babies slept, waiting to be gathered like morning lilies (TM 9, 163). This is not to say, however, that Dill is an entirely passive character. His subversive potential is evident in his theatrical performances, for as Scout describes, "Dill was a villain's villain: he could get into any character part assigned him, and appear tall if height was part of the devilry required. He was as good as his worst; his worst performance was Gothic" (TM 43-44). These dynamic abilities are even more apparent when juxtaposed against
the limited range of Jem, who is only capable of inhabiting the scripted, conventional role of the "born hero" (*TM* 44). It is this talent as a performer that marks the sissy, like the tomboy, as a figure of queer resistance, a subject whose depth and complexity I address in Chapter 2.

In a thesis concerned with tomboy and sissy characters, there is perhaps an argument that Dill Harris warrants a chapter of his own. Indeed, Lee based the character almost entirely on her childhood friend Truman Capote, as he himself confirmed in interviews.\(^\text{115}\) While Capote's sissy protagonists are among the most empowered and dynamic in southern fiction, however, there are limitations to Dill's queer potential.\(^\text{116}\) While Scout and Dill begin the narrative as inseparable characters, for example, it is only a matter of time before Dill attempts to exert his male prerogative over Scout. As she explains,

Dill was becoming something of a trial anyway, following Jem about. He had asked me earlier in the summer to marry him, then he promptly forgot about it. He staked me out, marked me as his property, said I was the only girl he would ever love, then he neglected me. (*TM* 46)

Thus, even at a young age, Dill has already begun to idolize Jem's masculine qualities. He begins to consider his friendship with Scout in terms of conventional, heterosexual marriage, a relationship in which she is objectified "as his property." When the narrator does refer to Dill's effeminacy, too, it is often cast in a distinctly negative light, as evidence of weakness. For example, while Dill longs to establish contact with the reclusive Boo Radley, he is conspicuously cowardly, and will go no closer to the Radley's than the light pole on the corner. Only Jem has the courage to enter the Radley yard and touch the house.


\(^\text{116}\) For more on the sissy in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Room* (1948) and *The Grass Harp* (1951), see Chapter 2.
It is Scout's gender violations, not Dill's, that are constantly subject to communal 
surveillance and control. Over the course of the novel, Scout's extended family and community 
work tirelessly to discipline her behavior, mannerisms, speech, and appearance. It is these 
pressures that work do condition her – with partial success – to abandon her tomboyish ways, 
and mature into a proper southern lady.

From the beginning, Scout is defiant of proper gender roles in Maycomb society. She 
abandons her feminine name, Jean Louise, for a butch nickname, and prefers to wear overalls 
instead of dresses. Like Jem, she desires an air rifle for Christmas, rather than a doll. She takes 
particular pride in her fighting ability, as well, and uses her strength to intimidate her male 
classmates. Only rarely does she attempt to conform to the demands of southern womanhood, 
and these efforts are themselves only half-hearted and hardly successful. For instance, Scout 
recalls her "burning ambition to grow up and twirl in the Maycomb County High School band," 
but only develops this talent "to where I could throw the stick up and almost catch it coming 
down" (TM 116).

Having reached adolescence, Scout is frustrated and bewildered by the sudden and 
intense pressures she is now forced to confront. Until now, as the narrator suggests, Scout's 
tomboyhood was never a subject of concern for the adults around her, who dismissed her 
mischievous and precocious nature as merely symptomatic of childhood innocence. Now, as an 
adolescent, Scout finds herself under intense scrutiny, as a number of characters begin to chastise 
her masculine attributes. For example, the elderly Mrs. Dubose ridicules her "unladylike" 
manners: "what are you doing in those overalls? You should be in a dress and camisole, young 
lady!" (TM 117). These sentiments are similarly echoed by Jem, who tells her, "It's time you 
started bein' a girl and acting right" (TM 131).
The most powerful disciplinary influence over Scout, however, is the matronly Aunt Alexandra, who embodies the conventional ideals of womanhood to perfection. As the archetypal southern belle, Alexandra goes to great lengths to present herself accordingly. "She chose protective garments that drew up her bosom to giddy heights," as the narrator recalls, and she "pinched her waist, flared out her rear, and managed to suggest that Aunt Alexandra's was once an hour-glass figure" (TM 145). Her manners and comportment are comparably ladylike:

To all parties present and participating in the life of the county, Aunt Alexandra was one of the last of her kind: she had river-boat, boarding-school manners; let any moral come along and she would uphold it; she was born in the objective case; she was an incurable gossip [...] She was never bored, and given the slightest chance she would exercise her royal prerogative: she would arrange, advise, caution, and warn. (TM 146-147)

While Scout speaks unflatteringly of her Aunt, however, it is these very qualities that allow Alexandra to thrive in the local community. Almost upon arrival, as Scout laments, the town embraced Aunt Alexandra, for she "fit into the world of Maycomb like a hand in a glove" (TM 149).

Just as Aunt Alexandra ascribes to and performs proper white southern femininity, she takes it upon herself to impose such exacting standards on others. Much to Scout's dismay, as Claudia Johnson notes, "Aunt Alexandra brings with her a system of codification and segregation of the family according to class, race, and in Scout's case, sex" (136). Indeed, Alexandra makes Scout her own personal project, and takes it upon herself to reform the girl's tomboyish tendencies. As the narrator describes, Alexandra's efforts in this regard border on obsession:

---

117 For more on the avuncular or materteral relationship, see Chapter 2.
Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born [...] Aunty said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year. (*TM* 92-93)

Alexandra's belief that Scout was initially "born good but had grown progressively worse each year" demonstrates her faith in the inherent innocence of children, an innocence that erodes with each passing year. Ironically, however, her tactics only further alienate Scout from the cult of southern womanhood. When Alexandra moves into the Finch's Landing to provide the "feminine influence" Scout's adolescence requires, Scout feels "a pink cotton penitentiary closing in on me," and contemplates running away (*TM* 145, 155).

While Scout claims that "She hurt my feelings and set my teeth permanently on edge," it is her aunt's bigotry that that particularly repels her (*TM* 93). As a "proper" southern lady, Alexandra adheres to a code that narrowly delineates between ladies and gentlemen, black and white, upper- and lower-class. When she attempts to enforce these boundaries – by forbidding Scout from visiting Calpurnia in the colored side of town, for example, or from inviting a Cunningham for dinner – Scout instinctively disobeys, and the animosity between the two mounts.

The ladies in Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle are no less relentless when it comes to disciplining Scout's performance of gender. On the afternoon of Alexandra's tea, for instance, Scout feels "Rather nervous," for "Ladies in bunches always filled me with vague apprehension
and a firm desire to be elsewhere" (*TM* 262). When the meeting begins, she is immediately criticized for wearing pants, as well as for attending the trial of Tom Robinson. The town gossip Miss Stephanie Crawford mocks Scout by asking her if she wants to be a lawyer, a comment to which Scout – coached by Aunt Alexandra – replies, "Nome, just a lady" (*TM* 262, 263). This response, however, only provokes the lady's ire: "Miss Stephanie eyed me suspiciously, decided that I meant no impertinence, and contented herself with, "Well, you won't get very far until you start wearing dresses more often"" (*TM* 263).

It is through the dialogue of the missionary circle, as related through Scout's first-person narration, that Lee further exposes the superficiality and provincialism behind their façade of respectability. The members of Alexandra's circle – with the notable exception of Miss Maudie Atkinson – share the same racial and socioeconomic prejudices, which they couch in terms of pity, condescension, and outright contempt. Mrs. Grace Merriweather, who is supposedly "the most devout lady in Maycomb," comments on the plight of a black family, "those poor Mrunas," who live "in that jungle with […] The poverty… the darkness… the immorality" (*TM* 263). As the conversation continues, and other offer Mrs. Merriweather their support, Scout's disgust becomes increasingly apparently to the reader, and she ultimately dismisses them as "Hypocrites" (*TM* 267).

Besides satirizing the behavior of these "refined" belles, the narrator further undercuts the model of their supposedly "natural" femininity through her detailed description of their appearances. "The ladies were cool in fragile pastel prints," Scout relates, and "most of them were heavily powdered but unrouged; the only lipstick in the room was Tangee Natural. Cutex Natural sparkled on their fingertips, but some of the younger ladies wore Rose" (*TM* 262). Ironically, a great deal of preparation and artifice is thus necessary to create the illusion of ideal
"natural" femininity. As the brand names emphasize, there is nothing "natural" about the ladies' choice of lipstick or finger polish. These are merely commercial products designed to manipulate their appearance, while also disguising the artificial feminization of their bodies. With these observations, the implied logical basis of Alexandra's demands on Scout – that Scout express the natural gender with which she was born – is discredited, for the reader is made aware of the complicity of these women in their efforts to preserve what is merely a cultural fiction.

By exposing the artifice and theatricality at the heart of gender, Lee importantly anticipates what queer theorist Judith Butler would later argue in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), that gender is neither natural nor innate, but rather a social construct which serves particular purposes or institutions. Gender, in other words, is the performative effect of reiterative acts. According to Butler,

[These acts] are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport are fabrications manufactured and maintained through corporeal signs and discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.  

In her reading of Butler's work, Mona Lloyd explains that ontologies of gender – that is, the commonly held beliefs regarding the essence of gender – establish what counts as intelligible; what kinds of identities are "normative," and thus allowed to exist. To perpetuate these cultural fictions, it is necessary that gender functions to eradicate signs of its performativity. As Butler writes,

---


Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (140)

Aunt Alexandra and her missionary cabal demonstrate both of these concealments, as illustrated by their desire to embody and perform "natural" southern femininity, as well as the disciplinary measures to which Scout is subjected for violating traditional gender codes. By exposing these efforts to conceal the genesis of gender, Lee thus reveals white southern womanhood as a "regulatory fiction."

For the privileged southern belle, however, the preservation of this cultural myth comes at a price. Indeed, the narrator often casts conventional femininity in distinctly negative terms. Scout's description of the "whispering, sipping, and fanning" of the ladies, for instance, sets them apart from the more substantive issues that shape her father's world (TM 266). Her humorous depiction of her aunt associates the southern womanhood with emotional and physical repression: "Aunt Alexandra was positively irritable on the Lord's Day," she reflects, "I guess it was her Sunday corset" (TM 145). Alexandra's corset – a rather unambiguous symbol of feminine repression – further reinforces the constructed nature of gender. The manner in which it "drew up her bosom to giddy heights, pinched her waist, [and] flared out her rear" demonstrates its restrictive nature, and shows how femininity – like Alexandra's body, must be shaped and forced into a mold.
Perhaps the most visible example of female disempowerment in *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be found in Scout's schoolteacher, the hapless Miss Caroline, whose hyperfemininity provides a sharp contrast to Scout's own gender-transitivity. As Scout describes,

She had bright auburn hair, pink cheeks, and wore crimson fingernail polish. She also wore high-heeled pumps and a red-and-white striped dress. She looked and smelled like a peppermint drop [...] when Miss Maudie introduced us to her, Jem was in a haze for days. *(TM 18)*

From her crimson nails to her high-heeled shoes, Miss Caroline's formal appearance may grant her the temporary illusion of authority, but her inability to manage her classroom quickly undermines any semblance of power she may have projected. She draws the ire of Scout on the first day of school, for example, by referring to her as "Jean Louise," and criticizing her advanced reading ability *(TM 19)*. Ultimately, Miss Caroline's failure to understand or relate to her mostly underprivileged students draws the censure of Scout once more: "You're shamin' him, Miss Caroline. Walter hasn't got a quarter at home to bring you, and you can't use any stovewood" *(TM 24)*. In addition, Jem's "haze" reflects their polarized responses to Miss Caroline, for Scout's aversion to hyperfemininity is equaled only by Jem's erotic attraction.

It is through these experiences that Scout comes to recognize the superficiality and limitations of southern womanhood. "Ladies seemed to live in faint horror of men," she observes, "But I was more at home in my father's world," where "People like Mr. Heck Tate did not trap you with innocent questions or make fun of you" *(TM 267, 266)*. This obviously naïve and childlike perception of manhood nevertheless strikes at the heart of Scout's own gender ambivalence. In a world in which men are more privileged and appear more tolerant than women, Scout feels no motivation to conform to conventional notions of southern womanhood.
While Scout continues to endure the pressures of conformity, she finds a great deal of guidance and support from an unlikely source. In Miss Maudie Atkinson, the neighborhood spinster, she discovers a role model diametrically opposed to the figure of Aunt Alexandra. Scout and her companions gradually come to trust and respect Miss Maudie over the course of the narrative, for "she never told on them, never played cat and mouse with them, and because she was not at all interested in their private lives" (TM 50). As Scout describes her, she represents the potential for queer adult subjectivity in southern society, the tomboy who refuses to be tamed: "She was a widow, a chameleon lady who worked in her flower beds in an old straw hat and men's coveralls, but after her five o'clock bath she would appear on the porch and reign over the street in her magisterial beauty" (TM 47). It is Miss Maudie's adaptability – her existence as a "chameleon lady" – that allows her to strategically deploy her performance of gender roles. Though she may act and appear masculine within the privacy of the home, she is also able to convincingly perform her "appropriate" feminine role in public. Her baking skills, for instance, and her membership in Alexandra's missionary circle allow her to preserve her place in Maycomb society.

Preferring her independence as a widow and refusing to remarry, it is Miss Maudie's embodiment of lesbian subjectivity that marks her as a figure of gender and sexual resistance. This is not to imply that she fits a narrow definition of "lesbianism" delimited by same-sex desire, but rather that she exemplifies feminist Bonnie Zimmerman's concept of the "metaphorical lesbian," a character who is not "really" a lesbian, but could be, and who engages in a variety of woman-identified practices that suggest, but stop short of sexual encounters. According the Zimmerman, "the metaphorical lesbian, the lesbian-as-sign"

[…] is a disrupter of heterosexuality, a presence standing outside the conventions of
patriarchy, a hole in the fabric of gender dualism. She cannot be contained within these institutions; she explores their gaps and contradictions; she signifies a radical absence. Her desire functions as excess within the heterosexual economy. Hence she positions herself outside these institutions, or creates space within them. […] Within that space she also creates a lesbian relationship between the self and other.\textsuperscript{120}

In all aspects but a genital sexual relationship, Miss Maudie acts out the characteristics of this composite figure that Zimmerman saw emerging from lesbian criticism in the 1990s. Whereas her sexual preference remains ambiguous, in other words, she embraces spinsterhood as an alternative to heterosexuality.

This is not to say, however, that she does not still face the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality. For instance, Scout describes how every year her Uncle Jack would visit for Christmas, and every year "he yelled across the street for Miss Maudie to marry him," to which Miss Maudie would yell back, "Call a little louder, Jack Finch, and they'll hear you at the post office. I haven't heard you yet!" (\textit{TM} 49). As this ritual demonstrates, Miss Maudie represents the queer "spinster," who feminists such as Trisha Franzen and Sheila Jeffreys have identified as a prominent figure of lesbian resistance.\textsuperscript{121} In her entry on the "spinster" in \textit{Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia} (2000), Trisha Franzen writes that "Within feminism, this term has taken on the meaning of a woman who chooses her own definition, and is autonomous, and


without connections to husband or children.\textsuperscript{122} As an empowered spinster, Miss Maudie has a profound impact on Scout's development, and the strength of her will is demonstrated after a fire destroys her home. As Scout recalls, "Miss Maudie puzzled me. With most of her possessions gone and her beloved yard in shambles, she still took a lively and cordial interest in Jem's and my affairs" (TM 83). Her perseverance in this regard offers a striking contrast to the helplessness of Miss Caroline, or the superficiality of Aunt Alexandra and her missionary circle.

Even Miss Maudie, however, cannot fully escape the judgment of Maycomb society, and Scout soon learns that fortitude and strength are essential to the queer adult's survival. When Miss Maudie is condemned by a group of Baptists, for example, she demonstrates to Scout how the church functions as a disciplinary institution. As Scout recalls,

\begin{quote}
Miss Maudie said: "Foot-washers believe anything that's pleasure is a sin. Did you know some of em came out of the woods one Saturday and passed by this place and told me me and my flowers were going to hell?"

"Your flowers too?"

"Yes ma'am. They'd burn right with me. They thought I spent too much time in God's outdoors and not enough time inside the house reading the Bible."

My confidence in pulpit Gospel lessened at the vision of Miss Maudie stewing forever in various Protestant hells. [...] She was our friend. How so reasonable a creature could live in peril of everlasting torment was incomprehensible. (TM 49-50).
\end{quote}

As Scout's anecdote indicates, Miss Maudie's spinsterhood still places her at the margins of southern society. While she must conform to acceptable standards of femininity in public, her...

tomboyish transgressions are confined to the isolation and privacy of the home. Despite these limitations, however, Miss Maudie's encounters with persecution affect Scout deeply: "That ain't right, Miss Maudie," she declares, "You're the best lady I know" (TM 50).

In addition to educating Scout on the nature of prejudice, she also opens Scout's mind to the possibility of connecting with other marginalized characters within her community. As a "chameleon lady" with the ability to negotiate between private and public spheres, she understands the plight of Boo Radley, who keeps himself locked in his home. She is also the only character besides Atticus to see Boo as a person, rather than a mystery or a subject for gossip.

For Scout, Jem, and Dill, as for the rest of the townfolk, Boo is a figure of both fear and fascination. Though terrified by the Radley house, the three children attempt one scheme after another in an attempt to lure him out, and thus finally discover his true identity. Such an ambivalent yet obsessive response, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in Epistemology of the Closet (1990), has, and continues to be, a staple reaction to homosexuality:

To the fine antennae of public attention, the freshness of every drama of (especially Involuntary) gay uncovering seems if anything heightened in surprise and delectability, rather than staled, by the increasingly intense atmosphere of public articulations of and about the love that is famous for daring not speak its name. (67)

In other words, as discourses continue to proliferate around homosexuality, there persists – and even increases to be – a fascination with exposing deviant identities as public knowledge. This is certainly the case with the enigmatic Boo, who is ultimately "outed" by the novel's end. Still, it is the wisdom imparted by Miss Maudie that contributes, at least in part, to Scout's ability to accept Boo Radley as an equal rather than an outcast.
Besides Miss Maudie, only Atticus Finch refuses to participate in the communal gossip surrounding the Radley house. While Atticus recognizes the importance of Boo's privacy, however, he imparts this knowledge to his children through the form of a paternal dictate: "Son,' he said to Jem, 'I'm going to tell you something and tell you one time: stop tormenting that man. That goes for the other two of you" (TM 54). Despite his good intentions, Atticus's order does little to demystify the spectre of the Radley house. In fact, his threat serves only to intensify the curiosity of Scout and her companions, and only encourages their future efforts.

In contrast to the paternal prerogative of Atticus, Miss Maudie offers Scout a more sensitive and empathetic understanding of the Other in Maycomb society. Like Boo, Miss Maudie has herself experienced discrimination firsthand, and her solitary lifestyle has similarly taught her the benefits and drawbacks of a closeted existence. It is she who first refers to Boo by his real name, Arthur, and thus begins to deconstruct the myths and superstitions surrounding him. Gradually, over the course of their conversations, Scout perceptions undergo a considerable transformation. When Scout asks, for instance, "You reckon' he's crazy?", Miss Maudie casts him as a sympathetic figure: "If he's not he should be by now. The things that happen to people we never really know. What happens in houses behind closed doors, what secrets –" (TM 51). His innocence and vulnerability are further emphasized when Miss Maudie describes her own childhood memories: "that house is a sad house. I remember Arthur Radley when he was a boy. He always spoke nicely to me, no matter what folks said he did. Spoke as nicely as he knew how" (TM 51). It is following this conversation, in which Scout finally begins to learn the history behind Arthur "Boo" Radley, that her fears begin to dissolve, and she begins to empathize and even identify with the Otherness he represents.
It is therefore through her relationship with the local spinster – the tomboyish adult who has learned to negotiate the space of the closet to maintain her gender-transitive identity – that contributes to Scout's understanding of her father's most importance lesson: "Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit em, but remember, it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (TM 103). Indeed, as critic Smaranda Stefanovici observes, "in coming to know Boo Radley as a real human being at the novel's end, [Scout] recognizes the empowerment of being 'the Other' as she consents to remain an outsider unable to accept society's unwillingness to seek and know before judging" (86). By learning to empathize with and support other queer individuals, Scout comes to realize that "outing" Boo, and subjecting him to the prejudices and disciplinary mechanisms of society, would "be sort of like shootin; a mockingbird, wouldn't it" (TM 317). Thus, while the character of Tom Robinson serves as the black "mockingbird" in the text, who is subject to the racial prejudices of Maycomb county, Boo Radley similarly exists as the sexual Other, and is likewise persecuted for defying the conventions of southern society.

Arthur "Boo" Radley is only one of the many marginalized characters with whom Lee's tomboy protagonist identifies over the course of the narrative. As Dean Shackleford observes in his article "The Female Voice in To Kill a Mockingbird: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel," "Harper Lee's fundamental criticism of gender roles for women (and to a lesser extent for men) may be especially evident in her novel's identification with outsider figures such as Tom Robinson, Mayella Ewell, and Boo Radley."123 Rather than confine herself to the space of the home, as Alexandra – and to some extent Atticus – expect of her, Scout instead spends much of her time exploring her community, and engaging with those whose race, class, or sexual status

---

places them beyond the bounds of "respectable" Maycomb society. In doing so, she demonstrates a key strategy of lesbian resistance, a lesson inculcated by her spinster mentor. Scout's efforts to develop a surrogate family – a family bound not by blood, but by mutually shared experience and understanding – illustrate her desire to generate what feminist Adrienne Rich original conceived of as a "lesbian continuum," "a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman identified experience [...] the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support." It is as a part of this continuum – which, as it includes not only women, but also men, and people of varying racial and class backgrounds, can be more accurately described as a queer continuum – that the tomboy is able to find affirmation and selfhood within her own alternative community.

---

**Part 3 – "Gray eyes is glass"**

While Scout learns to embrace the queer elements of her society, it is also important to note that To Kill a Mockingbird offers a relatively limited – and often problematic – critique of southern society. In recent decades, as Kristen B. Proehl observes in *Battling Girlhood: Sympathy, Race, and the Tomboy Narrative in American Literature* (2011), "literary and cultural critics have focused less upon the inconsistencies of Scout's narrative voice, and more upon the inconsistencies within Lee's vision of social reform" (202). In a 2009 article, "The Courthouse Ring: Atticus Finch and the Limits of Southern Liberalism," for example, journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell takes issue with the reluctance of Atticus to challenge the power structures that have perpetuated racial and class hierarchies in the southern states. Instead, as Gladwell

---

writes, the novel oversimplifies these issues, and encourages white southerners to "swap one of their prejudices for another" by placing the blame for Maycomb's social ills on the impoverished Ewell family. Ultimately, the paternal, white, middle-class figure of Atticus Finch is inscribed as the hero of the narrative, for the trial of Tom Robinson establishes his role as both the champion of the African American community and the antidote for the violence and prejudice localized in Maycomb's poor whites.

In addressing these criticisms, I extend Gladwell's argument to include Lee's treatment of gender and sexuality as well. In her depiction of Miss Maudie, for example, the character's capacity for tolerance – or intolerance, in the case of Aunt Alexandra – extends to any and all forms of Otherness in her community. With the capacity for universal tolerance located in such figures as Miss Maudie, or Atticus Finch for that matter, Lee appears to posit an identity inherently resistant to any oppression of any cultural, racial, gender, and sexual difference. In other words, she implies that all tolerances are congruent; that if one sees the unfairness of racial prejudice, one will naturally see the injustice of gender or sexual discrimination. In contrast to this simplified understanding of oppression, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues instead that "it was the long, painful realization, not that all oppressions are congruent, but that they are all differently structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments" (Epistemology 33). One's acceptance of racial difference, in other words, is not the same as, nor does it imply a similar acceptance of gendered Otherness. Lee's characters, however, are either entirely accepting or entirely intolerant, and thus leave readers with an oversimplified representation of social mechanism and interactions in southern society.

---

It is for this reason that I examine *To Kill a Mockingbird* in conjunction with the tomboy protagonist of Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), a novel published over a decade earlier, but set a decade after Lee's Depression-era narrative. While twelve-year old Frankie Addams resembles Scout Finch in myriad ways – from their sissy boy companions, to their style of dress, to their similarly masculine interests – it is through Frankie's relationship with her black mammy Berenice that McCullers is able to offer a more nuanced exploration of race, gender, and sexuality in southern society. In contrast to Calpurnia, the stereotypical mammy figure in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Berenice Sadie Brown shares an intensely personal relationship with her young tomboy charge, and her guidance has a particularly formative effect on Frankie's development. As a maternal surrogate, Berenice draws from her own lifetime of experiences – and the experiences of her companions, Lily Mae Jenkins and Honey Brown – to encourage Frankie's imagination and provide a queer counternarrative to the heterosexualizing imperative of the dominant culture.

In contrast to Harper Lee, Carson McCullers's tomboy protagonist was developed through a number of similar iterations in her earlier works. At the age of nineteen, McCullers produced "Like That" and "Wunderkind," two short stories featuring distinctly tomboyish main characters. "Wunderkind," which is usually cited as her first published work, is the semi-autobiographical tale of an adolescent musical prodigy struggling to meet her own high expectations.126 "Like That," which also featured an adolescent protagonist, is narrated by an anonymous tomboy who enjoys basketball, football, and playing other typically "masculine"

---

sports with her siblings. Her relative contentment is interrupted when her elder sister begins to increasingly participate in the rituals of normative southern womanhood. Indeed, as "Like That" portrays the tomboy's grief over a sibling's heteronormative initiation, the story anticipates many of the central themes explored in *The Member of the Wedding*.

McCullers's fascination with tomboys and other characters whose "freakish" bodies and behaviors challenged normative conventions would continue in her novels. As critic Rachel Adams observes in her article "'A Mixture of Delicious and Freak': The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers," "McCullers's fiction is populated by freaks, characters constrained by corporeal anomalies that defy the imposition of normative categories of identity." Her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) begins with a description of the household of Spiros Antanapolous, a "dreamy Greek," and the Jewish John Singer, "two mutes who were always together" in their small Georgia mill town. Marked as foreigners with distinct physical disabilities, these two companions suffer an alienation from their bodies that parallels their experiences of estrangement within and isolation from the society of others. As Leslie Fiedler notes in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), their homosocial relationship is "rendered through the consciousness of one of those boy-girl adolescents," the tomboyish protagonist Mick Kelly (478). Fourteen-year old Mick finds herself uniquely drawn to the couple because, as a tomboy, she too occupies a marginal position in relation to their small-town community.

---


By the end of the narrative, however, Mick's tomboyish tendencies appear to have been essentially "tamed," as she makes her transition to adulthood. As the Café owner Biff Brannon observes,

Her rough and childish ways were almost gone. And instead there was something ladylike and delicate about her that was hard to point out. The earrings, the dangle of her bracelets, and the new way she crossed her legs and pulled the hem of her skirt down past her knees. (LH 357).

These signs of tomboy taming are likewise evident in the conclusion of The Member of the Wedding, though only to a certain extent. Indeed, by the novel's end, Frankie has stopped attending freak shows, has befriended the more appropriately feminine Mary LittleJohn, and has changed her name to Frances. As Miho Matsui notes, "These changes symbolically mark the end of Frankie's freakish tomboyhood; she is now a normative white girl" (172). However, whether Frankie has been completely "normalized" is still a matter of debate.

While To Kill a Mockingbird and the tomboyhood of Scout Finch have been subject to considerable critical neglect, the opposite can be said McCullers's tomboy protagonists. Although Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article "Three Feminist Readings: McCullers, Drabble, Habermas" is often cited as the first feminist response to McCullers's fiction, the work of Louise Westling has had a much greater influence on how feminist criticism has understood and interpreted her writings. In Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor (1985), Westling argues that the tomboys in

McCullers's fiction work to illustrate the constraints of female identity in the South.\textsuperscript{131} Mick and Frankie, like Miss Amelia Evans in McCullers's novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), are "ambitious, artistic girls who are disoriented and terrified when they are forced to identify themselves as females at puberty" (Westling 114).\textsuperscript{132} The tomboy figure, as Westling argues, thus serves as a tragic figure who – like Boo Radley and Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* – must conform to heteronormative society or suffer the consequences.

Since the 1980s, a number of critical studies on McCullers's female adolescents have echoed Westling's consensus.\textsuperscript{133} As a result, as critic Barbara A. White observes in *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (1985), her works have come to be read primarily as "novel[s] of initiation into acceptance of female limits."\textsuperscript{134} Since the turn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, however, there have been powerful counterarguments published reevaluating McCullers's tomboy characters as figures of queer resistance and potential. Similar to my analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, Lori J. Kenschaft reads Frankie as a "metaphorical lesbian" in her article "Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson


McCullers 'As a Lesbian.' In perhaps the most extensive study of queerness in McCullers's fiction, Sarah Gleeson-White's *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (2003) challenges Westling by instead reading "the female adolescent body as a liminal site of becoming, which challenges the very notion of 'female limits'" (8). Reading McCullers through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the power of "grotesque" bodies and desires allows Gleeson-White to argue that these tomboys exist "in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood and, in the case of Mick and Frankie, between femininity and masculinity" (12). Essentially, by existing in opposition to the classic, "finished" body, the female adolescent represents Bakhtin's concept of the Rabelaisian grotesque body, as described in *Rabelais and His World* (1984): "not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits […] This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body" of limitless potential (25-26).

While queer and feminist theory have opened new avenues of inquiry into McCullers's fiction, however, it is interesting to note which subjects and characters have remained at the margins of critical discourse. McCullers's African American characters, for example, have received minimal attention. In fact, when Frankie's mammy Berenice Sadie Brown is mentioned at all, it is usually to dismiss her as an oppressive agent of heteronormativity. Barbara White, for instance, labels her "a completely man-oriented woman" (94), while Thadious M. Davis describes her as "thoroughly secure in her sexual identity."

---


purpose of Berenice's mentorship is to not only whiten and feminize Frankie, but to heterosexualize her as well: "She does so in part because she understands heterosexual intimacy as something of a panacea for the world's ills" (181).

The critical consensus has thus been to dismiss Berenice as merely another stereotypical mammy figure, a stock figure in southern literature who, as critic Diane Roberts observes, "typifies the mythic Old South of benign slavery, grace and abundance; she rules the kitchen or instructs the young ladies in decorum or she buries the family silver in the garden so the Yankees won't steal it." 137 Like Calpurnia is To Kill a Mockingbird, or Hattie in Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind, the mammy is commonly deployed as a surrogate mother, one who both heterosexualizes and racializes her young female charge. 138

To oversimplify the role of Berenice, however, is to overlook the depth and complexity of her relationship with Frankie, a relationship to which the author returns throughout the narrative. While Miho Matsui observes that Frankie "is a quintessential Southern tomboy figure," on who "offers a more intensive examination of the relationship between the tomboy figure's gender subversion and non-traditional families," it is similarly the case that Berenice's influence on Frankie draws attention to the relationship between racial and sexual Otherness in southern society (151). Berenice may ostensibly appear to promote a strict heteronormative agenda, as she pressures Frankie to find "A nice little white boy beau," and "to fix [her]self up


nice in dresses," but she also protects Frankie from the darker, more exploitative side of patriarchal society, and helps her carve her own niche within its framework (MW 82, 83).

From the very beginning of the novel, Frankie's conspicuously tomboyish appearance and behavior mark her as an outsider. As the narrator describes, "she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak […] she wore a pair of blue black shorts and a BVD undervest, and she was barefooted. Her hair had been cut like a boy's, but it had not been cut for a long time and was now not even parted" (MW 4). Similarly to Scout, she refuses to play with dolls, and prides herself as "the best knife-thrower" in town (MW 36). Her gender transgressions also generate similar feelings of alienation and anxiety, an effect described in the novel's opening lines:

It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid. (MW 3)

In addition, Frankie constantly struggles with her inability to articulate her feelings and desires, for she lacks the language to do so. Instead, she fantasizes about becoming a "member" of her older brother's wedding, which she associates with security and a sense of belonging. By joining this heterosexual union – her fantasy that "They were the we of me" – Frankie hopes to finally throw of the yoke of her "freakish" tomboyhood, and become initiated into adult society.

Despite their similarities, Frankie's experiences with sexual and racial Otherness differ radically from those of Scout. While To Kill a Mockingbird offers a relatively sanitized vision of southern race relations, McCullers instead depicts the South as a region defined by racial violence and subjugation. Frankie herself experiences this at the Freak Pavilion, when, in addition to seeing "the Half-Man, Half-Woman, a morphidite and a miracle of medical science,"
she also witnesses "The Wild Nigger," who "came from a savage island" and "squatted in his booth among the dusty bones and palm leaves and ate living rats" (MW 20). Of course, as the narrator acknowledges, "he was not a genuine Wild Nigger [...] but a crazy colored man from Selma." By associating racial Otherness with "freakishness," barbarism, and insanity, however, the spectacle serves to reinforce the whiteness – and therefore, the normativity – of the spectator. Critic Susan Stewart explores the dynamics of the gaze in her study *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), where she argues that "the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees." It is the distance between the viewer and the freak-object that allows the spectator to avoid "contamination" by the object on display. Thus, the so-called "Wild Nigger" serves in a racializing capacity, and "The fair gave free admission to his show to all who brought rats of the right size" (MW 20).

This dehumanization the black body has tragic consequences, as McCullers's narrative soon demonstrates. One of the more vivid and gruesome descriptions in the novel is Frankie's recollection of Lon Baker, a "colored boy" murdered in the white part of town: "On an April afternoon his throat was slashed with a razor blade, and all the alley people disappeared in back doorways, and later it was said his cut throat opened like a crazy shivering mouth that spoke ghost words into the April sun" (MW 92). Much later, as the novel approaches its conclusion, Frankie learns that one of Berenice's companions, Honey Brown, has been sentenced to serve on a chain gang (MW 159). Indeed, of the few non-white characters in *The Member of the Wedding*,

---


over half end up murdered, imprisoned, or paraded for public display. Only Berenice and T.T. Williams – a "fine upstanding colored gentleman," who Berenice describes as friendly but passive – survive the novel relatively unscathed (MW 93).

Throughout the text, Berenice uses her role as the white tomboy's mentor to educate her on the reality of racial prejudice. When Frankie envisions a world in which "people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, which ever way they wanted," Berenice is quick to add that, in an ideal society, "There would be no colored people and no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry all their lives" (MW 97). It is thus through Frankie's relationship with Berenice that McCullers demonstrates not only how racial and sexual oppression are differently structured, but how also how they intersect in complex and often productive ways.

While Berenice struggles against racial prejudice, Frankie struggles – often with comically grotesque results – to conform the the demanding standards of southern womanhood. Her perception of her size as "freakish," her desire to join the other female "club members," and her obsession with with her cousin's wedding all demonstrate the powerful effects of heteronormative socialization (MW 21, 95). Like Scout, however, Frankie's futile efforts to "feminize" her appearance and behavior only work to expose the performative nature of gender. Rather than transforming Frankie into a proper southern belle, her ill-fitting organdie dress and excessive use of cosmetics make her resemble, in Berenice's words, "a human Christmas tree in August" (MW 90).

Unlike Harper Lee, however, Carson McCullers extends the scope of the tomboy's experiences to include sexual, as well as gender otherness. While To Kill a Mockingbird may be infused with latent sexuality, it is only implicitly addressed through such characters as Miss
Maudie and Boo Radley. In *The Member of the Wedding*, on the other hand, Frankie's experiences challenge the presumed asexuality of childhood innocence. As an adolescent, she is repeatedly exposed – both accidentally and intentionally – to the world of adult sexuality. It is these "queer" and often unpleasant experiences that ultimately work to demythologize the fantasy of heterosexual romance.

In contrast to her expectations, Frankie's initial sexual encounters leave her feeling confused and violated. She remembers her first experience – when she accidentally witnessed the lodgers in her house in the act of coitus – as a being a particularly traumatic one, for at the time she misinterpreted the situation as a medical emergency: "Mr. Marlowe is having a fit!" (*MW* 40). Berenice's explanation that the Marlowe's are "common people" who were simply engaged in a "common fit" only further queers the experience for Frankie, who reads this behavior as absurd and unnatural (*MW* 40). Three years later, Frankie now similarly recalls her first erotic encounter with a neighborhood boy as "a secret and unknown sin":

> In the MacKean's garage, with Barney MacKean, they committed a queer sin, and how bad it was she did not know. The sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach, and she dreaded the eyes of everyone. She hated Barney and wanted to kill him. Sometimes alone in bed at night she planned to shoot him with a pistol or throw a knife between his eyes. (*MW* 25-26)

Frankie's "queer" perception of heterosexuality as being unnatural and perverse is further underscored by the context of her memories. Indeed, it is as she is describing how she "got herself into trouble" and "broke the law" that she recalls the details of her "secret and unknown sin" (*MW* 25, 26). The memory itself triggers an intensely violent response from Frankie, who desires to penetrate Barney with either a pistol or a knife, and thus exact her phallic revenge on
his act of heterosexual domination. This interpretation is suggested by critic Barbara White, who claims that "resistance to sex is almost universal in novels of female adolescence. The reason is always the same: adolescent heroines view sex as domination by a man" (103).

In her own mind, Frankie's "secret and unknown sin" with a boy – like her acts of shoplifting and vandalism – mark her as a "criminal," a fact that is written on her body via her "freakish" size and appearance. While Frankie's sexuality and gender-transitivity mark her as an outside, however, it is also important to consider the racial implications of Frankie's "criminal" status. For instance, the local jail, a place which "had drawn the old Frankie" even as it "scared and haunted her that spring and summer," is characterized as the space of the racial Other (MW 123). As the narrator describes, Frankie "knew some people who had been locked up in jail, all of them colored – a boy called Cape, and a friend of Berenice who was accused by the white lady she worked for of stealing a sweater and a pair of shoes" (MW 123).

While Frankie is taught by society to associate darkness with freakishness and criminality, she is also conditioned to associate whiteness with normativity and respectability. "I think it is a curious coincidence," she muses to Berenice, "that Jarvis would get to go to Alaska and that the very bride he picked to marry would come from a place called Winter Hill" (MW 7). Both of these locations are associated with whiteness in Frankie's imagination, as she dreams of "walk[ing] up a cold white hill" in the "cold white snow" with her cousin and his lover (MW 11, 12). Thus, through the tomboy's perspective, McCullers establishes that race, like gender and sexuality, is similarly defined as a social construct; the performative effect of reiterative acts. In this way, the ostensibly "white" tomboy is racialized as a "colored" subject, by nature of her transgressive actions and appearance.
If white womanhood, as critic Kate Davy argues, is "a racialization project in which middle-class respectability functions as a structuring principle," Frankie's "dark" features and her relationships with other nonwhite minorities signifies her identification with the racial Other. Though she may occasionally dream of a white wedding, Frankie's primary relationships are with "colored" folks such as Berenice and Honey Brown, and she feels most comfortable in the colored town of Sugarville, or loitering by the jailhouse. According to Michelle Anne Abate, therefore, The Member of the Wedding contributes to the "hidden history" of the racially ambiguous tomboy in American literature. According to Abate, especially in works created by white female authors [...] the ambiguity of the tomboy's gender mirrors the ambiguity of her purported Caucasian identity. [...] Characterized with "brown" skin tones, associated with "dark" features and affiliated with other nonwhite racial and ethnic minorities, these figures were not only distanced from, but even seemed to have disavowed, their purported racial heritage. (xx)

Fortunately for Frankie, she is able to relate to and draw comfort and support from her mammy, who – not unlike Miss Maudie in To Kill a Mockingbird – also uses her own experiences with oppression to subvert and exploit the patriarchal system. Having lost her biological mother in infancy, in the words of critic Mary Elliot, "The presence of the orphaned tomboy in the narrative creates an orphaned space in the ideological fabric of the narrative as well," a space which can either be subsumed under the authority of the Father, as is the case in To Kill a Mockingbird, or can serve as a space of subversive potential, where the tomboy benefits from the

---

guidance of a queer maternal, avuncular, or materteral surrogate. In Frankie's case, this is the role filled by Berenice, an ostensible heteronormal figure who protects and guides the tomboy on her difficult journey through adolescence.

While critics such as Gary Richards dismiss Berenice as a stereotypical mammy figure, who "understands heterosexual intimacy as something of a panacea for the world's ills," this interpretation fails to consider Berenice's own profound disillusionment with the myth of heterosexual romance. Having survived four marriages – widowed once and divorced three times – her own experiences with compulsory heterosexuality have brought her only tragedy, disappointment, and violent abuse. The husbands themselves were "all bad, each one worse than the last before," as Berenice describes them, and "it made Frankie blue just hearing about them" (MW 28). In fact, it was her last husband – the man who "gouged out Berenice's eye and stole her furniture away from her – who permanently marked Berenice as a grotesque figure. "The was only one thing wrong about Berenice," as the narrator describes, "her left eye was bright blue glass. It stared out fixed and wild from her quiet, colored face, and why she had wanted a blue eye nobody human would ever know. Her right eye was dark and sad" (MW 28, 5).

While the artificial blue eye symbolizes the grotesque reality behind the myth of heterosexual romance, it also serves in a productive capacity as well. For Berenice, who acknowledges the reality of oppression through her "dark and sad" right eye, the glass eye instead reflects the queerness inherent in her supposedly heteronormative society. In this way, it resembles feminist Luce Irigaray's conception of the speculum, a curved, anamorphic mirror, which suggests a kaleidoscopic fluidity and excess, an otherness outside of flat, two-way

Indeed this dynamic vision, and its ability to offer a window into the hearts of others, is affirmed by Berenice herself. "You and that wedding at Winter Hill," she scolds Frankie, "That is what I am warning about. I can see right through them two gray eyes of yours like they was glass, and what I see is the saddest piece of foolishness I ever knew" (MW 107). If Berenice's eye signifies wisdom, it is Frankie's eyes that betray her own adolescent naivete, a fact John Henry repeats to offer choral amplification: "Gray eyes is glass" (MW 107).

The depth of Berenice's queer insight and insight, however, also comes at considerable cost. Her dysfunctional marriages have left her deformed, as well as distrustful of those outside her inner circle of influence. As a result, Berenice has learned to recognized the "queerness" that is ironically inherent in her supposedly normal society, and the opportunities it offers. For example, when Berenice speaks of her current affairs with men, she brags about how many "beaus" she has "caught" in her web of seduction, along with the luxuries she enjoys at their expense. "You mean you never pay your own way," asks Frankie's companion John Henry, to which Berenice responds, "That's what I'm telling you [...] Not when I go out with a beau. Now if I was to go somewhere with a crowd of womens, I would have to pay my way. But I'm not the kind of person to go around with crowds of womens" (MW 85). In addition to takin an active role in the courtship process, Berenice also prioritizes her own autonomy and independence. Her

In her groundbreaking text *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Luce Irigaray challenges Plato's formulation of the metaphysical order by reimagining "the myth of the cave" from a feminist perspective. By reevaluating the metaphorical space of origin as the "inner space, of the den, of the womb or hystera, sometimes of the earth," she instead explores it as a space of the maternal imaginary. As Barbara Godard explains, "This imaginary, staged as hypothetical figuration of a feminine libidinal economy organized around the endless circulations of desire, of signs, is articulated 'behind the screen of representation,' and outside the reach of screen memories of a primal Oedipal scenario [...] This is the order of the recursive paradigm, of the anamorphic distorting mirror." See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985) 243; Barbara Godard, "Translating (With) the Speculum," *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Redaction* 4.2 (1991) 100.

The image of the glass eye and its grotesque reflections is a common motif in McCullers's fiction. For another detailed example, see my analysis of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) in Chapter 3.
personal standards will not allow her to marry T.T., a "fine upstanding colored gentleman" who "has walked in a state of grace all his life" (MW 93). When Frankie asks why she would refuse as man "who is crazy about you," Berenice explains that "I respect and regard him highly […] but he don't make me shiver none" (MW 93-94).

Thus, as a "queer heterosexist," Berenice attempts to heterosexualize and racialize her tomboy charge, while simultaneously protecting her from male violence and exploitation. She encourages Frankie to empower herself through performance, and tells her "You ought to fix yourself up nice in your dresses. And speak sweetly and act sly" in order to "catch you a beau" (MW 78). These instructions are based on Berenice's belief that "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear;" and that "you had to cut your suit according to the cloth, and make the best of what you had" (MW 90). In other words, Berenice does not attempt to "tame" Frankie's tomboy tendencies, but instead advises strategic concealment as a strategy for snaring a suitable beau.

As an uncompromising realist, she reminds Frankie of the value of patience and humility, and attempts to dispell her childish illusions; "You cozen and change things too much in your own mind," she chastizes at one point, "And that is a serious fault" (MW 34). Instead of rejecting conventional heteronorms – or attempting to transform them, as Frankie does with her "we of me" fantasy – Berenice emphasizes the importance of knowing ones position in the southern social matrix, and thus learning to manipulate the system from within. By advising Frankie to pursue "A nice little white boy beau," she attempts to find a socially acceptable conduit for the tomboy's active desires, while reminding Frankie of her privileged racial status (MW 82).

To read Berenice as a "queer heterosexist" is not to imply that she precludes any potential for gender or sexual alterity in southern society. While she herself prefers the advantages of a
"closeted" existence, she also demonstrates and awareness – and surprising acceptance – of other more visibly queer forms of subjectivity. Her belief in the mutability of gender and sexual identity is nowhere more apparent, for example, than in her story of Lily Mae Jenkins:

"I have heard many a queer thing," said Berenice […] I have seen some of the most peculiar weddings anybody could conjecture. […] I have known boys to take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys. You know Lily Mae Jenkins?"

[Frankie] thought for a minute, and then answered: "I'm not sure."

"Well you either know him or you don't know him. He prissed around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo. Now this Lily Mae fell in love with a man named Juney Jones. A man, mind you. And Lily Mae turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl."

"Honest?" [Frankie] asked. "Did he really?"

"He did," said Berenice, "to all intents and purposes." (MW 81-82)\

While Berenice acknowledges the problems Lily Mae faces as a result of his overtly queer appearance and behavior – with a warning that "you don't need to know Lily Mae Jenkins. You can live without knowing him" – the anecdote nevertheless introduces a counternarrative that signifies a rupture in the heteronormative script. Lily Mae's existence as a transgendered homosexual introduces Frankie to the possibilities of queer adulthood. In other words, she learns to accept that gender, like sexuality, is not a natural condition, but rather a discursive production open to interruption and revision.

This queer knowledge – that self-affirmation can be found outside the confined of
traditional marriage – is further reinforced by Berenice's foster brother, the implicitly
homosexual Honey Brown. Unlike the dull and respectable T.T., Honey's deviant identity
inspires Frankie's imagination, and she feel a deep sense of kinship towards him. Whereas T.T.
is described as being "very big and black," Honey, as his name suggests, is a figure whose queer
sexuality is implied by his racially ambiguous appearance. As the narrator describes,
it was almost as though he came from some foreign country, like Cuba or Mexico […] he
was lightskinned, almost lavender in color, with quiet narrow eyes like oil, and a limber
body […] Honey could talk like a white school teacher; his lavender lips could move as
quick and light as butterflies. But he only answered with a colored word, a dark sound
from the throat that could mean anything. (MW 38)\textsuperscript{146}

In her description of Honey Brown as a "partly-colored" subject," one who resists classification
as either "black" or "white," McCullers anticipates what Frantz Fanon has characterized in \textit{Black
Skin, White Masks} (1967) as the "epidermal schema" of racial difference.\textsuperscript{147} Honey's racial
interstitiality marks him as a grotesque figure, or, as the fortune-teller Big Mama describes him,
"a boy God had not finished […] a peculiar half-boy" (MW 128). Thus, the gender-transitive
tomboy finds an ally in the racially-transitive figure of Honey Brown.

\textsuperscript{146} Homosexuality is here codified through the use of lavender, for, as Tison Pugh writes, "'Lavender' has faded from
the gay lexicon but commonly signified homosexuality in the early to mid-twentieth century." See Tison Pugh,

\textsuperscript{147} In Western history, as Frantz Fanon argues, "cultural logic [has] presupposed a biological foundation of race
visibly evident in physical features such as facial structures, hair color and texture, and skin color." For these
reasons, while the precise definition of race may change in the United States, Richard Dyer observes that one
element remains constant: "concepts of race are always concepts of the body." See Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White
Ultimately, whether it is through her queer powers of perception or her deviant companions, Berenice is able to introduce Frankie to a far more expansive and complex understanding of Otherness than that explored in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In Harper Lee's novel, the queerness of such figures as Miss Maudie or Boo Radley is ultimately overshadowed by the overpowering influence of Aunt Alexandra, or the patriarchal Atticus Finch. In *The Member of the Wedding*, on the other hand, Frankie's father is left unnamed, and plays only a minor role in her life. It is instead Berenice towards whom she looks for support and guidance, as Frankie finds in this masculine woman the qualities of control, independence, and knowledge that she so desperately longs to possess. While Frankie struggles to articulate her inchoate desires, she admires how "when Berenice spoke […] her voice was a strong deep song that soared and sang in beautiful dark tones leaving and echo in the corners of the room that trembled for a long time until silence" (*MW* 97). Indeed, when "Berenice spoke in an unwinding kind of voice" to say "she was happier than a queen," it appears to Frankie "That Berenice resembled a strange queen, if a queen can be colored and sitting at a kitchen table" (*MW* 102). It is thus, as a "strange queen," that Berenice defies predominant racial and gender stereotypes, and reigns as a figure of queer empowerment.

**Part 4 – Negotiating Queer Adulthood**

While queer mentors like Berenice and Miss Maudie play an integral role in the lives of these tomboy protagonists, their ultimate effectiveness against the institutional forces of "tomboy taming" are still subject to debate. In American culture, as critics such as Michelle Anne Abate, Sharon O'Brien, and Judith Halberstam have observed, "tomboyism" has historically been tolerated, and even encouraged in childhood, so long as such tendencies are abandoned in
adolescence. While tomboy narratives by female authors often work to subvert women's traditional gender roles, there are many that, to quote Abate, still "conclude with the all-too-familiar trope of wedding bells and baby cries" (xx). Still, while many young women are pressured into marriage and motherhood, there are also those for whom adolescence serves as a space of potential, in which the queer child transforms into the empowered queer adult. As a subversive figure, as Sarah Gleeson-White argues, "the female adolescent is even more 'grotesque' than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood […] To exist on the threshold obtains within it grotesque possibilities of becoming" (12). In other words, tomboys like Frankie and Scout function as important sites of queer resistance, for it is figure of the adolescent – the representative of a new generation, the future as hope and possibility – in which society invests a great deal.

For a successful transition to queer adulthood, the tomboy depends on the guidance of her adult role models, those transgressive figures outside the nuclear family who play a formative role in the child's development. Reading the conclusions of To Kill a Mockingbird and The Member of the Wedding, however, there are many critics who continue to argue that both Frankie and Scout ultimately capitulate to the demands of southern womanhood. Louise Westling and Barbara White, for example, have both interpreted The Member of the Wedding as a story of "female limits." In her study of To Kill a Mockingbird, Smaranda Stefanovici similarly argues that "this ongoing oscillation between fitting and getting away from the stereotypical 'Southern Belle' kind of woman […] ends with Scout becoming one of them" (87). While many of Frankie and Scout's tomboy traits do appear, at least on the surface, to have either been reformed or

---

148 See Abate xix; O'Brien 354; Halberstam 210.

149 See Westling 109, 119; White 109.
"tamed," I argue, to the contrary, that a careful examination of these "adult" tomboys allows for a much more positive interpretation of both these novels. As the final sections of both these narratives demonstrate, Frankie and Scout have actually internalized the lessons of their queer mentors, and thus have successfully carved a niche for themselves within the framework of heteronormative society.

In the third and final act of *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie finally experiences the full disciplinary weight of patriarchal society. Ignoring Berenice's advice, her dreams of becoming a "member" of her cousin's wedding fail spectacularly, as she is physically dragged away from the couple in tears. When she makes a last-ditch attempt to run away from home, she is caught by a male police officer and returned to her father's custody. As the narrator describes,

> It was her father who had sicked the law on her, and she would not be carried to jail. In a way, she was sorry. It was better to be in a jail where you could bang the walls than in a jail you could not see. The world was too far away, and there was no way anymore that she could be included. She was back to the fear of the summertime, the old feelings that the world was separate from herself – and the failed wedding had quickened the fear to terror. (*MW* 157).

At this moment, Frankie realizes the futility of her childish fantasies, and her own vulnerability outside the confines of normative society: "For now she admitted that she was too scared to go into the world alone" (*MW* 155). This traumatic experience has a catalyzing effect on Frankie, as she appears to instantly transition from adolescence to adulthood. The reader is suddenly introduced to thirteen-year old Frankie, who now goes by the more feminine name "Frances," and who anticipates moving to the suburbs – a space traditionally reserved for white
Meanwhile, Berenice has decided to retire and marry T.T. after all, a decision motivated by self-preservation rather than passion. For those characters who continue to defy heteronormative expectations, the consequences are particularly severe. Frankie's effeminate companion John Henry, as the reader learns, has died after a torturous battle with meningitis, while Honey Brown has been sentenced to eight years on the chain gang.

While Frankie's queer counterparts have all but disappeared, she has subsequently found a more socially-appropriate companion in Mary LittleJohn, a neighborhood girl who is characterized by her whiteness and femininity. As Miho Matsui observes, in consensus with Westling and White, "These changes symbolically mark the end of Frankie's freakish tomboyhood; she is now a normative white girl" (172). However, the extent to which Frankie has been effectively "normalized," I argue, has never been carefully gauged.

While the critical consensus has been to identify Frankie/Frances as, in Matsui's words, "a normative white girl," I argue instead that McCullers offers numerous narrative clues to the contrary. Not only is Frankie's transition abrupt, but it seems to contradict Frankie's appearance, behavior, and personality, all of which have remained more or less consistent over the course of the narrative. The new, feminine Frances shares little in common with the old Frankie Addams, who, just a few pages earlier, had considered suicide an an alternative to capture: "She said she would shoot herself if her bride and her brother would not take her. She pointed the pistol at the side of her head and held it there for a minute or two" (MW 153). Rather than claiming her life as the ultimate act of independence, however, she chooses a different path, and lowers the pistol.

150 Coupled with being a product of the postwar building boom, suburbia was a product of postwar efforts at racial consolidation. The racial exclusivity associated with these subdevelopments was so pronounced that historian Catherine Jurca refers to it as the "white diaspora." See Catherine Jurca, White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth Century Novel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001). See also Rosalind Rosenberg, Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992) 145.
It is at this point, as her subsequent actions demonstrate, that she finally takes the lessons of her mammy to heart, and works to exploit the heteronormative conventions she ones bitterly opposed.

Consider, for instance, the implications of Frankie's relationship with Mary LittleJohn. While her friendship with Mary associates Frankie with "appropriate" feminine society – just as membership in the missionary circle does for Miss Maudie – it also offers the opportunity to pursue her dreams of world travel, not with a heterosexual couple or a "white boy beau," but with a female companion instead. Critics such as Lori Kenschaft and Rachel Adams have also argued that Frankie's relationship with Mary is characterized by distinctly homoerotic undertones, as the narrator describes "the wonder of her love" for Mary, who "Frances had defended fiercely" as "her one most intimate friend" (MW 160). As Nancy Bombaci argues in Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning, and Carson McCullers (2007), "the potential for transgression remains, for Frankie's closeness to Mary has lesbian implications [...] Unknown to her family – and even to herself – Frankie transfers her initial lesbian desire for Berenice onto Mary LittleJohn, initiating a friendship that simultaneously fosters social acceptance and gender transgression." In other words, it is Berenice who serves as catalyst for Frankie's sexual awakening, and Mary who serves as a conduit for her repressed homosexual desires.

A lesbian reading of The Member of the Wedding is further supported by the novel's historical and semi-autobiographical content. Indeed, as Rachel Adams observes, "the multiple

151 See Kenschaft 228-229; Adams 109.

152 Nancy Bombaci, Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning, and Carson McCullers (New York: Peter Lang, 2007) 131.
valences of the queer in [McCullers's] fiction derive from her own encounters with the homophobia of the dominant culture as well as with communities that encouraged a more diverse array of sex and gender identification" (554-555). The novel was written over the course of World War II, after all, a period of increased sexual freedom in the United States brought about by the separation of families, the growth and diversification of urban populations, and the disturbance of established social and economic configurations.\textsuperscript{153} It was also during this time that McCullers moved to New York, where she engaged in affairs with a series of women, and lived for a time with a "queer aggregate of artists" such as W.H. Auden and Gypsy Rose Lee.\textsuperscript{154}

It is also through Frankie's relationship with Mary LittleJohn that Frankie's tomboy tendencies appear to resurface. Indeed, the two appear to represent the classic butch-and-femme configuration of lesbian desire, as Frankie's masculine traits are complemented by Mary's hyperfemininity.\textsuperscript{155} While Mary maintains a silent presence in the text, it is Frankie who declares that "they were going around the world together," and announces their plans to support themselves as artists (MW 159). In contrast to the younger Frankie, who earlier laments that "[her] plans for the movies or the Marines were child plans that would never work," the adult Frances aspires to establish herself as "a great poet – or else the foremost authority on radar," the latter of which was still a traditionally male profession in midcentury America (MW 157, 159).

\textsuperscript{153} According to historians John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freeman, the social circumstances of World War II contributed to the development of homosexual subcultures in cities such as New York. See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freeman, \textit{Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America} (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 239-260.

\textsuperscript{154} See Carr 199.

\textsuperscript{155} In the 1940s and 50s, according to Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, the butch/femme dynamic was a social imperative in working-class lesbian relationships. See Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, \textit{Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community} (New York: Routledge, 1993).
Thus, by assuming the male role of the husband, Frances is able to retain her independence and autonomy. As a "queer heterosexist," however, she not only restructures the traditional dynamics of heterosexual marriage, but does so in a way that empowers, rather than subjugates her partner. Frankie makes no attempts to "domesticate" Mary LittleJohn, but rather encourages her creative efforts, and believes that Mary will one day develop into "a great painter" (MW 159). In other words, by interrupting and rewriting the heteronarrative script, the tomboy has emerged from childhood as a queer "butch" adult.

In contrast to Frankie, Scout's transition to adulthood in To Kill a Mockingbird remains more ambiguous and uncertain by the novel's end. Existing only as the narrator, the adult Jean Louise never actually appears in the text, and is represented only by her voice. As critic Gregory Jay asserts, "The often ambiguous splitting of the story-telling voice is critical," for, as the narrator, "[Jean Louise] remains in the closet, even as she empowers the portrait of her childhood self to articulate the counter-normative agenda." Queerness is made visible through the adult's fantasy of her tomboy childhood, but, as Jay argues, "that freedom depends on projecting the condition of the closet, along with its shame, loneliness, and stigmatizing, onto Mayella and Boo" (519). This is similarly true of Miss Maudie, whose queer identity is dependant on a partly-closeted existence.

Just as McCullers's sexual curiosity and rebellious personality were reflected in her fiction, it was also the case that Harper Lee – like her deviant characters in To Kill a Mockingbird – lived a comparatively closeted existence. Throughout her life, as Irene Monroe writes in her article "The Truth About Harper Lee," "One of the most frequently asked questions about Harper Lee was about her sexual orientation. Lee obviously wanted this answer hidden from the public, but her reclusiveness and annoyance with the question only contributed
to the curiosity."\(^{156}\) The novel has also established an important place in the American LGBTQ canon, with the Publishing Triangle ranking *To Kill a Mockingbird* 67\(^{th}\) on their list of The 100 Best Gay and Lesbian Novelists. This enduring popularity is due to the fact that, as Victoria Brownsworth explains in her article "A Queer Look at Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*," "No lesbian or gay reader of *To Kill a Mockingbird* came away from the book without feeling that there was someone else like him or her, be it Scout or her friend Dill."\(^{157}\) Still, the "truth" of the author's sexuality has remained a closeted secret, even in the wake of her recent passing.

Scout's queer potential is also limited by her unwavering commitment to her father's authority. While, as Smaranda Stefanovici observes, "it is obvious [...] that Scout's tomboyishness relates to her developing sense of female self," this development is stunted by "Scout's devotion to her father's opinions" (82). Throughout the novel, both Scout and her brother idolize Atticus as a model of southern gentility and honor, both essential qualities of a traditional gentleman.\(^{158}\) For the most part, Atticus prefers to avoid the world of women completely – preferring the masculine world of the courthouse – however, it is he who invites his sister Alexandra into their home, and supports her efforts to "feminize" Scout. At one point, as the narrator recalls,

> Atticus suddenly grew serious. In his lawyer's voice, without a shade of


\(^{158}\) According to historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "honor" and "gentility were the two defining qualities of the antebellum gentleman: "Honor in the Old South applied to all white classes, though with manifestations appropriate to each ranking. Few could escape it altogether. Gentility, on the other hand, was a more specialized, refined form of honor, in which moral uprightness was coupled with a high social position." See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 81.
inflection, he said: "Your aunt has asked me to try and impress upon you and Jean Louise that you are not from run-of-the-mill people, that you are a product of several generations' gentle breeding —" [...] She asked me too tell you you must try to behave like the little lady and gentleman that you are. (TM 151)

This is neither the first nor the only moment where Atticus reiterates his belief in traditional gender roles. Earlier in the text, the narrator describes how "Atticus had once promised to wear me out if he ever heard of me fighting anymore; I was far too old and too big for such childish things" (TM 85). Later, when Scout ponders whether women should be allowed to serve on a jury, her father dismisses the idea offhand: "I guess it's to protect our frail ladies from sordid cases like Tom's, besides," Atticus laughs, "I doubt if we'd ever get a complete case tried – the ladies'd be interrupting to ask questions" (TM 252).

As the novel approaches its conclusion, it becomes increasingly apparent that Scout has learned to internalize the expectations of her father, as well as those of Aunt Alexandra and her missionary circle. She is no longer the same tomboy with the mercurial temper and rebellious nature, for, as she describes, "our lives had become the familiar routine of school, play, and study" (TM 287). The story itself ends with Atticus undressing and tucking in a sleepy Scout for bed.

Still, when one considers Scout’s relationships with outsiders like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley – the two "mockingbirds" to which the title refers – it becomes possible to reevaluate her, at least to an extent, as a figure of queer resistance. The tomboy's close bonds with the outcasts of Maycomb county – relationships facilitated by Miss Maudie's lesson's on female autonomy and social tolerance – illustrates the capacity for marginalized figures to forge alliances of support with one another. It is thus through the queer tutelage of the spinster that Scout learns
the implications behind another of her father's greatest lessons: "there's just one kind of folks. Folks" (TM 259).
Chapter 2 – A Harp of Other Voices: The Avunculate, the Amitate, and the Queer Sissy in

*Truman Capote's Other Voices, Other Rooms and The Grass Harp*

With the emergence of queer and feminist theory in southern literary discourse, the tomboy, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, has been established as the preeminent figure of queer childhood in Southern Renaissance fiction. The epistemology of the tomboy had been codified in Michelle Ann Abate's groundbreaking work, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (2008), and my study of the queer tomboy in Carson McCullers contributes to an existing body of scholarship by such southern literary critics as Louise Westling and Sarah Gleeson-White.159 In their preoccupation with the tomboy, however, these and other critics have somehow failed to acknowledge the role of her constant companion and literary counterpart. Indeed, as Abate observes, "more often than not, a tomboy's closest friend is a 'sissy' boy rather than another tough girl," and yet her study of tomboyhood dedicates only a single page to this figure, with the dismissive claim that "the union between a tomboy and a sissy generally poses no threat" to conventional gender roles (xvi-xvii). By working to foreground the role of the adolescent sissy in Truman Capote's fiction, therefore, this chapter not only challenges the critical consensus, but offers the first study of the effeminate boy as a queer figure of resistance in American literature.

The absence of sissy criticism is even more remarkable when one considers his ubiquitous presence in the southern canon. There are a number of sissy boy characters that continue to remain unexamined – Bubber Kelly in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), for example, or John Henry in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) – and would benefit from further critical inquiry. Perhaps the most well-known sissy in American culture is Dill Harris, a character in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961) inspired by the childhood

159 For more on the figure of the tomboy in southern literature, see Chapter 1.
of Truman Capote. This chapter, however, focuses on two relatively less known works – Capote's semi-autobiographical *Kunstlerroman, Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), and his novella, *The Grass Harp* (1951) – both of which are narrated from the perspective of the effeminate male protagonists.

While the literature of Carson McCullers and Harper Lee was released to generally favorable reviews, it was the controversy surrounding the publication of Capote's first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, that catapulted the author to literary fame. The violent backlash surrounding the publication of the text – which focused on novel's explicit treatment of intergenerational relationships, childhood sexuality, and most importantly boyhood effeminacy – exemplified how paranoia concerning the sissy boy's transgressive potential had reached crisis levels by the late-1940s. However, as this chapter argues, it is Capote's positive and empowered depictions of adolescent sissyhood, and the potential of the queer avuncular and amitalocal influence, that allow the sissy to be revalued as a queer figure of potential at least a decade ahead of its time.

Compared to the hapless homosexuals in the literature of Capote's male contemporaries, such as in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) or James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), where effeminacy is conflated with same-sex desire, the sissy's journey of self-discovery in Capote's fiction does not lead to self-destruction, violence, rape, and death. Instead, not only does the sissy's sexuality remain ambiguous, but his embodiment of "male femininity" – the inverse of Judith Halberstam's concept of "female masculinity" in her 1998 work of the same name – enables him in ways different from, but complementary to, those of his tomboy

---

Joel Knox, the sixteen-year old hero of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, for example, declares his queer identity out loud: "I am me!" For, as the narrator explains, "he knew who he was. He knew that he was strong."\(^{162}\)

This self-affirming conclusion, which similarly occurs in *The Grass Harp*, when sixteen-year old Collin Fenwick describes his community as "a harp of voices remembering a story," was over a decade ahead of its time.\(^{163}\) As Vito Russo indicates in *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981), homosexual characters in literature and film often met with predictably fatal outcomes, a trend which continued even after the ban on homosexuality in films was lifted in 1961.\(^ {164}\) Still in spite of its deviation from the cliché of the "doomed homosexual," *Other Voice, Other Rooms* and *The Grass Harp* have remained relatively obscure, especially compared to the popular acclaim of Capote's later works, such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) and *In Cold Blood* (1966). As a result, with the exception of recent work by Tison Pugh, Gary Richards, and Brian Mitchell-Peters, there exists little scholarship on either of these texts.\(^ {165}\)

---


C. Waldmeir include only a single essay on *Other Voices, Other Rooms*: a 1962 article by psychoanalyst Marvin E. Mengeling criticizing Joel's "perverse" effeminacy.\textsuperscript{166}

Characterized by its pronounced homophobia and misogyny, Mengeling's essay "*Other Voices, Other Rooms*: Oedipus Between the Covers" exemplifies the consensus towards the sissy in American literary and cultural discourse, a consensus that has continued into the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century.\textsuperscript{167} At best, these characters have been either ignored or received cursory critical attention. According to Michelle Anne Abate's brief assessment, the tomboy and sissy tend to police each other's gender transgressions rather than encourage them. The tomboy is credited for "masculinizing effeminate boys: [...] teach[ing] their weak counterparts to be adventurous, assert themselves, and even fight" (Abate xvii). Meanwhile, as Mary Elliott asserts, "Sissies hardly ever feminize tomboys," for "Even when tomboys are paired off with reform male sissies, they are tempered not by these flawed boys but through the historically constant presence of gender and heterosexual pressure" (11). By dismissing the sissy as "weak," however, queer and feminist critics ironically work to reinforce a binary understanding of gender, one that privileges masculine subjectivity over its feminine Other.

This chapter therefore works to offer a corrective to what has continued to be a disturbing trend in queer criticism. This is not to suggest that the discourse of female masculinities, as articulated by Halberstam and others, does not carry empowering implications. Certainly, "butch" women and tomboys can embody and perform masculinity in positive, self-affirming


ways, and there are innumerable "alternative masculinities" which avoid wedding masculinity to maleness, and power to domination.

The valorization of masculinity becomes problematic, however, when it is championed at the expense of femininity and the feminine subject. Halberstam's monolithic focus not only essentializes gender categories, but also works to marginalize femininity, and male femininity in particular, "which fulfills a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures" (*Female Masculinity* 9). The pathologization of the sissy body, which originated with the rise of sexology at the turn of the 20th Century – as the following section illustrates – proves quite to the contrary of Halberstam's assessment.

(Ef)feminophobia is hardly a new phenomenon. Ironically, the politics of antifemininity have maintained a vocal presence feminist history for over a two centuries. Such sentiments can be traced as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in which she deplores the traits of character typically attributed to lower-class women; traits such as irrationality, infantilism, artifice, weakness, dependency, inertia, crippling modesty and forbearance, non-purposeful thought and action, frivolity, and a taste for littleness. Predictably, this disgust with the female character prompted Wollstonecraft to "look to the imitation of manly virtues, or more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character."168 The result, it seems, has been a tradition of "empowered gynophobia," which still resonates in queer cultures today.169

169 The feminist aversion to femininity is itself an interesting, but relatively little-discussed area within feminist criticism. See Emily Apter, "Reflections on Gynophobia," *Coming Out of Feminism?*, eds. Mandy Merck, Naomi Segal, and Elizabeth Wright (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell P, 1998) 102-122.
This chapter works to address issues of (ef)feminophobia through the figure of the empowered sissy adolescent. To Wollstonecraft's unflattering depiction of femininity, I propose that Joel Knox in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Collin Fenwick in *The Grass Harp* embody a powerful counterdiscourse, one in which "irrationality" and "infantilism" are revalued as the feminine qualities of imagination and abstract perception. The sissy's skill "artifice" and his propensity for "non-purposeful speech" are reconstituted in his abilities as a performer and a storyteller. He is not "dependent" and those around him, and feels content in solitude. He is equally comfortable within his community, too, and his empathy and humility enable him to connect with others, such as the tomboyish Idabel, or the cross-dressing Cousin Randolph in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

While my analysis constitutes the first positive appraisal of the sissy boy in southern literature, I am notably not the first scholar to observe his transgressive potential. For example, as film critic Bradley Boney observes in his article "The Lavender Brick Road: Paul Bonin-Rodriguez and the Sissy Bo(d)dy," "real or perceived effeminacy has been shown to be the most common factor in histories of adult gay men" in 20th Century American theater and cinema, and yet, though "an affirmative sissy-boy criticism [...] would be uniquely positioned to challenge the category of the 'normal,' it has been largely absent from queer/gay studies." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes this observation a step further in her article "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in which she declares that, not only would queer theory benefit from an "affirmative" revaluation of the effeminate boy, but that such a project is essential. According to Sedgwick, "the eclipse of the effeminate boy from gay discourse would represent more than a damaging theoretical gap; it would represent a node of annihilating homophobic, 

---

gynophobic, and pedophobic hatred internalized and made central to gay affirmative analysis” ("Effeminate Boys" 142).

This study thus engages in the redemptive project called for by Boney and Sedgwick. By analyzing the development of Capote’s effeminate protagonists, who stand at the threshold of adulthood, I work to consider the queer strategies through which the author transforms the traditionally pejorative signifier into one of affirmation and empowerment. The sissy boy protagonist in Capote’s fiction thus serves as a proto-queer figure, one enabled by his embodiment of "male femininity," what Sedgwick refers to as "the haunting abject of gay thought itself" ("Effeminate Boys" 157). Such an analysis, therefore, works to liberate the sissy body from the phobic discourses that continue to surround it.

The 20th Century South of Capote’s childhood offers a particularly interesting locus for such a study. For Truman Capote and others, the effeminate sissy was not just a literary creation, but also a lived experience southern boys, as Kevin Sessums documents in his memoirs, Mississippi Sissy (2007). Part 1 of this study therefore begins by providing a brief history of the "sissy," as he came to be constituted over the first half of the 20th Century. Throughout America, the "sissy boy" would emerge as a figure around whom pathologizing discourses of gender and sexuality would coalesce. With this sissy was originally consigned to the margins of American culture, he would become increasingly regarded as a threat to U.S. society and nationhood, as these anxieties would reach their apex between the 1940s and 1960s. Ultimately, the sissy would become a figure so derogated that even the already marginalized gay culture in the South held him in disdain.

---

171 Kevin Sessums, Mississippi Sissy (New York: Picador, 2007).
Part 1 – Sissies and "Real" Boys

For Truman Capote, Other Voices, Other Rooms would begin a preoccupation with childhood innocence that he would return to time and again throughout his career.  For his first two novels, Capote drew heavily from his own southern childhood in Monroeville, Alabama, a childhood during which the stigma of effeminacy would cause the adolescent Truman a great deal of grief in the 1930s. Despite his intimate friendship with a young Nell Harper Lee, his constant tomboy companion over the course of his life, Capote's sissified mannerisms worked to isolate him from both his peers and his mother, that latter of which affected him deeply. "Other Voices was an attempt to exorcise demons," as Capote would write of the book a quarter-century later in The Dog’s Bark: Public People and Private Places (1973), and indeed, Joel can be read as a stand-in for the author himself.

Similarly to Truman himself, the fiction Joel Knox of Other Voices, Other Rooms is described as having inherited the burden of southern history from his Confederate ancestors. The reader is introduced to Joel as he is being transported to Skully's Landing, an old southern manse belonging to his matronly Aunt Amy. Just as Joel reflects on the memories of his mother, and desires acceptance from his father, the mysterious Mr. Sansom, Capote himself felt

---

172 Even the adult characters in Capote’s later fiction would exhibit distinctly childlike characteristics. Holly Golightly, the southern heroine of Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1958), for example, is as vulnerable, anxious, and lost as a little girl. The murder Perry Smith in In Cold Blood (1966), too, is described sympathetically as a small, childlike genius preoccupied with the memories of his boyhood. See Bruce Bower, “Capote’s Children,” The New Criterion (1985): 39-44.


174 Elaborating on this point, Capote’s biographer Gerald Clarke describes Other Voices, Other Rooms as a “psychological autobiography: charting, under the guise of fiction, the anguished journey that ended in his discovery of his identity as a man, as a homosexual, and as an artist.” See Gerald Clarke, Capote: A Biography (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 150. Subsequently cited in text as Clarke, Capote.
abandoned as a child. He too grew up without a father figure, and was raised largely under the care of his Monroeville aunts. The bond Joel quickly establishes with the tomboyish Idabel Tompkins is also comparable to the authors friendship with Harper Lee, who was herself a consummate southern tomboy. As Capote's biographer Gerald Clarke describe this real-life tomboy/sissy duo,

> The bond that united them was stronger than friendship – it was a common anguish. They both bore the bruises of paternal rejection, and they both were shattered by loneliness. Neither had many other real friends. Nell was too rough for most girls, and Truman was too soft for most other boys [...] People often remarked that with his white-blond hair and sky-blue eyes, he was pretty enough to be a girl. (22)

Capote's initial description of Joel – the passive subject of the masculine trucker Sam Radclif's gaze – serves to emphasize his feminine attributes. "He was too pretty," thinks Radclif, as he drives him to the Landing, "too delicate"; he is a sensitive boy who exhibits a "girlish tenderness," and speaks with a voice "uncommonly soft." Such attributes disturb Radclif immensely: "He had his notions of what a 'real' boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them" (OV 4, 5).

With the exception of only the equally childlike and sissified Cousin Randolph, the characters at and around Skully's Landing pressure Joel throughout the text to outgrow and abandon his effeminate tendencies. Capote wastes little time in establishing the threat the sissy presents in culture of masculine, heteronormative privilege. Radclif's feelings, for example, are betrayed by the sadistic and homoerotic undertones latent in his desire to discipline the young boy: "Yessir, if I was your Pa, I'd take down your britches and muss you up a bit" (OV 9). For his part Joel feels nothing in common with Radclif, nor with the whiskey-drinking, "hot
tempered" men at Noon City, who gather away from the ladies to joke, play jacknife, and settle their quarrels with fists (OV 19).

When Joel finally arrives as Skully's Landing, however, it is ironically the women who take on the task of "masculinizing" their young ward. Upon his arrival, Miss Amy discourages his peaceful and introspective nature, and instead encourages him to spend the evening bird hunting (OV 62). Zoo, the Landing's black housekeeper, even voices he frustrations outright: "first thing you know, boy, folks is gonna say you got to wee squattin' down" (OV 115). The tomboyish Idabel – who is herself well aware of the strictures and limitations placed on femininity – is particularly vitriolic in her attempts to make a man out of this "sissy-britches" (OV 108, 109).

While Joel is not meant as an exact autobiographical sketch of a young Truman Capote, he certainly endured disciplinary measure similar to those of his protagonist. Unfortunately for Capote, his childhood would coincide with a period in American history that marked a critical shift in both popular and professional understanding about gender in childhood, and in boyhood in particular. Before this paradigm shift, as Julia Grant argues in her article, "A 'Real Boy' and Not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890-1940," the 19th Century middle-class preserved childhood as a period of life uncontaminated by sexuality. One marker of middle- or upper-class status was in fact the frivolity of dress with which boys and girls alike were adorned. According to Grant, the ideals of behavior for both young girls and boys were strikingly similar: "While boys were associated with qualities such as roughness and cruelty to animals, the typical 'hero' of a children's book embodied instead ideal feminine virtues: tenderness, refinement, and restraint." Even in the late-19th Century, the popularity of the noble, refined, and self-effacing

---

boy-hero in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) attests the effeminate boy's appeal in American culture.

At the turn of the 20th Century, however, an aggressively masculine ideal emerged in contradistinction to the effeminate male. The "sissy," a once benign term that originated in mid-19th Century America, became a clinical term indicative of psychological dysfunction and sexual inversion. Professionals in the newly minted fields of sexology and psychology increasingly came to regard gender and sexuality as products of cultural upbringing. Experts now sought to delineate the "normal" trajectory of childhood and sexual development, and to mediate that process accordingly. "The 'real' or 'regular' boy was the standard against which boys were measured," as Grant explains, "while effeminate boys were considered deviants in the making" (831). President Roosevelt himself would declare boyhood effeminacy a threat to the progress of American civilization.

In other words, the age of childhood asexuality was at an end. In its place, Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the History of Sexuality* (1905) methodologically mapped and largely inaugurated the theoretical interface between the "child" and the "pervert." According to Freud, the perverse tendencies of the child – if not properly channeled towards heterosexual adulthood – could leave the subject paralyzed in a state of arrested development. G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* (1904) also emphasized the the importance of childhood and puberty as critical stages in the psychosexual development of the individual.

---

176 This ideal originated in the late-19th Century. See, for example, Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1869), which advocated the notion that “real” boys were rowdy and aggressive, but held hostage by polite Victorian society. This would not emerge as the dominant discourse, however, until the turn of the century.

177 For more on the influence of Freud and Hall, see Introduction.
It was during this period that gender came to be considered a primary indicator of sexual identity. The recently conceptualized idea of "heterosexuality," as Jonathan Ned Katz argues in *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995), now served to explain how biological impulses were transformed into socially appropriate behavior. Homosexuality, as its antithesis, was regarded as a pathology, an illness resulting either from constitutional weakness, improper child-rearing practices, or a combination of the two. For Freud, it was the parents who played the most important role in the process of socialization, and thus the responsibility of the mother and father to guide the child towards heterosexual fulfillment.

As Freudian psychology increasingly came to influence the discourse of childhood, and professionals in the 1920s and 30s came to focus on the psychodynamics of the family, the phenomenon of “mother-blaming” became a preoccupation in both popular and professional discourse. As Molly Ladd Taylor and Lauri Umansky explain in *Making Sense of Women’s Lives: An Introduction to Women’s Studies* (2000), “Three aspects of modern American life exacerbated ‘mother-blaming’” over the first half of the 20th Century, “the dominance of childrearing experts, the growth of state power, and the flux in gender roles, manifested in the growing number of women in the work force and in feminist movements.” According to prominent writer and critic Floyd Dell in *Love in the Machine* (1930), those mothers who coddled their sons and encouraged effeminate behavior were responsible for stunting their child’s development. Influential John B. Watson, too, warned in *Psychological Care of Infant*  

---


and Child (1928) that the so-called “smother-love” of mothers was ruining the temperament of modern boys. In essence, the Victorian cult of motherhood was effectively obliterated.

Emphasis in American culture was no placed on instilling in children a “proper” sense of gender identity. Parental advice columns, articles, and books now championed fatherhood, and fathers were encouraged to counteract the smothering influence of mothers by directing their son towards such “proper” masculine activities as boxing or hunting. The “real boy,” according to the popular advice column of Angelo Patri, was he who measured up to his father’s expectations. Meanwhile, the mother was obliged to play her part by withholding affection and discouraging feminine behavior.

These cultural developments combined to make Capote’s childhood and adolescence a difficult period for the author. “That Truman lacked a positive role model,” as memoirist Marianne M. Moates notes in Truman Capote’s Southern Years: Stories From a Monroeville Cousin (1989), “is an understatement.” Not only had his father abandoned the family, but his mother Nina Capote was herself an advocate of these early-20th Century developments in child rearing. In fact, Nina’s disappointment with her son’s effeminacy bordered on obsession. As Thomas Fahy writes in Understanding Truman Capote (2014), Nina was “ashamed of and repelled by Truman’s effeminacy,” and “She ridiculed him publically and privately, calling him a ‘fairy,’ a ‘pansy,’ and a ‘monster.’ She even set up an appointment with a doctor to give her

---

181 The tradition of dressing infants in pink and blue, for instance, originated in the 1920s, and was established as common practice by the 1930s. See Jo B. Paoletti, “Clothing and Gender in America: Children’s Fashions, 1890-1920,” Signs 13 (1987): 136-143.

182 For example, Parents Magazine featured a monthly column, “For Father’s Only,” that ran through the 1920s and 30s and focused almost exclusively on the raising of boys.

son male-hormone shots.”

It is perhaps no wonder that Capote described her as “the single worst person in my life.”

The Freudian model of child rearing thus foreclosed any potential bonds of intimacy between Truman and his mother. Unfortunately, a more positive mother-son relationship could perhaps have been possible, had Nina not been so invested in the dominant heteronarrative deployed by childcare professionals. After all, as biographer Gerald Clarke notes, Nina did love her son. This relationship, however, was characterized by constant ambivalence: “she loved him and she did not love him; she wanted him and she did not want him; she was proud to be his mother and she was ashamed of him” (Capote 41). Nina would be torn between her feelings of maternal affection and parental obligation throughout her life.

Capote, an effectively “orphaned” adolescent without a positive parental role model, would continue, however, to resist the institutional forces of gender socialization. Instead, as he spent much of his upbringing in the care of his eccentric aunts, he was instead most influenced most powerfully by his “amitalocal” relationships, which could otherwise be described as the female avunculate, or, the "amitate." The role of matriarch belonged to Capote’s Aunt Jenny, a spinster who had earned the respect of most businessmen and landowners in the community. Capote’s closest companion – even closer than Nell, in fact – was Jenny’s childlike elder sister Sook, who Capote saw as not only an aunt, but as a mother and sister as well. These two, as

---


185 See Clarke, Capote 41.

186 While the avunculate refers to the uncle, the amitate can be said to refer to the aunt. According to anthropologist K.N. Dash, "This is the logical opposite of avunculate relationship. This is a relationship between a man and his father's sister. Amitalocality develops out of this kind of relationship. See K.N. Dash, Invitation to Social and Cultural Anthropology (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004) 98.
Marianne Moates claims, would later form the basis for the fictional Dolly and Verena Talbo, Colin’s aunts in *The Grass Harp* (28-29).

Ultimately, it was Sook, as represented by the character of Dolly in *The Grass Harp*, who would nurture Capote’s feminine qualities. She was, as Capote describes Dolly, a gentle healer and a storyteller with an acute sense of intuition: “she had the subterranean intelligence of a bee that knows where to find the sweetest flower” (*GH* 14). As Mary Rudisill, another of Capote’s aunts has documented in *Truman Capote: The Story of His Bizarre and Exotic Boyhood by the Aunt Who Helped Raise Him* (1983) and *Fruitcake: Memories of Truman Capote & Sook* (2000), the home of his aunts in Monroeville offered Capote a queer shelter from the pressures of gender conformity. It was for him a base of support where, with the guidance of Sook and others, Capote would gather the strength, perseverance, and wisdom to carve out his own independent subjectivity. Before exploring the implications of these amitalocal relationships, however, that author’s first novel would demonstrate the power of the avunculate in *Other Voice, Other Rooms* through the character of Cousin Randolph. In doing so, the novel would provoke controversy in the literary community, and gain Capote a degree of prestige and notoriety as a cultural icon.

---

**Part 2 – The Effeminate Menace**

As the young protégé of Carson McCullers – herself a southern tomboy icon – a great deal of anticipation surrounded the young Capote’s first novel. Still, even he could not have imagined the level of controversy and outrage it would generate upon publication. Initial reviews denounced the text as a lurid piece of homosexual pornography. *Time* magazine

---

dismissed the novel as an “immature” work, “designed to make the flesh crawl [...] the
distasteful trappings of its homosexual theme overhang[ing] it like Spanish moss.¹⁸⁸ Even Diana
Trilling, whose review in the Nation praised Capote as a literary genius, was disturbed by what
she considered his “artistic-moral purpose.” “What his book is saying,” she felt, “is that a boy
becomes a homosexual when the circumstances of his life deny him other, more normal
gratifications of his need for affection.”¹⁸⁹

Ironically, in their indignation critics failed to recognize the only explicit depiction of
sexual coitus in the text, a passionate heterosexual encounter between two unnamed African
Americans (OV 187-188). In addition, in what was supposedly a work of homosexual fiction, it
is interesting to note that the neither the protagonist nor any other character – with the exception
of Cousin Randolph – ever identifies as homosexual or demonstrates homoerotic urges. So why
then were critics so quick to condemn the text as a work of homosexual perversion?
The answer can perhaps be found not in the prose itself, but rather on the dust jacket of the
novel’s first edition.¹⁹⁰ Thanks to the now famous – and infamous – Harold Halma photograph

¹⁸⁸ For more on this specific review, see Lily Rothman, “Reading a Stunningly Frank 1948 Time Letter on Truman
Capote and Sexuality,” Time 30 Sep. 2014, web, 10 Mar. 2016. For more on other reviews critical of what they
considered the novel’s homosexual elements, see Carlos Baker, “Deep South Guignol,” Rev. of Other Voices, Other
Rooms, by Truman Capote, New York Times Book Review 18 Jan. 1948: 5; Richard McLaughlin, Rev. of Other

¹⁸⁹ Diana Trilling, Rev. of Other Voices, Other Rooms, by Truman Capote, Nation 31 Jan. 1948: 133-134. Subsequently cited in text.

¹⁹⁰ See Fig. 1 on p. 117.
Fig. 1. Truman Capote's infamous photo on the dustjacket of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). Photograph by Harold Halma, 1947.
of the author, a great deal of readers had taken offense before reaching page one. Lounging on an ornately carved Victorian settee, Capote meets the reader with a provocative, pouting gaze. Every element of the image establishes the passivity of its subject. The result, as Gary Richards observes, is a "brazen performance of one of the most frequently recurring gay types: the passive, effeminate, foppish gay man" (Lovers & Beloveds 32). That effeminacy functioned as a signifier for sexual deviance can be read in the response of Newton Arvin, Capote's former colleague, mentor, and lover: "There is a look in [those] eyes I know so well [...] and that I decidedly hope no other human being knows in the same way."\footnote{191}

Halma's photograph generated perhaps more controversy than even the text itself. Several newspapers and magazines reprinted in alongside their reviews. Both the effeminacy and the youthful appearance of Capote carried offensive, and even sinister implications.\footnote{192} Halma, for instance, once overheard the following exchange between two ladies discussing a blowup of the photo in a bookstore window: "I'm telling you he's just young," said one, "to which the other responded, "and I'm telling you, if he isn't young, he's dangerous."\footnote{193} This "slim, exotic looking faun," as Clarke describes him, was now a threat to society.\footnote{194}

It was during this time that boyhood effeminacy was considered a precursor to adult homosexuality, and the homosexual was branded an enemy of the state. Sissies were thus no longer pitied as the victims of their suppose psychosexual affliction, as they were in the 1920s

\footnote{191} See Clarke, Capote 154.  
\footnote{192} For example, Gertrude Steinem described the photograph as a piece of smut that "did not encourage readers looking for depth." See Gertrude Steinem, "A Visit With Truman Capote," Truman Capote: Conversations, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987) 74.  
\footnote{193} See Clarke, Capote 156.  
and 30s. Strengthened by postwar prosperity and the growth of a consumer society, as history
Elaine Tyler May observes, a new "family culture" emerged, a culture designed around the
heterosexual family unit. With the inception of the Cold War, too, the stability of the family
came to be seen as buffer against the threat of communism and nuclear destruction.  

In this culture of national paranoia, the Kinsey reports of 1948 and 1953 hit America like
a bombshell. With Kinsey's research, Americans were now alert to the prevalence among family
members of premarital sex, homosexual tendencies, and extramarital intercourse, all of which
deviated from the heterosexual imperative of monogamy upon which family stability was
established. Cultural anxieties reached crisis levels as a result. According to historian Daniel
Gomes, in his article "'Sissy' Boys and 'Unhappy' Girls: Childrearing During the Cold War," those who did not embrace marriage and parenthood were often perceived to be "perverted,
immoral, unpatriotic, and pathological" by therapists, and therefore were considered a threat to
national security. Those accused of sexual deviance were discharged from the military, placed
under Congressional investigation, disbarred from federal jobs, monitored by the FBA, branded
by state sexual psychopath laws, harassed by the police, and shamed by the press.  

Considering the historical context, therefore, Trilling's warning that Other Voices, Other
Rooms promotes a "very dangerous social attitude" is hardly surprising (134). Capote's
adolescent protagonist, in tandem with the author's youthful appearance in the Halma
photograph, only contributed to these anxieties. The late-1940s marked the dawn of a new era:
the "age of the child," and the proper socialization of young boys and girls was considered

195 Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic

196 Daniel Gomes, "'Sissy' Boys and 'Unhappy' Girls: Childrearing During the Cold War," Thresholds:
essential, not only for the sake of the family, but for the sake of the nation.197 Childrearing practices now emphasized gender distinctions to an obsessive degree. According the historian Stephen Mintz in *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004), "Experts urged parents to respond promptly to signs of 'sissiness' in boys," as "Sissylike behavior not only led to harassment from other boys, but might make him an indecisive and ineffectual person, and at worst may lead to homosexuality or impotence" (281).198

These national developments regarding gender and sexuality had important regional implications. Specifically, literature and art produced and distributed in the South from the 1940s to the 1960s often romanticized the "heroic" masculinity of "real" American men. Physique magazines packed with images of near-naked muscle men were widely distributed.199 Masculine and feminine stereotypes became so ubiquitous, in fact, that they would be appropriated and reproduced by the very people they had been designed to marginalize.

Consider Carl Corley, whose prolific *oeuvre* of homosexual pulp fiction would have remained in obscurity if not for the work of southern historian John Howard in *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (1999).200 With the rising popularity of homosexual pulp fiction in the 1950s and 60s, a phenomenon documented in Roger Austen's *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America* (1977), Corley penned at least eighteen paperbacks between 1966

---

197 For more on the "age of the child" in America, see Mintz 275-309.

198 See also Gomes 7.

199 These publications appeal to the desires of not only women, but homosexual men as well, though they ostensibly targeted young heterosexual men. The popularity of *Physique Pictorial*, which was published by the Athletic Model Guild, was responsible for the emergence of such artists as George Quaintance (in the 1950s) and Tom of Finland (in the 1960s).

200 See Howard 192-220.
and 1968 alone. These tawdry paperbacks – all of which were set in Corley's home state of Mississippi – made no pretense towards mainstream conformity. Corley even produced his own cover art inspired by images he found in physique magazines. Readers lured by these suggestive depictions of exotic, scantily-clad young muscle men would not be disappointed, for Corley's tales of homosexual romance offered gay southerners a rare outlet for their often confused or repressed same-sex desires.

Corley ultimately paid a steep price for his subversive prose. Unlike such pulp contemporaries as Thomas Hal Phillips and Hubert Creekmore, whose work exhibited the requisite subtlety of "highbrow" engagements with homosexuality, Corley's work was considered pornographic and obscene by censors, and thus difficult to acquire. "His obscurity reflected elite biases in literary criticism," as John Howard argues, and these biases privileged only depictions of homosexuality deemed inoffensive and "culturally worthy" (216).

It is therefore ironic that Corley's paperbacks would time and again reproduced the norms of the very society that oppressed him. Effeminate men in Corley's work, for example, are depicted as weak and undesirable. Relationships between hypermasculine men – attracted to one another by virtue of their own masculine qualities – are idealized by the author, with Corley going to great lengths to disown any implied femininity in the role of the receptive party. In a bar scene in Corley's A Chosen World (1966), for example, the protagonist distinguishes between

---


202 See Fig. 2 and 3 on p. 122.
Fig. 2. Paperback cover for *My Purple Winter* (1966). By Carl Corley.

Fig. 3. Paperback cover for *Jesse: Man of the Streets* (1968). By Carl Corley.
nells, [and] aunties," for whom the hero feels little more than contempt. Thus, the sissy boy's sexuality is rendered inconsequential, while his effeminacy is only further pathologized.

Ultimately, even the "heroic" masculinity of the homosexual was not enough to redeem him in the eyes of heteronormative culture. Pulp fiction was itself not exempt from the tragic ending, which was a requisite trope in "highbrow" queer fiction. Publishing giants such as P.E.C. skirted moral controversy by promoting their products as cautionary tales, rather than conventional romances. Editors took the liberty of revising each of Corley's drafts, and the drafts of other authors, to conform to the dominant standard. As a result, his novels often contain a tragic conclusion, one which was always "tacked-on" just prior to publication.

______________________________________________________________________________

Part 3 – The Sissy Avunculate

What Capote achieved with the publication of Other Voices, Other Rooms was thus particularly remarkable for his era. Joel exemplifies those hallmarks of effeminacy disavowed by both hetero- and homosexual cultures alike. In addition, his journey of self-discovery ends without the "requisite" tragic fate that would befall so many queer characters before and after. Neither Joel, nor Collin in The Grass Harp, however, could have maneuvered the treacherous path towards selfhood, were it not for the queer tutelage of an adult guide and mentor. While Chapter 1 considers the role played by different queer mentors in the development of the tomboy, this chapter focuses specifically on the influence of the avunculate in Other Voices, Other Rooms, as well as the materteral influence of the amitate – the avunculate's female counterpart – in The Grass Harp. Indeed, these extended relatives play a critical role in the life


204 See Howard 206.
of the adolescent sissy, from the avuncular presence of Cousin Randolph at Skully's Landing, to the feminine influence of Collin's aunts, Dolly and Verena.

Throughout the narrative of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the queerness of Capote's sissy protagonist is confirmed by Joel's cousin, the eccentric, flamboyant, and cross-dressing Cousin Randolph. As Joel soon discovers, Randolph inhabits a world apart from the one he encounters in Noon City, a town where social and commercial spaces are strictly gendered. When he arrives at Skully's Landing, Joel feels as if he now inhabits a dreamworld, a world seemingly beyond the conventions of time and space. A clock on its side, for example, is heard ticking unevenly in the kitchen (*OV* 63); the garden outside looks like a jungle, where "Grass and bush and vine and flower were all crushed together in riotous abundance" (*OV* 47-48).

It is here, in the decaying splendor of the garden, that Joel first encounters his cousin as the mysterious "lady in the window." In a particularly queer moment, the cross-dressing Randolph appears to Joel, and psychic and material boundaries seem to dissolve:

> It was at this point he was the queer lady. She was holding aside the curtains of the left corner window, and smiling and nodding at him, as if in greeting or approval; but she was no one Joel had ever known: the hazy substance of her face, the suffused marshmallow features, brought to mind his own vaporish reflection in the wavy chamber mirror [...] Whoever she was, and Joel could not imagine, her sudden appearance seemed to throw a trance around the garden. (*OV* 67)

From that moment onward, Joel is puzzled by the mystery of this "queer lady." What "she" means, or who "she" is, as Capote demonstrates, is cleverly manipulated by Randolph's ambiguous response to Joel's questions. When Joel asks who she is, and whether or not she is
even real, Randolph replies, with "his kimono swaying about him," that it is "A matter of viewpoint I suppose (OV 89, 90).

Free from the prescriptive norms that dominate town society, Randolph teaches that subjectivity is a matter of perspective. His ability to appropriate femininity, for example, works to expose the performative nature of gender. Similarly, the fascination he provokes in Joel as both a male role model and "queer lady" indicate the mutability of desire.

As much of the novel's initial criticism indicates, however, viewpoint can be dictated by readership. The critical consensus surrounding the novel in Capote's era both reflects and reinforces the hetero-masculine cultural biases described in Parts 1 and 2 of this chapter. In Marvin E. Mengeling's 1962 article, "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Oedipus Between the Covers," one of the few 20th Century studies of the novel, for example, Joel is psychoanalyzed and diagnosed as a case of arrested development. As a result of the sissy boy's quest, as Mengeling argues, "Joel's Super-Ego [...] has been crippled, and must now remain forever retarded and incomplete" in a world "Heaped with dreadful psychologies and nightmare terrors" (104, 99).

In his indictment of what he considers the "dreadful psychologies and nightmare terrors" operating in the text, Mengeling's analysis exemplifies the characteristics of contemporary American effeminophobia. For instance, he thoroughly condemns the feminine influences which he claims will ultimately thwart Joel's "healthy" masculine development. Mengeling particularly laments the absence of an appropriately masculine father figure in the text, as well, which renders Joel vulnerable to the castrating effects of a maternal enemy. Even death fails to exempt the fictional parent from the tactic of mother-blaming, as "Joel gradually comes to project her image into the figure of the fairy tale personality, the Snow Queen," and is "about to embark

---

205 For other examples of this bias in pre-Stonewall literary criticism, see Mitchell-Peters 113-114. See also Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago and London: University of Chicago P, 1965) 16.
upon his own personal journey to [her] palace, there to be entombed in a frozen state of Oedipal fixation, and no one, not even his father, will 'brave robber barons' to effect his rescue" (Mengeling 100-101). It is not the frigid ghost of Joel's mother, however, the Mengeling considers the most dangerous feminine threat. "In psychically identifying with the strange lady [in the window] and the Snow Queen," he argues, "Joel has accepted Randolph as a mother substitute," and thus remains trapped in a perpetual state of childlike dependence" (103).

I cite Mengeling at length because, from a queer perspective, the anxieties articulated in his article demonstrate the power of femininity as a destabilizing force against the patriarchal idealization of masculine dominance. Contrary to Mengeling's assertions, Joel's obsessive search for a father figure far outweighs any maternal fixation he may exhibit. Capote emphasizes the allure of patriarchal power in southern society throughout the first half of the text. Joel's first point of pride, for example, is the Confederate flag he inherits from an ancestor (OV 6). He spends his first morning at the Landing badgering Miss Amy about his father's whereabouts, all the while paralyzed by his own fears of inadequacy:

he was taken with a terrible idea: what if his father had seen him already? Indeed, had been spying on him ever since he arrived [...] And his father thought: that runt is an imposter; my son would be taller and stronger and handsomer and smarter looking. (OV 51-52)

Joel asks about his father at least a dozen times before they finally meet. The very name "Edward O. Sansom" conjurs a host of impressive images in Joel's imagination: "sometimes as a circus strong-man, sometimes as a big swell millionaire." For the impressionable youth, the Name of the Father quite literally functions as the privileged signifier. Its authority establishes
the fiction of a "natural" correspondence between names and objects, signifier and signified, titles and selves.

Capote does not therefore deny or de-emphasize the cultural stranglehold of southern patriarchy. He does, however, challenge, and thus destabilize the traditional gender hierarchy. There is nothing heroic or admirable in the tales of Mr. Sansom's hypermasculine exploits, as related to Joel by Randolph. The memories of Cousin Randolph instead work to expose the entitlement, elitism, sexism, and untamed violence lurking behind the façade of "heroic" masculinity. As Joel learns, Edward and his boxing protégé, Pepe Alvarez, would always treat the effeminate Randolph as a figure of ridicule and contempt, all the while exploiting his generous nature. Pepe, whom Randolph still idolizes as the pinnacle of masculine perfection, is depicted as a savage who beats Randolph and his female companion, Dolores, in a fit of drunken rage (OV 148-149). Whether Randolph realizes it or not, Joel becomes gradually disillusioned with the myth of paternal benevolence, as he discovers the reality of male oppression.

Still, Joel struggles throughout the latter half of the novel to escape his father's clutches. "This Mr. Sansom was nobody but a pair of crazy eyes," as Joel describes, and yet this penetrating gaze continues to haunt his psyche as an omniscient, omnipresent predator. As the narrator explains,

he was half convinced Mr. Sansom's eyes knew exactly what went on inside his head, and he attempted, for this reason, to keep his thoughts channeled in impersonal directions [...] He knew everything; in some trick way his eyes traveled the whole world over: they were this very instant watching him, of that he had no doubt. (OV 170-171, 173)
The paternal gaze is characterized as an unambiguously malevolent force. At one point, Joel even believes they have materialized in the phallic form of a copperhead snake (OV 180). It is thus the father, rather than the mother, who constitutes the greatest threat to Joel's well-being.

In contradistinction to Mr. Sansom, Cousin Randolph serves as a mentor who cultivates and empowers Joel's effeminate nature. Contrary to Mengeling's argument, Capote chooses not to foreground the mother as the embodiment of dynamic femininity in the text. Instead, he emphasizes the role of the avunculate, a strategy through which the author effectively breaks from the Oedipal paradigm and thus redefines the terms of discourse. In this case, "The avunculate," as anthropologist Eric Kline Silverman argues in *Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery: Psychoanalyzing Culture and the Iatmul Naven Rite in New Guinea* (2004), "is a male mother, one whose identity is singularly expressive of the complex relationship between masculinity and motherhood."206

While Randolph can be characterized as more feminine than masculine – and thus arguably functions as the amitate rather than the avunculate – he effectively complicates the role of the mother, and thus signifies a rupture in the Freudian developmental narrative. Thus, Capote avoids valorizing either the mother or father in the narrative, which would have been to implicitly legitimize the Freudian terms of Mengeling's argument. To borrow the term from Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), such a "redemptive" project would be counterintuitive, for it presupposes and hence reinforces the very apparatus of power it seeks to oppose.207


When the family defined as the biologically-based Oedipal triad, the paths of desire and identification open to the child are essentially reduced to "positive" and "negative." By emphasizing the oft-neglected fourth term – the avunculate – Capote thus advocates for a more elastic, inclusive understanding of "family," one expansive enough to include those related by neither blood nor marriage. To borrow from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's defence of the avunculate in "Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in The Importance of Being Earnest," Cousin Randolph functions in the text

To project into the future a vision of "family" elastic enough to do justice to the depth and sometimes durability of nonmarital and/or nonprocreative bonds, same-sex bonds, nondyadic bonds, bonds not defined by genitality, "step" bonds, adult sibling bonds, nonbiological bonds across generations, etc. At the same time, [projecting this] avuncular angle onto the family of the present can show this heterosexist structure as always already awash with homosexual energies and potentials. ("Avunculate" 71)

These "energies and potentials" in Capote's fiction would be more accurately described as "queer," rather than narrowly "homosexual." Cousin Randolph demythologizes the "Name of the Father" Joel has been conditioned to idealize. Gradually, Joel becomes increasingly receptive to other perspectives, and experiences new forms of desire and identification previously unavailable to him.

Randolph is introduced to the reader as a figure in whom physical, psychic, and temporal boundaries are rendered ambiguous. He is a man whom both Joel and the reader are meant to initially mistake for a woman. Going by Miss Amy's description alone, Joel "supposed this person to be a kid near his own age," and indeed, Randolph is introduced as an exceedingly childlike adult (OV 45). Randolph effortlessly entertains his nephew with "topics that would
interest and flatter a boy of thirteen" *(OV 74)*; he is characterized by his delicate features, his babyfat, and his fine hair, which "fell in childish yellow ringlets across his forehead," and accentuated his his "womanly eyes" *(OV 78-79)*.

Randolph does not reason, either, with the hierarchical logic upon which patriarchal society is structured. On the contrary, his perspective is both imaginative and intuitive, and he finds "truth" to be a curious amalgam of fact and fiction. According to Randolph, one should not "define [the] artist as one who sees, takes, and purely transmits," for "always for [him] there is the problem of distortion, and [he] never paints so much what [he] see[s] as what [he] think[s]" *(OV 136)*. His perspective is reflected in the composition of his room, a glorious menagerie of foreign antiques and curios draped in faded gold and tarnished silk. It is here where Joel – who initially feels upon entering the room "as though he had eaten too much candy" – experiences and embraces the maternal tenderness Randolph offers *(OV 136)*. Indeed, Randolph himself describes his chamber as being akin to the warmth and comfort of a mother's womb *(OV 138)*.

Cousin Randolph's effeminate nature does more than just endear him to his nephew. The gentle guidance of his cousin also develops Joel's ability to open himself to others, and ultimately forge close bonds with the other queer children and outcasts in the wilderness around Skully's Landing. It is this sense of community that Idabel, like her tomboy counterparts in Harper Lee and Carson McCullers fiction, yearns for throughout the text. In fact, Idabel Tompkins shares a great deal in common with the adolescent Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, as both characters aggressively vent their frustrations by lashing outwards, both consider themselves criminals, and both take pride in their proficiency with knives and other penetrative weapons. Their female masculinity effectively isolates them,

---

208 For more on the role of the tomboy is Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1961), see Chapter 1.
however, and precludes any potentially empowering of supporting relationships with others in the community.

Fortunately for Idabel, her friendship with Joel enables her to largely resolve her sense of hostility towards society. Both the sissy and the tomboy in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* suffer the same initial sense of isolation. Upon arriving at Noon City, Joel feels self-conscious and alienated from his adolescent peers in the local soda shop, R.V. Lacey's Princely Place. "He felt separated, without identity," the narrator describes, as Joel wanders Skully's Landing, "a stone-boy mounted on the rotted stump: there was no connection linking himself and the waterfall of elderberry leaves cascading on the ground, or, rising beyond, the Landing's steep, intricate roof" (*OV* 71).

What Joel is able to offer Idabel later in the narrative is the sense of "connection" he has learned from Cousin Randolph. It is a sense of enlightenment and belonging, a feeling that recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the medieval carnival in *Rabelais and His World* (1984):

> The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases in a certain sense to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community. (255)

That Randolph has attained this state of "sensual, material bodily unity and community" is perhaps most evident in his ability to manipulate the bounds of space, time, and gender. It is also demonstrated in his expressions of empathy toward his fellow outcasts. As he explains to Joel,

"The feeble minded, the neurotic, the criminal perhaps, also, the artist, have unpredictability and perverted innocence in common." His expression became smugly
remote, as though having made an observation he thought was superior, he must pause and listen admiringly while it reverberated in his head. "Let's compare them to a Chinese chest: the sort, you remember, that opens into a second box, another, still another, until at length you come upon the last… the latch is untouched, the lid springs open to reveal… what unsuspected cache?" (OV 78)

This comment captures the essence of Cousin Randolph's character. Indeed, he not only relates to and identifies with the queer world he inhabits, but he demonstrates a sense of introspective awareness concerning his own inner-being.

Randolph's sense of "connection" is manifest in the intimate bonds he has forged within the queer rural community. For instance, he teaches Joel to have patience with the childlike Miss Amy, and brings Joel into close contact with an old negro hermit and shaman, Little Sunshine. Perhaps most importantly, Randolph teaches Joel to value and celebrate his effeminate nature, a condition that initially brought the boy only feeling of anxiety and inadequacy.

Consider, for example, Joel's feelings of self-contempt towards his perceived "deceitful" tendencies. His insecurities compel him to fabricate a mythic "masculine" identity of his own, be it through lies to a friend about hunting with his "tall," "pipe-smoking" father, or by spinning tales of his survival in the frozen north to Zoo. In either case, Joel is painfully self-conscious of his behavior, and even believes that Amy and Randolph consider him "just a natural-born liar" (OV 81).

According to Gerald Clarke's biography, the adolescent Truman Capote shared Joel's sense of shame in this regard. After all, his mother Nina considered artifice to be one of the worst symptoms of her son's "sissyhood," and she would incessantly accuse him of being unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood (Capote 42). Ironically, Truman's inability to
conform to the standards of so-called "real" boyhood only worked to expose this concept as a social construction open to reinterpretation. In order to perform as a "true" or "real" boy, for instance, the author was forced to rely on equivocation and artifice as a defense mechanism. The stress of having to maintain this masculine performance took its toll, however, as Capote found being a boy so burdensome and demanding that he constantly desired to be a girl. "She wanted him to be an ordinary fellow, straight in every way," as Truman's stepfather, Joe Capote explained, "But Truman was reluctant to be an ordinary fellow. He had to be himself" (Capote 43).

This is just one of the personal "flaws" that Randolph teaches the sissy to treasure as a gift. Joel is taught to revaluate his identity, not as a "liar," but rather as a storyteller. In particular, Randolph's strange, unconventional stories about the past teach Joel of the intrinsically antinarrative nature of identity and knowledge. As he listens with rapt attention, the narrator describes how "It was as though Randolph's voice continued saying in his head things that were real enough, but not necessary to believe. He was confused because the story had been like a movie with neither plot nor motive: Had Randolph really shot his father? And, most important of all, where was the ending?" (OV 154). "If I knew..." answered Randolph, "But my dear, so few things are fulfilled: what are most lives but a series of uncompleted episodes? 'We work in the dark, we do what we can, we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task...' It is wanting to know the end that makes us believe in God, or witchcraft, believe, at least, in something."

"Truth," to the extent that anything like it exists, in other words, is a matter of perspective. The warmth and glorious clutter of Randolph rooms further serves as proof that art and imagination can be powerful tools in constructing one's identity.
Armed with the awareness of his transformative potential as a storyteller, a performer, and a dreamer, Joel ultimately builds the confidence to confront his nemesis — "death's impossible face, the figure in the fire," and earlier referred to as "the smiler with the knife" — the legacy of his father he confronts ghostly ruins of the Cloud Hotel (OV 226, 200). He emerges from the Joycean "smithy of the soul" unscathed, and returns to the Landing with a sense of oneness and clarity: "'I am me,' Joel whooped, 'I am Joel, we are the same people!' And he then looked about for a tree to climb: he could go right to the very top, and there, midway to heaven, he would spread his arms and claim the world" (OV 227).^209 Finally, the sissy has appeared to have achieved a sense of affirmation and selfhood he has yearned for throughout the text. However, as Joel prepares to leave the relative safety and isolation of Skully's Landing, his fate upon reentry into society remains ambiguous at best.

---

**Part 4 – The Queer Amitate**

Capote's novel ends, rather appropriately, on a note of uncertainty and cautious optimism. In a moment of bittersweet nostalgia, Joel casts a final look towards his former self, "the boy he left behind" with a sense of mourning, for his adulthood has not come without sacrifice (OV 231). Indeed, Joel's metamorphosis into adulthood — his realization of "spiritual and material bodily unity" — consequently results in a division between Randolph and himself. "I am me," Joel tells his cousin, "we are the same people," and yet Randolph offers no response; instead, he begins to wander in circles, as though lost in a trance. It is at this point Joel realizes that, by confining himself to the womblike safety of childhood innocence, Randolph remains

^209 Quoted from James Joyce's *Kunstlerroman, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915), in which the protagonist Stephen Daedalus declares, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."
circumscribed by his own subjectivity. "Joel then realized the truth," as the narrator explains, "he saw how helpless Randolph was: more paralyzed than Mr. Sansom, more childlike than Miss Wisteria, what else could he do, once outside and alone, but describe a circle, the zero of his nothingness?" (OV 227). Having been enlightened by adulthood, Capote appears to suggest, the student has finally transcended the mentor.

This is a paradox that Capote leaves the reader to grapple with. If Joel feels empowered by his new sense of selfhood, a self that is in part reflective of his cousin, then why does Randolph suddenly appear so vulnerable and lost? And what does Joel now consider his mentor and close friend a "zero"? According to Brian Mitchell-Peters, this ambiguity is intentional on Capote's part, for "with Joel, our answers must be derived from the complex, illusive language" that characterizes the final, dreamlike section of the novel, in which the prose becomes increasingly surreal, and "the evasive, suggestive language hints at interpretive solutions" (136-137).

However, the author does seem to foreshadowed the limitations of Randolph's avuncular influence through the dead bird motif, as as the character is repeatedly associated with such images as a deceased bluejay, or a soundless cuckoo. By contrast, images of flight, as James William Johnson observes in "The Adolescent Hero: A Trend in Modern Fiction," were common in novels of American adolescence from the 1930s to the 1960s. According to Johnson, such images were used to represent "the young hero's" desire to escape from the reality of "one's bodily and spiritual isolation." In Other Voices, Other Rooms, however, these images of flight suggest not merely escape, but also transformation. To borrow a concept from Gilles Deleuze

---

210 Miss Wisteria is a blonde, pixie-like midget who befriends Joel and Idabel at a fair traveling through Noon City.

and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), this is the "line of flight," or potential, through which the subject transforms both itself and the objects with which it interacts. For proponents of female masculinity, this concept possesses strong feminist implications. In her discussion linking the boyishness of Amelia Earhart with "aerality," for instance, Mary Russo suggests in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (1994) that flight is symbolic of "the fantasy of a femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body."  

In Capote's novel, these "lines of flight" surface in tropes of actual flight. In effect, Capote deploys these images to represent a fantasy of effemininity, a fantasy which defies the limits of not only the male body, but also the material and geographic boundaries it inhabits. Cousin Randolph, however, is determined to remain grounded, and cannot leave the protective womb of the Landing. "Don't you know that if I came here as a child, then most of me never left?" he laments to Joel, "I've always been, so to speak, a non-paying guest" in the warm cocoon of nostalgia (*OV* 224). Indeed, this statement is tellingly counterposed next to the description of a "coral-tongued cuckoo bird, forever stilled at three o'clock, spreading wings hawk-wide, falcon-fierce," who is nevertheless glued to his perch, to forever "mutely proclaim an hour forty years before" (*OV* 223, 225).

In contrast to Randolph's arrested development, Joel finds himself able to learn from the past and move forwards, rather that tread in perpetual circles. On the day he plans to depart, Joel

---

212 In French, *ligne de fuite*. For the purpose of this chapter, I offer a relatively simplified interpretation of this complex theoretical concept. According the Deleuze and Guattari's description of a "rhizome," this is "the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which [multiplicities] change in nature and connect with other multiplicities." See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1980; reprint, London and New York: Continuum, 1984) 9.

describes how "Th[e] morning was like a clean slate for any future," for example, and how he feels "as if all that had been before had turned into a bird, and flown there to the island tree" ([OV 226]). At a critical moment earlier in the text, this flight is itself foreshadowed in his conversation with Randolph over the sudden departure of Zoo. At the time, Randolph, who is absorbed in the project of pasting together the feathers of a dead bluejay, is displeased with her decision:

"Darling child," said Randolph, dipping a bluejay feather in the paste, "happiness is relative, and," he continued, fitting the feather on the cardboard, "[Zoo] will find that all she has deserted is her proper place in a more general puzzle. Like this." He held up the cardboard in order that Joel could see: there feathers were so arranged that the effect was of a living bird transfixed. "Each feather has, according to size and color, a particular position, and if one were slightly awry, why, it would not look real at all." ([OV 168]

Thus, Randolph cannot venture into the unknown. He depends instead on the structural sense of control his fortress of solitude provides. However, Joel desires a more expansive understanding of the outside world, for "What good is a bird that can't fly," he asks Randolph, "the other one, the real one, it could fly. But this one can't do anything… except maybe look like it was alive." Unaccustomed to resistance from his nephew, the rebuttal renders Cousin Randolph "peculiarly defenseless." "It is pleasanter in the dark," he finally responds, in a distant, quiet voice, "You are quite right: my bird can't fly" ([OV 169].

Considering the liberatory implications of flight, it appears that Capote does not intend his sissy hero to reach a static sense of contentment or complacency. His subjectivity instead remains dynamic and unfinished, as he prepares to broaden his horizons. Joel's declaration, "I am me […] I am Joel, we are the same people," thus constitutes an act of "queer naming," a
move that is both linguistic and performative. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in "Socratic Raptures, Socratic Ruptures: Notes Toward Queer Performativity,"

What the gay movement has had to depend on in place of any state support whatsoever is, quite simply, speech and visibility. That speech and visibility are complex acts […] does not gainsay that it is only speech and visibility that legitimate us. It is speech and visibility that give us any political power we have.214

In other words, this act of "queer naming" has important sociopolitical implications, yet it is a performance Randolph disavows. Meanwhile, Joel accepts his separation from the confines of his cousin's shadowy, insular world of illusions, while still at the same time incorporating Randolph's positive qualities into his own subjectivity. Whether or not he will apply his newfound sense of selfhood to restructure a heteronormative society that has, and continues to marginalize deviant forms of gender and sexuality, however, remains unknown.

In his study of sissyhood in American film and theater, Bradley Boney has also found the concept of "queer naming" relevant to his discussion of the empowered sissy. This naming stage, Boney argues, "completes the sissy subject's entry into the gay symbolic, where language articulates an identity of difference" (50). Rather than forming a "complete" or finished subject, however, I argue that the "queer" sissy adult remains in a state of unfinished potential, in a constant state of becoming. Considering the radical implications suggested by the act of "queer naming," however, it becomes possible to address important questions raised by Capote's ambiguous conclusion. For instance, as Joel wanders into the distance, where is he going? Will he attempt to reintegrate into normative society? Will he return to the Landing? Or, having only

begun to develop his identity, is the sissy doomed to exist in isolation at the margins of American culture?

To answer these questions sufficiently requires a close consideration of Capote's second major work, *The Grass Harp* (1951), a novella that effectively functions as a sort of sequel to *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Such an analysis not only serves the purpose of my inquiry, but also constitutes one of the first critical interpretations of this unjustly obscured work, a story that Capote considered a personal favorite, as Marie Rudisill claims in *The Southern Haunting of Truman Capote* (2000). The author's critical contemporaries were equally impressed, and, in a striking reversal of fortune, Capote's sophomore effort was published to immediate critical acclaim.

For critics, *The Grass Harp* demonstrated the evolution of Truman Capote's style and character. In the words of biographer Gerald Clarke,

> If *Other Voices* had been an attempt to exorcise demons, his new novel, *The Grass Harp*, was an attempt to raise the bittersweet spirits of remembrance and nostalgia [...] if Joel Knox represents one half of his character, then Collin represents the other half. *The Grass Harp* is the bright, obverse side of *Other Voices*, and Collin is the sunny, happy side of Truman Capote. *(Capote 218)*

---

215 In the last few years, it does appear that novel has begun to generate critical interest. See Thomas Fahy, "'It May Be That There is No Place For Any of Us': Homosexuality, Communism, and the Politics of Nostalgia in Capote's *The Grass Harp*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 66.1 (2013): 3-27.


The adolescent Collin Fenwick, however, still shares a great deal in common with his slightly younger counterpart in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Like Joel, as Collin describes himself, "I was small for my age," and "no one had ever paid any attention to me" (*GH* 11). His sissiness is further emphasized in comparison to the virile masculinity of his classmate and idol, Riley Henderson, just as Joel's effeminacy is foregrounded by the rugged Sam Radclif.

Instead of the avunculate, however, Capote instead draws on the power of its female counterpart, the amitate, as Collin's primary source of guidance. As an orphan, Collin has been raised under the guardianship of his two aunts, Dolly and Verena Talbo, two equally complex, but strikingly opposing figures of amitalocal authority. Despite this change, however, Capote maintains thematic consistency over the course of both these narratives. In particular, this novella continues to emphasize the "sensual, material bodily unity or community" initially explored in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

While the role of the avunculate has been foregrounded by and demonstrated through the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the complete lack of any scholarship addressing the amitate – much less its queer valence in literary and cultural theory – is particularly noteworthy. In her article, "Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in *The Importance of Being Earnest,*" for example, Sedgwick disregards the masculine connotations of avuncularity, and uses the term to encompass not only uncles and other male extended family members, but also aunts, nieces, and all other female relations. By privileging the avunculate, and also by failing to factor racial, ethnic, and class differences into her analysis, Sedgwick risks unwittingly reifying an alternative mode of white patriarchy. As Anne McClintock argues in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Lacan's "Name of the Father" has prevented all "historical investigation of why there is not one patriarchy, but many":
Committed to the economy of one, Lacan's Name of the Father cannot account either descriptively or analytically for historical contradictions and imbalances in power between men. Nor can it account for the history of masculine powers that are not invested in metaphors of paternity; nor for hierarchical relations between fathers and the state – a relation of particular importance for black, colonized, and otherwise disenfranchised men.\(^{218}\)

Thus, while Sedgwick argues convincingly that avuncular relationships might provide queer paradigms of social development outside the nuclear family, her focus on the "Name of the Father" neglects to consider alternative structures of patriarchal power that, however decentralized, are not necessarily empowering. This is Eileen Cleere's primary objection in Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Nineteenth-Century English Culture (2004), in which she claims that "Unlike Sedgwick […] I would argue that the local forces of patriarchy are not necessarily rendered benign just because they have curtailed size or jurisdiction."\(^{219}\)

By foregrounding the role of the amitate as distinct from that of the avunculate, my analysis recognizes the gendered imperatives that have been central to feminist work on patriarchy. In essence, it serves as a corrective to Sedgwick's implicitly white, male-oriented perspective. "After all," as Cleere observes, "Sedgwick's interest in The Importance of Being Earnest necessarily limits this particular assessment of avuncular kindness to a male-centered developmental narrative" (11). This is not to detract from the queer potential of the avunculate,

\(^{218}\) Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995) 197.

but rather to cultivate a theoretical discourse for understanding those narratives featuring strong amitalocal bonds between the protagonist and their female adult relations.

Considering Capote's own amitalocal upbringing, it is perhaps not surprising that the amitate plays such a powerful and formative role in *The Grass Harp*, especially compared to the more limited influence of the avunculate in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Capote's own mentorship under his spinster Aunt Jenny and the childlike Sook – upon whom the characters of Aunt Verena and Dolly Talbo were based – offered the author a wealth of experience from which to draw. It was these experiences that perhaps enabled Capote to explore themes of gender and sexuality with a much higher degree of skill, complexity and originality.

Just as in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Capote continues to emphasize the oppressive nature of patriarchal authority, as Collin recalls the terror inflicted on him by and abusive father, and Aunt Dolly shares stories about his Confederate great-uncle Uriah – the embodiment of patriarchal avuncularity – whose "pee and tobacco old man smell" still lingers in Collin's room (*GH* 11, 16, 23). In contrast to its predecessor, however, *The Grass Harp* depicts representatives of male privilege as often ambivalent, rather than exclusively destructive figures.

The patriarchal representatives in the text, such as the masculine Riley Henderson and the paternal Judge Cool, are described in vivid detail, and their privileged position in southern society is quickly established. Riley, for example, is introduced shouldering a shotgun and draped in bleeding squirrels; the reader later learns that he whips his younger sisters on a regular basis (*GH* 62). Despite his violent nature, Riley is considered a hero among his peers, who, as Collin recalls, "were glad to call him mean and hard: that was because he would only let us envy him, he would not let us love him […] How I longed for him to be my friend!" (*GH* 25, 26, 27).
Having established Riley's violent, aggressive brand of masculinity, which is idealized in southern society, the author then confounds the reader's expectations. Both Riley and Judge Cool are both drawn to the nurturing femininity of Collin's Aunt Dolly, and are able to bond and identify with her for similar reasons. The position of these two male subjects in the social hierarchy has effectively isolated them from their community; both feel compelled to maintain their performative identities as "real" men, and have thus have conditioned themselves not to betray any form of weakness or emotion. As a result, their relationships with other men are characterized by dominance and subjugation, thus precluding any positive avuncular relationship. They are essentially caught in the destructive loop described by Joseph A. Kuypers in *Men and Power* (1999) as "the male power imperative," in which the possessors of power are ironically as those they have systematically worked to oppress. According to Kuypers,

> The trap is there and it is designed to catch men. Faced with a power imperative which allows no real consideration of alternatives, demands participation in a process which is substantially unhealthy for both the doer and the victim, and punishes failures by challenging the core of their being (gender security), it is not surprising that so many men are caught. These men must do what they can to assure some peace with their gender. They play out their role and suffer the consequences.\(^{220}\)

Collin is stunned to discover the hidden vulnerabilities of these men, as revealed by the amitate, as he watches Riley break down and confess his insecurities and feelings of inadequacy (*GH* 43). Judge Cool confesses similar feelings of alienation from his family, his community, and even his own position of authority in the community, as he admits, "I should never have been a judge […] the law doesn't admit differences" (*GH* 41). In both cases, the amitate – in the figure of Aunt

Dolly – serves as an outlet beyond the scripted role of the mother, the father, and even the patriarchal form of the avunculate in heteronormative society.

In a story populated with "real" men, it is notable that Capote reserves his most complex and destructive portrayal of masculinity for a female character. Throughout the text, the author considers the positive and negative effects of "female masculinity," as embodied by Collin's Aunt Verena. This is not to say that Verena's masculine tendencies do not also have a positive effect as well, for her aggressive business tactic and financial acumen have made her the wealthiest woman in town (GH 10). As Collin explains, she owned "the drugstore, the dry goods store, a filling station, a grocery [and] an office building," and several men – Collin's father included – are indebted to her for unpaid loans (GH 12). In fact, her influence that has shaped many of the power structures operating in the town, for "it was Verena's backing that had put the sheriff in office" (GH 29).

Verena's success, however, comes at a price. For the men of the town, her masculine code of conduct represents an emasculating threat, and thus induces "phallic panic," a term used by feminist Barbara Creed in her article, "Phallic Panic: Male Hysteria in Dead Ringers," to describe male hysteria as "defense against the possibility of symbolic castration."\footnote{Barbara Creed, "Phallic Panic: Male Hysteria in Dead Ringers," Screen 31.2 (1990) 129.} Collin's father mocks her as a "morphodyte," for example, and rumors about the Talbo house have circulated throughout the town (GH 10). These rumors not only imply a connection between "female masculinity" and lesbianism, as suggested by the belief "that more went on at the house on Talbo Lane than a body cared to think about," but also with sexual deviance in general, as the town speculates on Verena's relationship with the "scandalous" Dr. Morris Ritz, "that little Jew from Chicago" (GH 14, 18). As Collin describes her plight, "She was like the lone man in a
house full of women and children," and "Though on diplomatic, political terms with many people, she had no close friends at all. Men were afraid of her, and she herself seemed to be afraid of women" (*GH* 15, 12).

Thus, Verena's embodiment of "female masculinity" is treated ambivalently in the narrative, as a source of both strength and isolation. It is when her masculine code of conduct is yoked to domination, oppression, and greed, however, that Verena becomes an antagonistic presence in the text, as her actions victimize not only others, but herself as well. This is demonstrated when Verena attempts to exploit the innocence and naivete of Dolly by marketing and mass-producing her sister's homemade dropsy medication. Motivated by greed and ambition, Verena violates the trust of her closest companions, and ultimately drives Collin, Dolly, and their partly-colored servant, Catherine Creek, to abandon her for the queer sanctuary of a nearby treehouse.

It is at this point in the text that the strength of Dolly's femininity is counterposed against Verena's ruthless masculinity. While Verena is initially introduced as the more powerful of the two, and is able to withstand patriarchal ridicule and competition, the loss of her sisterhood with Dolly proves devastating. Whereas her masculine abilities have kept the family financially secure, Verena cannot function without the compassion and understanding of her female counterpart. Dolly's strength is derived from her capacity for imagination and intuition: "the subterranean intelligence of a bee that knows were to find the sweetest flower," as Collin describes, "She looked around her and felt what she saw" (*GH* 15). While Verena lives apart from the community – in a manner similar to Cousin Randolph – Dolly instead reaches out to others as healer of divisions, and works to bridge the gap between the privileged and the outcast in southern society. "Dollyheart," as Catherine affectionately refers to her, remains oblivious –
or chooses to ignore – established patriarchal power structures and hierarchies. Sister Ida and her fifteen starving children are as welcome in her sanctuary as the magisterial Judge Cool, or the intimidating Riley Henderson, and all are received with dignity and respect. Indeed, as more characters of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds are introduced, it becomes all the more apparent that Dolly offers Verena, and many others, a locus of amitalocal support and connection.

What Collin experiences during his brief sojourn in the Chinaberry tree is Capote's fullest realization of the "sensual, material bodily unity and community" initially considered in Other Voices, Other Rooms. While Capote strictly separates the queer realm of Cousin Randolph from the harsh realities of life in Noon City, however, The Grass Harp places these two worlds in dialogue with one another. As a result, new cross-alliances of identity and support are forged across racial, gender, sexual, and class lines of division. Characters are made to confront their the prejudices and preconceptions. It is Collin's Aunt Dolly, the amitate, who is first attuned to this sense of harmony, a "grass harp" of voices, and the novel begins with her imparting this wisdom to her effeminate nephew:

of course it was Dolly who told me, no one else would have known to call it that, a grass harp […] human music, a harp of other voices […] It must have been on one of those September days when we were there in the woods gathering roots that Dolly said: "Do you hear? That is the grass harp, always telling a story – it knows the stories of all the people on the hill, of all the people who ever lived, and when we are dead it will tell ours too. (GH 9)

Collin does not fully grasp this understanding until very near the novella's conclusion, when Verena and Dolly finally reconcile as sisters. It is at this point, as he watches his aunts talk with
the judge, that Collin feels as though "a tenderness for all three ran together like raindrops, I could not separate them, they expanded into human oneness" (GH 83). While sense of collective harmony may seem idealistic and utopian, it importantly demonstrates the potential for a queer continuum of identification and support in southern society. In the words of Judge Cool, Collin has realized "that love is a chain of love, as nature is a chain of life" (GH 44).

*The Grass Harp* essentially serves as a story of reconciliation. In typical fashion, however, Capote's conclusion is characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. Indeed, the author's publisher and biographer both lament that the novella could have been perfect, where it not for the "unnecessary" coda. "The conclusion is a letdown," as Gerald Clarke writes, for "It is rather that having cast his spell of fantasy, Truman has not dispelled it in a believable way" (Capote 222-223). The conclusion may be a "letdown," in part because Capote fails to provide his queer cast – "the five fools in the tree," as the judge refers to them – with a conventional storybook ending. Dolly makes peace with Verena and returns home, but soon falls ill and passes away. Meanwhile, Catherine retires to the countryside, the elderly Judge Cool moves into a boarding house, and Riley strikes it rich as an industrial capitalist. Having found support and affirmation through the queer amitate, these characters must ultimately leave the China tree and reenter society.

Reading *The Grass Harp* as a sequel to *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, however, Capote's conclusion does attempt to address the place of the queer subject in heteronormative society, an intervention he neglects in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Unlike Joel and Cousin Randolph, Collin and Dolly to not have to option to live in blissful isolation. Collin's decision to leave town and become a lawyer is thus not a surrender to normativity, but rather a new beginning, the sissy boy's transition into queer adulthood. This is an act of independence which, in the words of film
critic Bradley Boney, "thrusts the body of the speaker into a political space, where it can be openly marked and read as queer" (51). In contrast to the initial sissy stage, the subject is now and active, self-aware participant in the process of socialization.

Capote's abrupt change of tone over the finally pages of the novella serves to emphasize Collin's newfound sense of maturity. As he describes his time in the treehouse, "those few autumn days were a monument and a signpost" marking a critical turning point in his development (GH 85). While the amitate remains his primary mentor, he now finds himself able to forge homosocial bonds with figures such as Riley and Judge Cool, and is thus able to incorporate the positive elements of their masculinity – pragmatism, logic, and courage, for instance – into his own effeminate nature. No longer signified exclusively by his femininity, he has effectively left the sissy body behind him.

This is not to say, of course, that the shedding of the sissy skin in any way devalues its significance. Indeed, Collin's "sissyhood" is never truly lost, and he still thinks fondly about "the boy he left behind." The conclusion of The Grass Harp instead suggests that he has discovered a more expansive, dynamic sense of identity, one which transcends gender categorization. As a queer adult, Collin is thus prepared to embark on a new journey, to seek out other voices, other rooms, and pass on to other generations the wisdom imparted to him.
Part II

Truman Capote's representations of boyhood effeminacy were unprecedented for his era. Despite his complex manipulations of gender and sexuality, however, his fiction rarely addressed issues of race and ethnicity in southern society. Writing from a position of white male privilege, Capote's "colored" characters are largely derived from traditional stereotypes, and serve in supporting roles, or as comic relief. Consider, for example, the hypermasculine violence of Keg Brown; the long suffering mammy, Missouri "Zoo" Fever; or the exotic shaman, "Little Sunshine," who haunt the margins of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Chapters 3 and 4 of my analysis thus endeavor to expose the socially-constructed nature of racial and ethnic stereotypes that proliferated in the South during its renaissance era.

Racial segregation has historically served as a guiding principle of southern culture for much of the 20th Century. Jim Crow laws enacted from the late-19th to the mid-20th Century worked to preserve a system of white supremacy previously established by the division between master and slave. These measures did more than simply divide white from black through a series of prohibitions; they collectively defined and enforced racial identity throughout the southern states. Legislation delimited the boundary between two categories of being: white and black.

Segregation held profound implications for the queer child in southern society. Unlike his white counterpart in Capote's fiction, the effeminate black boy was a doubly-discriminated figure in the South, a target of both racially and sexually-motivated abuse. In her research on the subject, Barbara Smith laments in "Homophobia: Why Bring it Up?" that effeminophobic and

---

homophobic values remain deeply rooted in black southern culture: "these attitudes are much too prevalent among people of color. Individuals who are militantly opposed to racism in all forms still find lesbianism and male homosexuality something to snicker about or, worse, to despise."^{223}

Consider the case of Aggie West in Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* (1957). In her biography, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (1988), Margaret Walker recalls from their interactions in the 1930s that the author "gave the appearance of an almost effete, slightly effeminate personality. He had pipsqueak voice, small and delicate hands and feet, a smooth face with a very light beard, and rather fastidious ways or mannerisms. It was the abduction of his brother, Leon, that demonstrated to Wright the dangers facing the sissy in the black community. According to Walker, "[Leon] was taken by foul play and beaten half to death in the 1930s [...] they took him for the ride no one knows where or who they were."^{224} It was an instance of "punk-hunting," what political activist Eldridge Cleaver describes as "a ubiquitous phenomenon in the black ghettos of America."^{225} Gangs of young men would kidnap those they considered "potential homosexuals," as indicated by the victim's appearance and mannerisms, and subject their captives to extreme forms of physical and sexual abuse.^{226}

For Wright, a self-described "heterosexual" author in an age when gender-transitivity was often taken to designate homosexuality, the fate of Aggie in *The Long Dream* represents the

---


consequences of transgression within the black community. Violence erupts when the boy with
the "mincing" walk and "too feminine" voice attempts to interject his effeminacy into the
homosocial realm of the baseball field. In response, Aggie is jeered as a "sissy," a "pansy," a
"queer nigger," and ultimately beaten by the protagonist and his companions (LD 35, 36).

Part II of my thesis, however, is not concerned with examining southern culture in terms
of merely black and white. I am interested, rather, in exploring literary representations of what
critic Leslie Bow calls the "partly-colored" subject in *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and
Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (2010). The following chapters focus primarily on two
immigrant groups – Asian and Italian Americans – whose cultural impact on the 20th Century
South has only begun to receive the critical attention it merits. If, as Bow claims, "the legacy of
segregation has come to define the terms of racial meaning in the United States," these chapters
examine how the Jim Crow South struggled to accommodate a supposed "third" racial caste,
those individuals and communities who into a system predicated on the binary distinction
between black and white (1).

In the literature of the Southern Renaissance, the foreign, partly-colored child represents
a critical site of cultural contestation. By taking Mae Ngai's theory of the "impossible subject" in
conceptual lens, it is possible to explore the challenges these subjects posed, and what
segregation demanded of those who seemed to stand outside – or rather between – its structural
logistics. My analysis traces narratives that attempt to reconcile these "partly-colored" children
to the seemingly uncompromising distinction between black and white adulthood. In doing so, I

---

in text as *LD*. 

consider those queer adolescent characters who refuse reconciliation, and thus highlight the very contradictions and irrationalities at the heart of white supremacist thought.

______________________________________________________________________________

**Part 1 – The Impossible Subject**

In the segregated South, Jim Crow society was largely established through laws disciplining the production and development of children. In 1944, economist Gunnar Myrdal observed that anti-miscegenation laws were the foundation upon which this entire system of legal and cultural representations rested.\(^{228}\) Segregated education was also essential to the preservation of racial purity; as one anti-integrationist would declare in 1957, "the key that opens the door to the schoolroom […] unlocks the door to the bedroom too!"\(^{229}\) According to African American critic Derrick Bell in *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (2004), the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) has been granted iconic status by critics as "the Holy Grail of racial justice," the putative boundary separating an oppressive past from a supposedly enlightened future.\(^{230}\)

The status of *Brown*, as Bell also observes, is problematic in that it works to establish a binary model of race relations: "segregation was not merely an oppressive legal regime, it consolidated the imaginative lens through which Americans to think of race – ie. black and white" (82). By framing the legacy of segregation as a biracial struggle, this focus on *Brown* effectively erases the complex histories of other minorities, and works to constrict our

---


understanding of racial difference. Legal historian Juan F. Perea argues, for example, that conceptualizing a "Black/White paradigm of race" in the United States has served to omit the struggles of Latinos and other minorities from the history of civil rights. According to Perea's article, "The Black/White Paradigm of Race: The 'Normal Science' of American Racial Thought," "Whites can ignore our claims to justice, because we are not Black, and therefore not subject to real racism. And Blacks can ignore our claims, since we are presumed to be aspiring to and acquiring Whiteness, and therefore we are not subject to real racism." Mexican Americans are but one in a number of racial and ethnic minorities whose voices have been silenced by the legacy of segregation. This chapter's focus on Asian American representation brings to the fore an important presence in the American South, one that has only recently begun to emerge from obscurity.

So what became of these "Other" colored people who seem to fall outside the social relations dictated by Jim Crow? The very metaphor of "the color line" admits no middle space, and therefore no straddling of the imagined border that defines not just social conduct, but racial identity. Rather than assume a stable identity, these subjects inhabit what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls the space of the "interstitial," as he describes in The Location of Culture (1994), the "passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy." Racial interstitiality effectively represents the physical manifestation of the law's instability, its epistemological limit. On the other hand, it can also be made a site of cultural reinscription, the

---


place were difference is made to conform to prevailing social norms. In either case, these interstitial populations unveil the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status.

My study of the Asian – or, more specifically, the Filipino – sissy in Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) considers the subversive potential of this interstitial subject. The young Anacleto represents multiple axes of differentiation. He exist at the interstices between not only black and white, but childhood and adulthood, masculine and feminine identity. The fact that he embraces his Otherness and refuses reconciliation marks his as a figure of queer interstitality, or what Ngai refers to as an "impossible subject," "a person who cannot be and a problem who cannot be solved" (5). He is the queer child who highlights the contradictions and irrationalities and the heart of heteronormative culture.

---

**Part 2 – The Interstitial Asian**

The Asian presence in the South is notable for its conspicuous absence in southern literary discourse. Heidi Lee Kim's article, "The Foreigner in Yoknapatawpha: Rethinking Race in Faulkner's 'Global South,'" has remained the lone study of Asian American representation in Southern Renaissance literature to date. According to Kim, even though William Faulkner "leverages the existence of other races in Mississippi to illuminate the shifting ground of in-betweenness and miscegenation," he rarely makes specific mention the region's considerable Asian population (200). Asian Americans were one of a myriad "Other" minority groups complicating the South's binary understanding of race relations. Indeed, the xenophobic sentiments of Faulkner, who is still remembered as one of the most greatest writers in the

---

American canon, are in part voiced through the character of Ike McCaslin, who rails in "Delta Autumn" against the "Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, [who] all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares." Indeed, the menace of a racially indeterminate Other is a constant theme in the work of this author who, as Patricia Yaeger argues in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (2004), "in a blaze of glory conjurs up race as an epic structure built on the foundations of guilt, giant torment, and oedipal drives that make miscegenation more culpable than incest."

Among the minorities derided by Ike, the Asian immigrant played a particularly instrumental role in the South's transformation. The history of the most noteworthy southern labor importation scheme, the Chinese Labor Convention, has been documented in the critical works of Gunther Barth, Lucy M. Cohen, Moon Ho-Jung, and others. In 1869, with the founding of the Arkansas River Valley Company, over two-hundred southern delegates converged in Memphis to discuss the possibility of importing Chinese workers to the cotton fields of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. In his sociohistorical study, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (1971), James W. Loewen describes how planters believed the "apolitical noncitizen coolie [...] would be a step back toward the more docile labor conditions of slavery times and would destroy all arguments about the indispensability of Negro

---


labor to the Southern way of life." It was thought that the "Chinaman" would not only provide a cheaper, less troublesome workforce, but that his presence as a threatening alternative would intimidate the negro into resuming his former servile behavior. Thus, before even arriving, the position of the Asian laborer was tied to the continuing and unequal struggle between whites and black in the South.

The convention itself was a success. According to the *Daily Alta California*, the land contractor Cornelius Koopmanschap promised that "coolies" could be recruited on cheap, long-term contracts. Commercial agent Ty Kim Orr also attested to the efficacy of Chinese labor in the post-emancipation West Indies. As a result, the conventioneers founded the Mississippi Valley Immigration Company, and agreed to raise over a million dollars to further importation plans throughout the South. In the Mississippi Delta region alone, the Chinese population rose from 16 to 147 between 1870 and 1890.

The hopes of the southern elite were short-lived, as the mission to exploit Asian labor would end in catastrophe. In the words of Clayton Powell, then Governor of Arkansas, "Planters soon learned that after all the negroes, as laborers in the cotton fields, were better in all respects than the men of any other race, and in a little while the Chinamen sagaciously learned the purposes for which they were introduced." Far from being the docile, subservient workers

---


expected, Asian migrants soon rebelled against their overseers. In 1872, it was reported that all but 25 of the original 140 workers had abandoned the Millaudon plantation in Louisiana. Those who remained were offered "five dollars apiece to run away." Over the following decades, the presence of these migrants would offer a substantial challenge to a society polarized by color.

After leaving their plantations en masse, the Chinese community rapidly established itself as an integral component of the South's economy. In Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton: Lives of Mississippi Delta Chinese Grocers (2009), Asian American theorist John Jung describes how these first and second generation migrants carved a niche for themselves as merchants, and quickly came to dominate the South's retail industry. As the mechanization of the cotton industry eliminated the need for plantation-owned and operated commissaries, the Chinese soon held a near monopoly over the region's grocery business.

The Chinese were the largest, but by no means the only Asian minority group to find success in the South. While the Chinese cornered the grocery industry, the emerging Lebanese population took advantage of a large rural market by peddling goods door-to-door. As James Thomas documents in his article, "Mississippi Mahjar: The Lebanese Immigration Experience in the Delta," a large number of Lebanese migrants – fleeing poverty and persecution at home – would establish thriving communities in Mississippi and Louisiana. Critics such as Laura Westbrook and Lynn W. Schonberg have also worked to chronicle the history of Filipino fishing

---


and seafood harvesting communities in Louisiana. In the late-1870s, Schonberg notes that Filipinos were able to develop the first major shrimp harvesting and processing establishments along the Gulf Coast. The shrimp processed in such settlements as Manila Village, Bassa Bassa, and Saint Malo was then exported to locations in Asia, Canada, and Central and South America (27). Thus, Filipinos were among the first Asians in the region to capitalize on the emerging global economy, a key process in the modernization of the South.

Being neither black nor white, the success of these Chinese, Lebanese, and Filipino migrants posed a major challenge to segregated society. These partly-colored subjects essentially constituted a "third race" outside the South's binary understanding of race relations. As James Loewen writes, "Negroes do not consider them exactly white; Caucasians do not consider them black," they are "privileged and burdened with an ambiguous racial identity," a people that exemplify Homi Bhabha's conception of the "interstitial subject" (Loewen 2). This space, the space between normative structures of power, is imbued with queer potential. In Bhabha's words, it is "the 'in-between' spaces that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1-2).

For the southern white elite, the success of the Asian migrant was perceived as an emerging threat. Indeed, the inability of whites to profit from their own dominant social position – and the ability of the interstitial subject to exploit that fact – exposed not only the limits of segregation, but also its potential subversion. As a result, these migrants faced a great deal opposition as they attempted to integrate into white society. James Loewen notes that "Each new

---

step taken by the Chinese – school integration, moving into white neighborhoods, or attempting to gain membership or employment in white-dominated organizations – met with resistance," which would manifest whenever the Other would attempt to cross the social divide (102). These subjects were disciplined through the process of "racial castration," a tactic which David L. Eng argues in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001) was deployed throughout America over the course of the 20th Century. Institutional efforts to derogate and marginalize Asian American culture as "feminine" worked to cast the migrant as an abject, foreign presence. In addition, these efforts demonstrate how race, gender, and sexuality remain inextricably linked in the American imaginary.

---

**Part 3 – Racial Castration in Yoknapatawpha**

Existing outside the bounds of segregation, Asians experienced forms of oppression that differed radically from their African American counterparts. The trope of predatory black male sexuality has a long history in southern culture. According to critic Diane Miller Sommerville in *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (2004), "The American South's hysterical fear of black rapists, often referred to as the 'rape myth' or 'rape complex,' is well-documented, and has been memorialized in fiction and nonfiction alike for over a hundred years."\(^{246}\) W.J. Cash, in his seminal work, *The Mind of the South* (1941), was the first to invoke the term "rape complex" to characterize these fears. Since the antebellum era, as Cash explains, white southerners came to identify "white womanhood" with the South itself (115). This collective anxiety would often culminate in lynchings, in which crowds would assault and often murder black victims. In *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (2004), historian Jonathan Markovitz

describes how these mobs would often castrate those accused of sexual crimes, for it was the general consensus that "a living victim of castration who remained a member of the black community would be a more powerful continuing reminder of the strength of white supremacy."

While Asians largely escaped the violence traditionally reserved for the "Negro," they would continue to struggle against institutional forms of prejudice through the late-19th and early-20th Century. In Mississippi, Asian membership was limited to only the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars – groups oriented primarily toward lower-, middle-, and working-class whites – while Rotary, Kiwanis, the Delta Council, and most country clubs denied them access. There were groups of wealthy citizens, too, who would systematically buy up lots and warn property owners against selling real-estate to Chinese, Lebanese, and Filipino customers. In the case of these Asian migrants, as James Loewen explains, "Discrimination could be localized in the upper class," and, while "The upper class is surely less violent in its prejudice […] that is partly because violence is less its style in any endeavor (111, 106).

Prejudice against Asian Americans not merely a southern phenomenon. In fact, the context of southern regionalism actually exaggerates Asian placement in the United States as a whole. The rupture of national and regional identity caused by the Asian presence is a key marker of modernity in the history of the America. In Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier (1999), David Palumbo-Liu examines how the presence of Asian migrants – and the reactionary movement to bar further immigration – contributed to shaping the nation's

---


248 See Loewen 112-113.
modern self-definition. His study builds on the work of a fellow Asian studies critic, Lisa Lowe, who notes in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) that "Throughout the 20th Century, the figure of the Asian immigrant has served as a 'screen,' a phantasmatic site, on which the nation projects a series of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body." As a result of this "Yellow Peril" mentality, Asian Americans were gradually pushed to the margins of American society. These racial anxieties would ultimately lead to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which not only prohibited immigration from China, but denied citizenship to legal residents. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1917 and the National Origins Act of 1924, both introduced at time when nativist sentiments had reached their heights – worked to extend these prohibitions to include virtually all Asians and Asian Americans.

Lisa Lowe's scholarship is particularly significant for her exploration of how race, gender, and sexuality have been woven to construct a genealogy of the Asian male subject. Analyzing the history of Asian American migration, naturalization, detention, exclusion, as well as the legislative ban on the entry of Chinese wives, Lowe concludes that these juridical practices combined to produce a "technology" for simultaneously racializing and gendering the Asian American male. In other words, the racial identity of the Asian male was produced, stabilized, and secured through these mechanisms:

---


251 For more on the history of the "Yellow Peril" in America, see William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982).
Racialization along the legal axis of definitions of citizenship has also ascribed gender to the Asian American subject. Up until 1870, American citizenship was granted exclusively to white male persons; in 1870, men of African descent could become naturalized, but the bar to citizenship remained for Asian men until the repeal acts of 1943-1952. (11)

Migrants were thus barred not only from social and institutional definitions of "maleness," but also from normative conceptions of masculinity legally defined as white. In addition, the concentration of Asian American males working in what were considered "feminized" professions – laundries, restaurants, and groceries, for example – further illustrates the material legacy of the intersectionality of gender and race. Throughout the 20th Century, the popularity of stereotypes connecting Asian men to these professions demonstrates how economically-driven modes of feminization cling to bodies, not only sexually, but racially as well.252

The "feminization" of the Asian male in the U.S. cultural imaginary has also served as a technology of sexualization. In their preface to The Big Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature (1991), for example, the editors lament how "It is an article of white liberal faith that Chinese met, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu."253 In his article,

---

252 For critical analyses of these stereotypes in American culture, see James S. Moy, Marginal Sites: Staging the Chinese in America (Iowa City: University of Iowa P, 1993); Darell Hamamoto, Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1994).

"Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Porn Video," Richard summarizes the phenomenon bluntly: "Asian and Anus are conflated."  

In the South, the conflation of racial Otherness with femininity and perversity is evident in the region's underground gay subculture, as the paperback covers and pulp fiction of Carl Corley illustrate. According to John Howard's study of the author, it is the taboo against black male sexuality that overwhelmingly attracts Corley's white male protagonists. Asians rarely appear in his fiction, and those that do are characterized as effeminate and submissive. Consider, for instance, the cover of Corley's *The Scarlet Lantern* (1966), in which a masculine American soldier is admired by an Asian houseboy with delicately-shaped eyes, feminine eyelashes, and a pouting mouth.

The emasculation of the Asian American has been described by David Eng as a form of "racial castration," As a result, Eng argues that the effeminate Asian male can be read as a "castrated boy" in American literature and culture:

[The] Asian male is psychically emasculated, foreclosed from an identification with normative heterosexuality, so as to guarantee the white man's claim to his location. As such, the potential trauma of sexual difference is not arrested at the site of the female body (as is the case with classic fetishism). Instead, sexual difference is managed through the arrest, disavowal, and projection of racial difference at the site of the Asian male body. (151)

---


255 For More on Carl Corley, see Chapter 2.

256 See Howard 213-214.

257 See Fig. 1 on p. 165.
Fig. 1. Paperback cover for *The Scarlet Lantern* (1966). By Carl Corley.
This psychoanalytic account effectively inverts Sigmund Freud's original argument in his 1927 article, "Fetishism," in which Freud describes the process whereby the male subject attempts to obviate the trauma of sexual difference by projecting onto the female body a penis that is not actually there.²⁵⁸ Eng thus identifies racial castration as a form of "reverse fetishism," in which the white male subject practices a "blatant refusal to see on the body of an Asian male the penis that is clearly there for him to see" (150).

In Southern Renaissance fiction, an example of this symbolically castrated subject can be found in one of William Faulkner's rare Asian characters. The character of the Chinese laundryman in *The Town* (1957), for instance, was at least in part based on Hum Wo, who owned a laundromat and a general store in Faulkner's native Oxford, Mississippi. As the narrator describes, the townsfolk tolerate this lonely Asian bachelor, a man who literally resides on the outskirts of the community, so long as he confines himself to sociocultural isolation:

the Chinese man was definitely a colored man, if not a Negro, he was only he, single, peculiar and barren; not just kinless but kindless, half the world or anyway half the continent (we all knew about San Francisco's Chinatown) sundered from his like, and therefore threatless as a mule.²⁵⁹

The migrant's existence is acceptable, as long as it does not constitute a threat to the town's racial balance. As he is disconnected from any interstitial community of strength and support, he is considered a harmless curiosity. Compared to the Negro, there is no fear of miscegenation surrounding the foreigner, for he has been rendered "peculiar and barren" as a neutered mule.


The nameless laundryman described by Chick Mallison is afforded little more attention in the text. He has effectively consigned his subjectivity to the town of Jefferson. In contrast, Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) experiences racial castration as an emasculating process that is as traumatizing as it is disempowering. As Heidi Lee Kim writes, "*Light in August* provides a frightening fictional portrait of what might happen to a man caught between black and white," a situation that was all to real for the migrant in the American South (207). To expand on Kim's observation, I argue that it is during Joe's childhood serves as the formative period during which he is conditioned to internalize his status – or lack thereof – as an "impossible subject." Shunned by his white peers at the orphanage, and unwelcome at a similar institution for blacks, he finds that there is no place for him in the segregated South. Ultimately, it is his stubborn refusal to accept his "castrated" status, and his violent search for identity, that leads to his literal castration and death.

Joe first receives objectifying knowledge of himself through his grandfather, Eupheus "Doc" Hines, who tortures and isolates the boy at a young age. For Hines, the racially indeterminate origins of his "bastard" grandson mark it as abomination: "A walking pollution in God's own image," the product of "womansinning and bitchery" (*LA* 128). Joe's earliest male role model thus confers upon him a racially and sexually ambiguous identity. The boy is neither male nor female, but something worse than both: the male embodiment of abject femininity.

While Joe's relationships with his various surrogate fathers are characterized by violence and prejudice, they are at least a respite from the maternal threat he perceives in women. Indeed, it is through the feminine that the adolescent Joe Christmas experiences an abjection so profound

---

as to be suicidal. As Julia Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), "The abject confronts us […] with our earliest attempts to release the hold of a maternal entity […] It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling." Joe's traumatic disavowal of menstruation, for example, demonstrates how he associates the female body with abject waste and the threat of castration:

> In the notseeing and hardknowing as though in a cave he seemed to see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in the moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack there issued something liquid, deathcolored, and foul. He touched the tree, leaning his propped arm against it, seeing the ranked and moonlit urns. He vomited. (*LA* 189)

This nauseating response is one of Joe's more terrifying and disturbing encounters with the female abject. At other moments, he exhibits "food loathing" – what Kristeva calls "the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" – towards the meals offered by his adoptive mother, Mrs. McEachern, and later by his white lover, Joanna Burden. It is "The repugnance and retching," Kristeva writes, "that turns us away from defilement, sewage, and muck," and all else that falls outside the realm of the symbolic (2). Thus, while Joe is emasculated by white male authority figures, he experiences femininity as a horrifying reminder of his own psychic impotence.

Despite his seemingly powerless position, Joe violently resists his "castrated" status. In contrast to the docile laundryman of *The Town*, the grisly fate of Joe Christmas serves as a

---

cautionary tale for those who would refuse to assimilate to the demands of southern society. Joe literally attempts to assert his "penetrative" capabilities at several key junctures in the text. In defiance of patriarchal authority, he knocks out Mr. McEachern with a chair (LA 205); to overcome his fear of the female body, he slaughters a lamb and fondles its genitals (LA 185). His climactic act of resistance is ultimately inflicted on a fellow outcast, the tomboyish Joanna Burden, who is introduced as a descendant of northern "carpetbaggers."

Joe Christmas is initially fascinated and frustrated by Joanna's ability to assume the masculine identity he so desperately longs to possess. As a lover, she reverses their roles in the bedroom so that, as Joe describes, "it was like I was the woman and she was the man" (LA 235). His attempts to flex his male prerogative, to "show the bitch" and "mak[e] a woman out of her at last" ends in failure, for she refuses to resist his advances, and even seems complicit in her own rape (LA 236). As their relationship progresses, Joe increasingly perceives Joanna to be what he describes as a "passionate sewer," in which he "began to see himself from a distance, like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass" (LA 260).

It is ultimately the recollection of his own childhood that inexorably compels Joe to violence. As time passes, and Joanna's dominance over him shifts from erotic to maternal, the tensions between them continue to escalate. The power struggle between them reaches its bloody climax when Joanna orders Joe to kneel before her in prayer, a demand which triggers Joe's early memories of kneeling before an adoptive father, kneeling over a mutilated sheep, and other similarly disempowering experiences of abjection and submission. In a moment of panic,
Joe overpowers and decapitates her with a razor, an act that feminist Helene Cixous would describe as a form of "female castration."262

Until Joanna's murder, Joe Christmas has managed to maintain an uneasy existence in Jefferson society. As Heidi Lee Kim observes, Joe's coworkers at the sawmill "classify Christmas as a foreigner but somehow suppress the possibility of his non-whiteness" (208). The townsfolk, for their part, seem willing to tolerate Joe's bootlegging activities, and even his relationship with a white woman, so long as these transgressions can be safely relegated to the margins of society. However, Joanna's brutal decapitation forces these subjects to confront the threat of Joe's interstitial subjectivity. No longer able to suppress the possibility of his nonwhiteness, the outraged townsfolk insist that he must be the absolute opposite, a Negro whose castrated status must be literally and permanently marked on the body.

Joe's execution and mutilation is conducted by Percy Grimm, a militant white supremacist who "the town had suddenly accepted […] with respect and perhaps a little awe and a great deal of actual faith and confidence" (LA 456-457). Faulkner even goes so far as to introduce a new character, the lawyer Gavin Stevens, who expounds on how Joe's "black blood" has finally become the master of his soul (LA 449). Ultimately, Joe's Negro identity is confirmed for the townsfolk, as "the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath" from his wounds (LA 465).

For the Asian migrant in the South, the threat of being forced onto the "dark" side of the racial binary loomed as a constant threat. These subjects could either accept the terms of racial castration or suffer the consequences. What prevents the people of Jefferson from identifying

262 According to Helene Cixous, "If a man operates under a threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head." See Helene Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Annette Kuhn, Signs 7.1 (1981): 41-55
Joe as possibly Asian, Mexican, or mulatto lies in the inability of segregated society to admit new elements into its power structure. As critic Daniel Joseph Singal observes in *The War Within: From Victorian to Modern Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (1982), the circumstances and motivations behind the actions of Joe Christmas are complex, and "Thus the ironic twist of the screw is the community's simplistic, stereotyped response to the event" (184). The crowd at the scene of Joe's murder "believed aloud that [Joanna's murder] was an anonymous negro crime [...] and hoped that she had been ravished too" (*LA* 288). The interstitial subject in the novel has once more been defined by forces beyond his control, this time to serve the town's need for a racially-appropriate scapegoat.

---

**Part 4 – The Castrated Houseboy**

The tragedy of Joe Christmas thus serves as a scathing indictment of Jim Crow society. The townspeople's image of the Negro racist is juxtaposed against Joe's actual thoughts as he prepares to surrender: "Yes, I would say here I am tired. I am tired of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs" (*LA* 337). His decision to cast off the burden of interstitiality and accept the identity conferred upon him demonstrates the performative nature of race. Here, racial identity has been defined by actions rather than appearances.

The publication of *Light in August* marked a turning point in Faulkner's literary development. For the first time, the author addressed issues of race, while black characters in his earlier work functioned primarily as comic relief (Sartoris's servant in *Flags in the Dust* (1929)), or to provide a moral and emotional counterpoint to the dominant white perspective (the role of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)). The racial Others in his early short stories – for
example, the Chinese sailors in "Yo Ho and Two Bottles of Rum" (1925) – were uniformly stereotyped as primitive savages. By contrast, the interstitial Joe Christmas – whom critic Regina K. Fadiman argues in *Faulkner's Light in August: A Description and Interpretations of the Revisions* (1975) was designed to appear as racially indeterminate as possible – serves to expose the anxieties, inconsistencies, and oppression at the heart of segregation.²⁶³ It is in *Light in August*, as author Robert Penn Warren observes in his essay, "Faulkner: The South, The Negro, and Time," that "Faulkner undercuts the official history and mythology of a whole society by indicating that the 'nigger' is a creation of the white man."²⁶⁴

Considering Faulkner's interest in racial interstitiality, in addition to his towering literary reputation, it is perhaps no surprise that Heidi Lee Kim locates him as the entry point for her pathbreaking study of the Asian in southern literature. While I agree with her interpretation of Faulkner's *Light in August*, however, I also argue that Joe's racial indeterminacy – and the marginal importance of Faulkner's other Asian characters – offers only limited insight into the specificity of Asian American subjectivity. The white male bias of the author, for example, is evident in Faulkner's portrayal of the dietician at the orphanage, Joanna Burden, and the other dysfunctional women in Joe's life.

Faulkner's perspective on race in *Light in August* is also characterized by a deep sense of ambivalence. As Daniel Joseph Singal observes, "the force of his critique of his own society must have been overwhelming for Faulkner in 1932 […] [for] he introduces in deus ex machina fashion a new character, the lawyer Gavin Stevens," to speculate at length about violence.


inherent in Joe's "black blood" (186-187). Indeed, in a novel that emphasize Joe's complexity as an "impossible subject," Faulkner ultimately racializes Joe as black, as the act of castration allows "the pent black blood to rush like a released breath" (LA 465). The implications of racial interstitiality are thus washed away in a communal act of violent catharsis. The effect, as Singal notes, "is to muddle considerably the moral thrust of the novel just as it peaks, allowing Faulkner to hedge his bets" (187).

Due the Faulkner's white male perspective, it is important for his work to be read in conversation with the marginalized literature of southern female and immigrant authors. Throughout the 20th Century, as Michael Kreyling notes in *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), the region's literary criticism has been dominated by the "Quentin Thesis," the valorization of Faulkner by such prominent critics as C. Vann Woodward, Louis D. Rubin Jr., and Allen Tate as the quintessential representative of southern culture. This myopic focus has only recently been challenged by feminist scholars. Patricia Yaeger in particular has observed that, unlike Faulkner, "who in a blaze of glory conjurs up race as an epic structure," it is the fiction of such authors as "[Alice] Walker, [Zora Neale] Hurston, [Eudora] Welty, [Willa] Cather, [Katherine Anne] Porter, and [Carson] McCullers" that asks us to consider how race and gender cohabit everyday lives (*Dirt and Desire* 104). Considering their shared – though unequally structured – experiences under white patriarchy, the female perspective is uniquely suited to explore the struggles of the neglected or oppressed racial Other. In fact, it is a text by one of the authors suggest by Yaeger that offers the only example of a dynamically queer Asian character in Southern Renaissance literature.

---

265 See Kreyling 106.
Upon publication, Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) was met with hardly the critical acclaim enjoyed by Faulkner just a decade prior. To the contrary, McCullers's second novel initially weathered a mediocre critical reception, with members of the Ku Klux Klan going so far as to threaten the author for proving herself not only a "nigger-lover," but a "queer" as well. Even the film adaptation released twenty-five years later would be censored for containing, in the words of the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, "gratuitous nudity, male and female, and almost no insight." Indeed, in its explicit portrayal of homosexual desire, McCullers's work was decades ahead of its time.

Critics have only recently engaged in the process of revaluing *Reflections in a Golden Eye* as a complex and groundbreaking work of queer fiction. In *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (2003), for instance, Sarah Gleeson-White praises the text for its "highly intricate portrayal of sexuality [that] demands that we think of homosexuality as a productive mode, in its creation of new pleasures and new relations to the world" (67). In his article, "But for Fate and Ban: Homosexual Villains and Victims in the Military," as well, Roger Austen observes that "more than any other writer, [McCullers] is able to be understanding and compassionate" in her treatment of Officer Penderton's unrequited love for primitive and sensual Private Williams. According to Austen, McCullers's story of an officer's desire for an enlisted man differs from similar works by Herman Melville, D.H. Lawrence, and Dennis Murphy, all of whom imply that homosexual desire is an unhealthy and destructive perversion of heterosexuality.


Set on a quiet army base in Georgia, McCullers's novel revolves around a web of erotic relationships woven beneath the surface of military discipline and order. The participants, as the narrator lists them, are "two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino and a horse," whose interrelated and often volatile interactions with one another lead to tragic consequences (*RG* 3). In a story in which, as Oliver Evans notes in *Carson McCullers: Her Life and Work* (1965), "not even the horse is normal," critics have focused primarily on the triangulations of desire involving all but one of the white characters.\(^{269}\) To begin, there is the affair between Major Langdon and the captain's wife, the hypersexual Leonora, while Captain Penderton – who is himself aware of his being cuckolded – suffers from "a sad penchant for becoming enamored of his wife's lovers" (*RG* 11). Meanwhile, Penderton is consumed by his own desire for the primitive Private Williams, who in turn voyeuristically stalks Leonora. Besides the horse, however, there are two characters who continue to remain at the margins of critical discourse. Indeed, the role of the major's long-suffering wife, Alison Langdon, and her doting servant Anacleto have receive only cursory attention.

A close reading of Anacleto reveals that the Filipino houseboy plays an integral and profoundly more complex role in the narrative than has previously been acknowledged. His racial heritage alone carries powerful colonial implications. Unlike Faulkner, McCullers works to construct a historically accurate portrait Asian American subjectivity in WWII-era American culture. In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, a novel written just prior to America's declaration of war on Japan and assertion of military control over the Pacific, the specificity of Anacleto's Filipino

identity carries particular significance. As I argue in the following section, his presence and behavior on the military base works to dramatize the displacement of hegemonic authority and the appropriation of that authority by the Other.

The queer significance of Anacleto lies in his status as a racially castrated boy. From his first appearance in the text, the author repeatedly emphasizes his foreign, exotic, feminine features. Despite being seventeen-years old, Anacleto has not made the transition to manhood – nor does he appear eager to do so – and "his sickly, clever, frightened face had the innocent expression of a child of ten" (RG 59). Besides serving in a domestic capacity, his is constantly referred to as the "little" or "tiny Filipino" by both the narrator and other characters. The only people he deems worthy of association – Alison Langdon and the elderly Lieutenant Weincheck – have themselves endured some form of symbolic castration as well. Weincheck, who lives a lonely life as a bachelor, is being forced to retire after failing a routine physical. Alison, who has been driven to despair by her husband's infidelity, cuts off her nipples with a pair of garden shears. It is the communion between these three "feminine" outcasts that ultimately demonstrates the potential for a queer continuum of support across gender, racial, and sexual boundaries.

While both McCullers's Anacleto and Faulkner's Joe Christmas represent racial interstitiality in the South, it is their opposing reactions to the process of racial castration that define them as either tragic or heroic figures. Unlike Joe, he loathes femininity and resists his castrated status, Anacleto actually embraces his effeminate (non)identity. The Filipino houseboy rejects rather than aspires towards heteronormative adulthood. Instead, he celebrates his embodiment of the grotesque, for "It was common knowledge that he thought the lord had blundered grossly in the making of everyone except himself and Madame Alison – the sole
exception to this were people behind footlights, midgets, great artists, and suchlike fabulous folk" (RG 40). His resistance to the patriarchal ideals of society – heterosexual adulthood, white supremacy, and the strict enforcement of gender roles – marks him as an "impossible subject," one whose existence works to expose and subvert the dominant cultural ethos.

Herein lies the queer potential of Anacleto. While David Eng's research locates the system and mechanics of racial castration, he fails to provide a single instance in which the sociopsychic position of the "castrated boy" is so embraced. Anacleto's character exemplifies what feminist and transgender critic Joon Oluchi Lee calls "The Joy of the Castrated Boy." In his article of the same title, Lee describes how his own childhood experience with castration anxiety turned from terror, to interest, to excitement:

the eventual mitigation of my castration terror relied not on the magic of penile reclamation, but on the gradual acclimation to the castration threat, and thus acclimation to the state of castration: having a feminine body, having a feminine psyche, being a feminine boy. This suggests an alternative reading of the boy's terror at seeing the nude female body. Freud identifies as the moment of castration terror the boy's "turning to stone" […] But what if we took another path with the image of turning to stone? Not "stiff," but "still." If the boy can be seen as still rather than stiff, then we can begin to think about his interest in the nude female body not as an object for sex but as an object for being. (36)

Lee's queer revision of Freudian theory is further supported in the realm of affect theory. Psychologist Silvan Tompkins suggests, for example, that the physical manifestation of the affect of "Fear-Terror" is almost indistinguishable to that of "Surprise-Startle," which, as a "Resetting" affect, is able to transition between positive and negative affects. Thus, the "Surprise-Startle"
affect is often a precursor to the positive "Interest-Excitement." In other words, the thought or concept of castration can serve as source of both fear and fascination. It is not, as psychoanalysis has traditionally defined it, a purely negative phenomenon.

For Joon Oluchi Lee, the terror of castration that merged into an interest in identification was not necessarily produced by the female body, but by what Lee calls "a raw female imagination [...] so even though I was never forcibly castrated [...] I have always considered myself a castrated boy and learned to be happy in that state" (37). In the American South, this was not – and continues to not be – an "acceptable" identity in a society gripped by effeminophobia. By embodying the "joy of the castrated boy," however, Anacleto demonstrates that the absence of the phallic signifier does not necessarily constitute loss. Instead, something is gained through the process of castration: the grotesque body of potential, and an identity that confounds the "either/or" logic of white, patriarchal, Jim Crow society.

In the following two sections, I consider the two primary methods through which Anacleto subverts the strictly enforced categories of gender, sexual, and racial identification on this southern military base. In addition, I read McCullers's text in conjunction with the history of Filipino migration to America, in order to demonstrate how Anacleto's specific national identity informs his queer methods of resistance, and whether he perhaps unconsciously draws on traditional practice and values rooted in Filipino culture.

Part 5 – Masculinity, Performance, and Bakla


271 For more on the issue of "effeminophobia," see Chapter 2. See also Tim Bergling, Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior (New York: Harrington Park, 2001).
From the beginning of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, McCullers clearly establishes the privileged position of men in southern culture. On a military base, where "all is designed according to a certain rigid pattern," the initial list of characters is striking: "two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino and a horse" (*RG* 3). Each participant is ordered according to their place in the social hierarchy. Listed first are the white men, as designated by military rank; then the women; and finally the foreigner – who possesses neither rank nor gender – whose station is only slightly above that of an animal.

The character who wields the highest of prestige and authority is Alison's husband, Major Langdon, who serves as a paragon of military masculinity. "Only two things matter to me," as he announces to his companions, "to be a good animal and to serve my country. A healthy body and patriotism" (*RG* 117). His obsession with discipline and control is particular evident in his almost fetishistic obsession of the Langdon's Filipino houseboy. Throughout the narrative, he repeatedly treats Anacleto with contempt, and even entertains the fantasy of somehow conscripting him into the service. "God! You're a rare bird," he declares at one point, "What I wouldn't do to get you in my battalion!" (*RG* 40). Much later, in a conversation with Captain Penderton, he couches his intentions in terms of benevolent paternalism:

"Alison always thought I brought up the subject just to be cruel […] But that wasn't so. Anacleto wouldn't have been happy in the army, no, but it might have made a man of him. Would have knocked the nonsense out of him anyway […] In the army they would have run him ragged and he would have been miserable, but even that seems to me better than the other." (*RG* 114)
"The other," for the Major, are those qualities that contradict the strict code of military masculinity. This includes not only effeminacy, but also intellectualism and abstract creativity, all of which he regards with contempt. Alison, who is too feminine, delicate, and intellectual, is thus incomprehensible to her husband's logic. When she requests a divorce, the idea can only be understood by the major as final proof of her insanity. His final, desperate act of control – by committing his wife to a sanatorium – results in tragedy, as Alison succumbs to a heart attack only a few days later.

Just a single rank below the major, Captain Penderton has also built a strong reputation as an officer and a gentleman. Unlike Langdon, however, Penderton's has inherited his authority by birthright. He is described by the narrator as "a descendant of a planter," the last representative of "a history of barbarous splendor, ruined poverty, and family hauteur," though "the present generation has not come to much" (RG 71-72). Despite the decline of his once-noble lineage, "the Captain set exaggerated store by the lost past," and it continues to define his identity as a white southern gentleman.

Behind his ancestry, his rank, and his marriage to the beautiful Leonora lurks what the narrator describes as Penderton's true nature. Below the heteronormative surface, the captain struggles with a complex mix of contradictory urges, feelings, and desires. Sexually, he possesses "a delicate balance between male and female elements," and has "a sad penchant for becoming enamored of his wife's lovers" (RG 10, 11). Besides his attraction to Langdon, and numerous other men who have cuckolded him in the past, he soon develops an obsession for Private Williams, an unrequited longing that ultimately drives him to violence.

Despite his position in the power hierarchy, Penderton's homosexuality itself appears to serve as a form of symbolic castration. His inability to consummate his marriage to Leonora is a
constant source of shame, a weakness Leonora mercilessly exploits: "Son, have you ever be
collared and dragged out in the street and thrashed by a naked woman?" (RG 15).272 His
castration anxiety, like the anxiety of Joe Christmas, is followed by traumatic disavowal. As
Miho Matsui observes in Passing Into Darkness: Sexuality, Race, and Integration of the
Segregated in the Works of the Southern Renaissance (2013), "Penderton hates women. In
addition to loathing Alison's fragile and delicate femininity, he hates his voluptuous and
somewhat feeble-minded wife, particularly her sexuality […] which emasculates him" (134). He
likewise regards femininity with a mixture of revulsion and abject terror.

Despite Penderton's deep-rooted misogyny, the description of his body by the narrator
ironically emphasizes his traditionally feminine attributes. For instance, he is characterized by
his "white, fattish hands," and he comports himself "in a nervous, finicky manner" (RG 6). In
particular, the description of the captain on his horse reveals his failure to meet the standards of
the masculine military body. The way "His buttocks spread and jounced flabbily in the saddle"
earns him the derogatory nickname "Captain Flap Fanny" among the enlisted men (RG 25-26).
As Georges-Michel Sarotte observes in Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the
American Novel and Theater from Herman Melville to James Baldwin (1978), Penderton
resembles "a grotesque effeminate who desperately tries to appear a virile horseman."273 His
failure as a rider represents also his failure to complete the masculine performance.

It is interesting to note, when considering McCullers's novel in its historical context, how
Penderton's physical attributes closely coincide with the symptoms listed by the American

272 See Fig. 2 on p. 182.

273 Georges-Michel Sarotte, Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and
Fig. 2. Leonora Penderton (played by Elizabeth Taylor) emasculates her husband, Captain Weldon Penderton (played by Marlon Brando) in a poster for John Huston's film adaptation of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1966).
military as being indicative of mental illness. According to Allan Berube in *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (1990), these 1921 guidelines listed "feminine characteristics among the 'stigmata of degeneration' that made a man unfit for military service":

> Males with a "degenerative physique," the regulations explained, "may present the general body conformation of the opposite sex, with sloping narrow shoulders, broad hips, excessive pectoral and pubic adipose deposits" […] In addition to these "anatomical stigmata of degeneration," the interwar standards listed "sexual perversion" […] as one of many "functional" stigmata of degeneration. (13-14)

In the army, where effeminate and homosexual men are regarded as "perverts" and "psychopaths," however, Penderton is able to blur the boundaries between male and female; normalcy and deviance. His success in the military is dependent on maintaining his superficial identity as a heterosexual, masculine officer.

While Penderton's marriage plays an important role, the figure of Anacleto is equally instrumental to the success of the captain's heteronormative performance. As Gary Richards notes, "[Anacleto's] effeminacy is so extreme that even Penderton seems masculine by comparison" (*Lovers & Beloveds* 173). In his efforts to distance himself from Alison and her Filipino houseboy – who represent gender, racial, and sexual Otherness on the base – he subjects them both to constant psychological abuse. Ironically for Penderton, even these attacks take the traditional feminine form of passive-aggressive gossip: "He fabricated any number of ridiculous anecdotes about Alison and Anacleto, and they had gone the rounds of the post with great success" (*RG* 99). Essentially, Penderton's white male authority is constructed in opposition to the queer Other, the effeminate Asian sissy.
However, Anacleto embraces his status as Other, and thus confounds efforts to classify and marginalize him by the hegemony. The "reflections in a golden eye" – the title's namesake – are the grotesque realities behind the apparently controlled, disciplined, and monotonous surface of army life, a grotesqueness that only Anacleto perceives. The "golden eye" itself is an image conceived and described by Anacleto himself:

"Look!" Anacleto said suddenly [...] "A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in it these reflections of something tiny and –"

[...]


He nodded shortly. "Exactly." (RG 86)

Anacleto himself is described as particularly perceptive, and is "imitative by nature." He takes particular pride in his capacity as a performer: "Have you ever noticed," he asks Alison, "How well 'Bravo' and 'Anacleto' go together?" (RG 43). Unlike characters such as Joe Christmas and Captain Penderton, he is able to channel his creative energies beyond the confines of phallic male empowerment, and "His work was at once primitive and over-sophisticated, and it laid a queer spell on the beholder" (RG 85).

For Anacleto, such white male characters as Captain Penderton and Major Langdon pose a constant threat to his livelihood. While Penderton spreads malicious rumors, Langdon actively harasses and belittles him. At one point, the major also adopts Penderton's tactics, and spreads a joke about how "the little Filipino thoughtfully scented Alison Langdon's specimen of wee-wee with perfume before taking it to the hospital for urinalysis" (RG 74). In response to these tactics, however, Anacleto proves himself a more than capable adversary. Throughout the text, he
continues to subvert the disciplinary mechanisms of society through acts of linguistic
manipulation, performance, and other childish tricks.

To fully understand the implications behind the Filipino houseboy and his white
antagonists, one must consider its colonial context. Behind Anacleto’s relocation to America is
the rise of expansionism in imperial America during the late-19th Century. As postcolonial
critics such as Jinqi Ling and Victor Bascara have observed, this expansionism is closely related
to the construction of the masculinity of the dominant, white, heterosexual American male. In
her study of gender politics and American imperialism during the Spanish-American of 1898,
_Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and
Philippine-American Wars_ (1998), Kristin L. Hoganson notes that America's motive for
"wag[ing] a lengthy war for control of the Philippines" was to "keep American men and their
political system from degenerating." War offered the opportunity to "recover" American
manhood, in an age when feminism was on the rise. According to Hoganson, imperialists argued
that Filipino men were "savage, childish," and above all, "feminine," and thus lacked the
capacity for self-governance (138).

After the colonization of the Philippines, the feminization of Filipino men contributed in
large part to the construction of white American masculinity. Studying the relationship between
American manhood and early-20th Century immigration, sociologist Michael Kimmel describes
in _Manhood in America: A Cultural History_ (1996) how rising unemployment and the increasing

---

274 See Jinqi Ling, "Identity Crisis and Gender Politics: Reappropriating Asian American Masculinity," _An
314; Victor Bascara, The Case of the Disappearing Filipino American Houseboy: Speculations on _Double Indemnity_

275 Kristin L. Hoganson, _Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-
number of immigrants was perceived as a threat to American "manliness." In the 1930s, as Kimmel writes, "racial exclusion and anti-immigrant nativism were again a recourse for some who searched for a foundation for secure manhood."\(^{276}\) In particular, Filipinos – whose numbers had increased even after the Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924 – were subject to a high degree of racial antipathy, and were a popular target for abuse. For instance, the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 effectively reclassified Filipinos as aliens, a status that rendered them ineligible for the benefits of New Deal programs. According to Kimmel, these discriminatory sentiments rested on "twin gender images":

Racism and nativism bore the mark of gender, as if depicting "them" as less manly would make "us" feel more manly. So on the one hand, Filipinos were cast as effete and effeminate; small with delicate features, great dancers who possessed an obsessive concern with clothing and appearance. On the other hand, Filipinos were hypermasculine "jungle folk," "scarcely more than savages," "with primitive moral codes." (195)

The gender image of the Filipino man, as constructed by the colonial gaze, is thus a reflection of the denied aspects of the white American male. As a result, Filipinos occupied the lowest social rank among Asian American subjects in the 1930s and 40s. In his introduction to Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1946) – the semi-autobiographical work of a Filipino laborer in California – Carey McWilliams describes how "the Filipino was the bottom dog; he occupied the lowest rung on the ladder."\(^{277}\) Bulosan's young narrator is characterized by his anger,


helplessness, and impotent fury, which he later directs towards his fellow countrymen. In other words, he narrates the frustration of the racially castrated subject.

Like Bulosan's narrator, the Filipino houseboy in Reflections in a Golden Eye is critical to the establishment of a privileged, white, masculine identity. By embracing his castrated status, however, Anacleto reevaluates the position of the Other, and draws on his abilities as an artist and performer to envision new modes of subjectivity. While the ostensibly normative, heterosexual characters in the text are characterized by their violent and destructive tendencies, Anacleto is the only one able to find joy through self-affirmation. Besides his feminine mannerisms and style of dress, he has a taste for the foreign and the exotic, and is able to articulate himself through the language of ballet, music, painting, and linguistic manipulation. As a result, in his interaction with Major Langdon, Anacleto is consistently able to overturn the dichotomy between "master" and "servant." This is particularly evident in his linguistic proficiency:

"Idiot!" The Major said. "How is [Alison]?

Anacleto lifted his eyebrows and closed his delicate white eyelids very slowly.

"Tres fatiguee."

"Ah!" Said the major furiously, for he did not speak a word of French. "Vooley voo rooney roo mooney moo! I say, how is she?" (RG 39)

Anacleto is himself aware of the subversive effects of his wordplay. Indeed, as the narrator describes, "When Anacleto brought out his French phrase, he gave the Major a glance of merriest malice" (RG 42). Unable to control, or even comprehend the effeminate individual – this "impossible subject" – Major Langdon's vulnerabilities are exposed. "It was apparent from

---

[Anacleto's] bright face," as the narrator explains, "that in his own mind he was out on an immense stage, the cynosure in a dazzling spectacle," while the major can only watch "in disgusted disbelief" (RG 43).

What marks Anacleto's body and performance as "queer," in particular, is his stubborn resistance to classification. He is the "impossible subject" always at the interstices of established power structures. In this, he exemplifies Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque in Rabelais and His World (1984), which "seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being" (52). Anacleto's identity is in a constant state of transformation, and the art he creates is always left unfinished and incomplete. In his conversations with Alison, he constantly challenges the logic of identity politics:

"Madame Alison," he said, "do you really believe that Mr. Sergei Rachmaninoff knows that a chair is something to be sat on and that a clock shows one the time? And that if I should take off my shoe and hold it up to his face and say, "what is this, Mr. Sergei Rachmaninoff?" then he would answer, like anyone else, "Why, Anacleto, that is a shoe." I myself find it hard to realize." (RG 59-60)

Anacleto thus fits Mae Ngai's definition of the "impossible subject," who is "a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved" (5). Existing at the interstices of binary understandings of race, gender, and sexuality, he works to interrogate and destabilize pre-existing structures of power in southern society.

Beside embodying the grotesque potential of the impossible subject, I argue that it is also important to consider how Anacleto's own racial heritage can be said to inform his queer strategies of performance and resistance. In Filipino culture, as Martin F. Manalansan IV explains in Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora (2003), the castrated boy find his
analogue in the *bakla*, the effeminate individual who, while born male, identifies as neither male nor female. According to Manalansan, "Bakla is the Tagalog term that encompasses homosexuality, hermaphroditism, cross-dressing, and effeminacy," and, like the castrated boy, "One of the *bakla's* singular attributes is a sense of self entrenched in the process of transformation" (ix). As a result, it has endured as a social category in Filipino culture for centuries.  

As Manalansan observes,  

*Bakla* is a problematic Tagalog term. Its etymology is popularly seen to be a result of the contraction of the first syllable of the word for woman (*babae*) and the first syllable of the word for man (*lalaki*) […] In addition, it is also seen in terms of the in-between, or *alanganin* […] The interstitial or epicene quality attributed to the *bakla* illuminates the social script. Indeed, while *bakla* conflates the categories of effeminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality and can mean one or all of these in different contexts, the main focus of the term is that of effeminate mannerisms, feminine physical characteristics (i.e., small, frail bodies, delicate facial features, and so on), and cross-dressing. (25)  

For the *bakla*, therefore, the act of performance is far more than an aesthetic exercise, it is rather a way of articulating multiple configurations of queer identity.  

He is the Filipino sissy, whose identity is always interstitial, always in flux. In the context of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, Anacleto therefore represents the triumph of the *bakla* in the face of both American imperialism and Jim Crow society.

---

279 In contrast to Martin F. Manalansan IV, J. Neil Garcia has theorized that "bacla" dates back to its initial use by Francisco Balagtas to denote "a temporary lack of resolve" in his poems "Florante at Laura" (1838) and "Orosman at Zafira" (1857). See J. Neil Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM* (Manila: UP, 2008).

280 See Fig. 3 and 4 on p. 190.
Fig. 3. Anacleto (played by Zorro David) reveals the image of the golden eye in John Huston's film adaptation of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1966).

Fig. 4. Image of *bakla* subject in the Philippines. Photo by Jez C. Self, 2010.
Though he may not consciously identify as such, Anacleto shares much in common with the historical figure of the *bakla*. His body and mannerisms both resemble the *parlorista*, who critic Bobby Benedicto describes as a flamboyant, cross-dressing individual in his article, "The Haunting of Gay Manila: Global Space-Time and the Specter of the *Kabaklaan*." In particular, however, it is Anacleto's subversive use of language that most powerfully illustrates the queer potential of the *bakla*. His playful appropriation of both French and English contributes to the lexicon of *swardspeak*, a complex argot that is itself an amalgam of English, French, Tagalog, and other languages. According to Manalansan,

*Swardspeak* is the vernacular language or code used by Filipino gay men in the Philippines and in the diaspora. The word *swardspeak* comes from sward, a Cebuano word for homosexual and/or sissy [...] In their use of swardspeak, Filipino gay men in the diaspora deploy translation as part of their attempts to claim a space for themselves as queer citizens in both the homeland and in the new place of settlement, the United States. (46, 47)

*Swardspeak* is a form of slang, and is thus not governed by the formal structures of the languages from which it draws. There are no standardized rules or conventions. As a form of communication, it is essential to the formation of queer communities of support, and indecipherable to those unfamiliar with, or hostile towards *bakla* culture.282

In Anacleto's case, the Filipino houseboy is able to craft and deploy his own form of swardspeak in ways that challenge and confuse the hegemonic order. Major Penderton, for

---


example, is infuriated when the boy addresses him in French. He then becomes suspicious of Anacleto's tendency to "[keep] up a soft and vivacious chattering to himself," as if mocking the officer in his very presence (RG 40). There is one moment in particular when Anacleto demonstrates his ability to reappropriate the language of his colonial masters:

"You can fix me and Old Fashioned, the Major said.

"I will suddenly," said Anacleto. He knew very well that "suddenly" could not be used in the place of "immediately," as he spoke choice and beautifully enunciated English in a voice that was exactly like Mrs. Langdon's; he made this mistake only in order to further addle the Major. (RG 39-40)

At other points in the narrative, as well, the narrator goes so far as to imply that Anacleto's mastery of the English language has eclipsed that of his hegemonic adversary. Anacleto's creative influence, for instance, are classical and sophisticated, while Langdon prefers the formulaic plots and simple stories he reads in pulp magazines. This is due in part to the fact that he is frankly unable to comprehend more complex material. To keep up appearances, he can only pretend to read "a very recondite and literary book" that he keeps on his bedside table (RG 43).

Anacleto's access to queer forms of language and expression are critical to his productive queer identity. It is this ability that Captain Penderton – the central, and overtly homosexual character in the narrative – tragically lacks. According to the narrator, Penderton's "unhappy restlessness" and his penchant for violence results from his years of repression, his inability or unwillingness to confront his own deviant desires: "the Captain never in his life had an idea in his head. For the formation of an idea involves the fusion of two or more facts. And this the Captain had not the courage to do" (RG 11). Instead, as the captain struggles to adhere to the
rigid codes of military society, he struggles also to repress his queer urges and desires, which are for him a source of fear, fascination, and abjection. Ultimately, it is Anacleto – or rather, Anacleto's disappearance – that acts as the catalyst for Penderton's queer transformation.

---

**Part 6 – Grotesque Reflections**

For Captain Penderton, the pressure to conform to heternormative standards is intense. On a southern military base, those who challenge the dominant ethos do so at their own peril. When Alison Langdon requests a divorce, for example, Major Langdon – who previously considered her behavior "a hypochondrial fake that she used to shirk her duties – finds such defiance "incomprehensible," and considers it a personal affront to his respectability (*RG* 80). The family doctor, who is himself a colonel and a close personal friend of the major's, has her immediately committed to a sanatorium, when she dies in a matter of days (*RG* 107). What becomes of the Filipino houseboy, however, is left a mystery, as the character simply disappears from the narrative without a trace. His fate, like his dynamic identity, is left undefined and incomplete.

Anacleto's disappearance does not necessarily signify failure on the part of the queer subject. On the contrary, his absence in the fourth and final section of the novel has a profound effect on Captain Penderton, and leads the captain to accept the grotesque desires he has long repressed. In other words, the disappearance of Anacleto is responsible for the central queer epiphany in the narrative.

From the beginning of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, McCullers's narrator repeatedly emphasizes the destructive effects of repression on Captain Penderton's psyche. With no positive or productive outlet for his passions, the captain instead finds catharsis through acts of
antisocial and sadomasochistic brutality. He derives pleasure, in one instance, from shoving a stray kitten in a mailbox on a frigid winter night (RG 12). Penderton later vents his frustrations on his wife's horse, Firebird, by "savagely" beating him with a switch (RG 70). The captain himself is not exempt from his own violent tendencies, for according to the narrator, "The Captain had always been afraid of horses: he only rode because it was the thing to do, and because this was another one of his ways of tormenting himself" (RG 67). Ironically, the pressure of having to constantly maintain his performance of heteronormative respectability leads to self-loathing, antisocial behavior, and intense feelings of loneliness and despair.

Rather than directing his frustrations towards patriarchal society, Penderton instead targets the more visibly "queer" characters on the base. He despises Alison and Anacleto, as both embody the abject femininity he struggles to repress. Indeed, violent acts of disavowal are necessary to the preservation of Penderton's normative identity. With the death of Alison and the sudden disappearance of Anacleto, however, Captain Penderton faces an existential crisis, for he can no longer project his own abject qualities onto the Other. It is at this point that his formerly stable identity is thrown into queer confusion.

Throughout the fourth and final section of the narrative, Captain Penderton undergoes a radical transformation. With the return of the repressed, as Sarah Gleeson-White observes, "Penderton cannot maintain the phallicization of his virile body as he becomes 'infected' with his own perverse desire" (65-66). Finally, the captain acknowledges his homoerotic feelings for an enlisted man, Private Ellgee Williams, who fills him with "the irresistible yearning to break down the barrier between them" (RG 119). Penderton is no longer the arrogant officer who "had imagined himself as a Corps Area Commander of great brilliance and power," for "Instead of dreaming of honor and rank, he now experienced the subtle pleasure of imagining himself as an
enlisted man" (*RG* 110). Traditional hierarchies of power have lost their significance. As a result, he experiences a newfound sense of freedom, which "aroused in the Captain a perverse feeling of relief and satisfaction" (*RG* 110-111).

The disappearance of Anacleto plays a particularly critical role in Captain Penderton's transformation. When Major Langdon complains about the loss of his Filipino servant, and reiterates how "Anacleto wouldn't have been happy in the army, no, but it might have made a man of him," he is shocked with his companion disagrees. It is at this moment that Penderton experiences his queer revelation:

"You mean," Captain Penderton said, "that any fulfillment obtained at the expense of normalcy is wrong, and should not be allowed to bring happiness. In short, it is better, because it is morally honorable, for the square peg to keep scraping around the round hole rather than to discover and use the unorthodox square that would fit it?"

"Why, you put it exactly right," the Major said. "Don't you agree with me?"

"No," said the Captain, after a short pause. With gruesome vividness, the Captain suddenly looked into his soul and saw himself. For once, he did not see himself as others saw him; there came to him a distorted doll-like image, mean of countenance and grotesque in form. The Captain dwelt on this vision without compassion. He accepted it with neither alteration nor excuse. "I don't agree," he repeated absently. (*RG* 114-115)

With this declaration, Penderton finally recognizes his own grotesque subjectivity. It is a profound experience of self-affirmation; a moment when, as Miho Matsui notes, "the difference between normalcy and abnormalcy, between masculinity and femininity, between whiteness and non-whiteness dissolves" (146-147).
Penderton's moment of enlightenment is also important in that it demonstrates how he identifies specifically with the figure of the castrated boy. The "unorthodox square," for example, may invoke the rectum as the site that affects the "feminization" of the masculine self. This is the male counterpart, in other words, to the *vagina dentata*, and the castration anxiety it evokes. In this, the body of the captain recalls the Rabelaisian body; a permeable, open-ended body of fertility, in "flagrant contradiction" to the classic body, "a strictly completed, finished product" (Bakhtin 28, 29).

This is not to imply that the novel concludes on a positive or optimistic note. Despite Penderton's newfound self-awareness, as critic Srimati Mukherjee notes in *Otherness: A Dynamics of Affirmation in the Fiction of Carson McCullers* (1993), the captain's movement towards comprehending the space of the Other "is undercut by his inclination towards violence." These violent tendencies have tragic consequences, as Penderton discovers Private Williams in his wife's bedroom and shoots him twice in the chest. This murderous act, which left "only one raw hole […] in the center of the soldier's chest," serves as the ultimate act of penetration, the symbolic reclamation of the phallic prerogative (*RG* 127). When Penderton discovers that Private Williams, the Other, is entranced by someone else, and thus outside the orbit of his control, the captain can only understand this discover as a disaster. In the end, Penderton remains circumscribed within the space of the self, and is driven to imprint that self upon the Other through violence.

Ultimately, the murder of Private Williams signifies Penderton's return to the heteronormative fold. From a military perspective, his conduct conforms to the southern code of

---

chivalry, as a masculine defense of female innocence. As the narrator describes, however, the reality of the situation is hardly mythic or romantic. In the final paragraph of the novel, the captain is said to resemble "a broken and dissipated monk" (RG 127). Like Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August*, Penderton is a tragic figure, for he has seen the possibilities of an alternate, more fulfilling existence, yet fails to commit himself to this alterity. Unable or unwilling to identify with the Other, he thus denies the validity and potential of Otherness, the joy of the castrated boy.
Chapter 4 – "Land of the Kike Home of the Wop": The Queer Italian Tomboy in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*

Prejudice towards immigrants at the turn of the century was hardly limited to the Jim Crow South. As historian Maldwyn Allen Jones notes in *American Immigration* (1992), a particularly virulent brand of anti-immigrant sentiment emerged across the nation in the 1880s, when a demographic shift occurred in the traditional source countries for American immigration. For the first time, America's "native-born" were faced with "immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, whose bizarre appearance offered a tempting target." This sense of paranoia was intensified by the belief that there was "a special danger in an influx of Slavs, Italians, and Jews, who were associated in the prevailing ethnic stereotypes with disorder, violent crime, and avarice." These groups in particular had the dubious distinction of being labeled "the murder-breeds of southern Europe" (Jones 221).

In the impoverished, post-reconstruction South, such xenophobic sentiments were tempered by economic necessity. With the migration of black labor northward, the region suffered an acute labor crisis from the late-19th to the mid-20th Century. According to historian C. Vann Woodward in *Origins of the New South: 1877-1893* (1951), the South actually invited "immigrants to fill up its sparsely settled territories, develop its resources, and supplement its labor supply." The most noteworthy of these labor importation schemes, as I mention in Chapter 3, was the Chinese Labor Convention of 1869, when millions was invested in an

---


unsuccessful attempt to import Asian laborers to the cotton fields of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana.\textsuperscript{286} As the South struggled to keep pace with the rest of the nation, Italians in particular were attracted to the economic opportunities the region had to offer. Rivaling the success of the Mississippi Chinese, Italian migrants would soon emerge as one of the region's largest and most rapidly expanding ethnic communities.

The Italians, however, would arrive almost two decades after the first Chinese migrants in the Mississippi Delta. An agreement between a wealthy Italian politician and a plantation owner in 1894 served as the catalyst for the first wave of Italian farmers and laborers to the region. After inheriting the failing Sunnyside Plantation in rural Arkansas, as William B. Gatewood has documented in \textit{Sunnyside: The Evolution of an Arkansas Plantation, 1830-1945} (1993), New York financial broker Austin Corbin conceived the idea of settling Italian families on the property to mitigate the crippling labor shortage.\textsuperscript{287} The Italian ambassador to the United States approved of Corbin's proposal as a means to divert immigrants from the already overpopulated eastern cities. The Mayor of Rome, Emanuele Ruspoli also seized on the opportunity to relieve the overcrowded conditions on most farms in his territory. Ernesto Milani's article, "Marchigiani and Veneti on Sunnyside Plantation" describes how Ruspoli signed an agreement with Corbin in October 1894 to recruit over a hundred families annually for the Sunnyside Colony over the following five years.\textsuperscript{288} According to historian Paul V. Canonici in \textit{The Delta Italians: Their Pursuit of "the Better Life" and Their Struggle Against Mosquitos},

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{286} For more on the Chinese Labor Convention, see Chapter 3, pp. 152-154.
\end{itemize}
Floods, and Prejudice (2003), the Italian population in the South rose exponentially during this time, as these migrants began to establish their own settlements throughout Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta region.\textsuperscript{289}

This international contract and the backlash it generated among southerners serves to illustrate the region's violent ambivalence towards the issue of immigration. On the one hand, the desperate need for agricultural labor led plantation owners to violate the Foreign Act of 1885, which expressly prohibited the importation of foreigners under contract or agreement to perform labor in the United States. On the other hand, many southerners considered immigrants, and Italians in particular, a threat to their economic livelihood, racial purity, and even their general safety. An 1890 editorial in the New Orleans Times-Democrat draws a sharp distinction between "old" and "new" immigrants, and notes the problems posed by the latter:

The Germans, the Irish, and others […] migrate to this country, adopt its customs, acquire its language, master its institutions, and identify themselves with its destiny. The Italians, never. They remain isolated from the rest of any community […] they seldom learn to speak our tongue, they have no respect for our laws or our form of government, they are always foreigners.\textsuperscript{290}

These anxieties would unfortunately culminate in violence the following year, with the lynching of eleven New Orleans Sicilians in 1891. In the eyes of native-born southerners, the inability to assimilate these southern Europeans rendered them a threat to the South's cultural identity.

As plantation workers, Italian Immigrants were treated no better than the slaves they replaced. In her 1907 report on the conditions at Sunnyside, Mary Grace Quakenbos was

\textsuperscript{289} Paul V. Canonici, The Delta Italians: Their Pursuit of "the Better Life" and Their Struggle Against Mosquitos, Floods, and Prejudice (Self-Published, 2003) 3-11. Subsequently cited in text.

shocked to discover that "the Negroes are treated better than the Italian 'colonists' for the Negroes are paid day wages and the foreigner kept in debt by the paper check system." In a society segregated by race, these immigrants, like their Asian counterparts, had effectively introduced a "third" category of being, one that revealed the contradictions and inconsistencies of a cultural system based on the binary distinction between black and white. As Paul Canonici recalls from his childhood in the 1910s and 20s, there were many Italians who adopted the same discriminatory attitude towards "Negroes" as other southern whites. Ironically, those migrants often found themselves working for African Americans, who tended to offer better housing and treatment than their white counterparts.

While there have been historical studies published documenting the history of Italian American migrant communities in the American South, however, the role of the Italian migrant in southern fiction has been left almost completely unexamined. While Asian American critics such as Heidi Lee Kim have inaugurated a critical discourse on Asian representation in southern literature, there has been no corresponding study concerning the Italian in the regional canon. This chapter works to address this area critical neglect by considering the "queer" implications of the Italian tomboy in Southern Renaissance literature. In the case of the mysterious, dark tomboy who follows Quentin Compson through the streets in The Sound and the Fury (1929), for example, I examine how the "racialized" tomboy forces Faulkner's protagonist to confront the inconsistencies and perversity at the heart of his "mythic" southern identity. As Michelle Ann


292 See Canonici 21.

Abate explains in her study of American tomboyhood, "the ambiguity of the tomboy's gender mirrors the ambiguity of her purported caucasian identity" (xxiv). In contrast to Faulkner's tomboy character, who plays only a minor – and decidedly sinister – role in the narrative, however, the adolescent Rosa Delle Rose in Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) depicts an empowered female character who combines the features of American tomboyhood with the rugged individualism of her masculine Sicilian mother. In addition, she benefits from the support of a thriving Italian community depicted by Williams; a community that demonstrates how these migrants contributed to the globalization of the American South.

First, however, I turn to the earliest representation of the Italian migrant in southern fiction. Though Mark Twain published *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894) over two decades before Mencken's essay, "The Sahara of the Bozart," would signal the dawn of the Southern Renaissance in 1917, the novel offers fascinating insight into the emergence of southern nativism at the turn of the 20th Century. For Twain, who was himself fascinated by "extraordinary bodies and their display," as Tracy Fessenden argues in *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (2007), the popularity of the conjoined Italian twins, Giacomo and Giovanni Battista Tocci, would inspire his 1892 short story "Those Extraordinary Twins." Expanding the story into a novel two years later, Twain would base the Capello twins off the image of "the youthful Italian 'freak' – or 'freaks' –," which had

---


captured the interest of audiences across America.\textsuperscript{297} For the first time, as Twain's narrator describes, the southerners in the text are forced to confront what is for them an "impossible subject," an "incomprehensible" being who inspires both fascination and fear.\textsuperscript{298}

\textit{Part 1 – That "derned Italian savage"}

The first southern novel to prominently feature immigrant characters, Mark Twain's \textit{Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins} (1894) explores the unstable and often perilous position of the Italian in southern society. Indeed, the arrival of the dandefied Capello twins throws the traditional, segregated community of Dawson's Landing into disorder. The adolescent immigrants, Angelo and Luigi Capello exist outside the relations dictated by Jim Crow, and thus reflect Mae Ngai's concept of the foreigner as an "impossible subject," "a person who cannot be, and a problem that cannot be solved" (5). The immigrant in this small Missouri town exists as a being-in-transition, a site of interpretive necessity that renders visible the processes and values which reproduce social hierarchies. As a result, these sites reveal the epistemological instability – or retrenchment – of segregation itself.

The town of Dawson's Landing is initially captivated by the "exotic" foreignness of the twins. Talking to her innkeeper mother, the young Rowena assumes that these mysterious strangers must have seen kings and other wonders of the world. She is impressed by their names, "Luigi" and "Angelo," which are "so grand and foreign – not like Jones and Robinson


\textsuperscript{298} See Fig. 1 on p. 204.
Fig. 1. Giacomo and Giovanni Battista Tocci, the conjoined "Tocci Twins," who were exhibited to audiences throughout America in the 1890s.
and such" (PW 38). It is only a matter of time, however, before the collective curiosity of the town shifts to paranoia and anxiety. When David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson reads Luigi's palm and divines a murderous act in his past – a crime that Luigi himself confirms – the romantic vision of the foreigner-as-exotic dissolves. From that point forward, the Italians are perceived as a threat to the community. Descriptions shift from simply the "new twins," to the "murderous devil[s]," the "detested twins," and ultimately the "derned Italian savage[s]" (PW 90, 93, 97).

The town articulates its animosity towards the twins primarily through the discourse of color. Following Luigi's admission of guilt, the townsfolk observe that his "dark face flushed" in anger, the first time their attention has been called to the twins' complexion (PW 83). This "negroization" of the Italian reflects the South's struggle to situate the interstitial foreigner on the traditionally oppressed side of the color line. According to Thomas Muller in *Immigrants in the American City* (1993), Italian immigrants were prime targets for displaced animosities towards blacks in the American South: "Italians from southern provinces had the twin liabilities of being Catholic and having swarthy complexions, the latter being taken as evidence of 'black blood.'" Soon after the town's revelation, the author pairs Luigi's face with a geographically-determined, blood-based motivation for violence. When Tom, the young son of the town judge criticizes Luigi before an audience at a Sons of Liberty meeting, "Luigi's southern blood leap[s] to the boiling point" (PW 87). He assaults Tom by kicking him off the podium, an act that dooms the twins' already dubious reputation in the community.

The basis for Luigi's fiery temper – his "southern blood" – fits a popular stereotype in late-19th and early-20th Century America. For example, an 1882 article in the *New York Times* 299

---

announced that Italian immigrants were "continually brought before the courts for fighting, violence, and attempts at murder." In his 1923 defense of an Italian American client, an attorney simply conceded that "The passionate nature of the Southern Italian, to put whom love and pride acquire equal intensities unknown to other races, often leads to bloodshed." In Twain's narrative, Luigi's "southern" temper provokes a similarly violent response from his white, aristocratic southern counterpart. Tom's father, the wealthy and influential Judge Driscoll is "an old Virginian grandee with proved descent from the first families […] a man always courteously ready to stand up before you in the field if any act or word of his had seemed doubtful or suspicious you, and explain it with any weapon you might prefer" (PW 7-8). The judge declares that Luigi's actions constitute an unpardonable affront to the Driscoll family honor; only a duel redeem "the blood of [his] race" (PW 92). Through the playing out of two southern-based justifications for action, the distinction between the twins and the town elite takes on a new form. In the ensuing duel "between chief citizen and titled stranger," a distinction that emphasizes the conflict between the local community and the "threatening" outsider, the fate of the region's cultural identity hangs in the balance.

Twain's deliberately ambivalent treatment of violence in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* reflected his own ambivalence towards the role of race in American society. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1961), Rene Girard argues that when cultural distinctions fail, the result is always violence. Only through a cathartic act of sacrificial violence can the community preserve itself and begin

300 See La Gumina 56.

301 See Antonio Stella, *Some Aspects of Italian Immigration to the United States* (New York: George Putnam's Sons, 1924) 80.
In Pudd'nhead Wilson, Twain depicts a southern town undergoing a crisis concerning the system of racial classification on which the community relies for economic and social stability. Himself a "native southerner," Judge Driscoll is able to exploit these anxieties in a speech that draws on popular stereotypes to condemn the foreign menace. As the narrator describes,

> It was disastrously effective. [The judge] poured out rivers of ridicule upon [the twins], and forced the big mass-meeting to laugh and applaud. He scoffed at them as adventurers, mountebanks, sideshow riff-raff, dime museum freaks; he assailed their youth and their showy titles with measureless derision; he said they were back-alley barbers disguised as nobilities, peanut peddlers masquerading as gentlemen, organ-grinders bereft of their brother monkey. (*PW* 131)

In Judge Driscoll's populist appeal to nativist sentiments, the Capello twins, who were first admired as exotic nobleman, have been reduced filthy and primitive immigrant caricatures. The response of the townsfolk is swift and decisive. In the subsequent election, "the twins were defeated – crushed in fact, and left forlorn and substantially friendless" (*PW* 132). Luigi and Angelo are no longer welcome in the community, which closes its ranks to protect against the perceived threat of immigrant contamination.

Twain's detractors have argued that the author himself possessed a certain degree of animosity towards American immigrants. In his study of Twain's *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (1908), Thomas Peyser claims in "Mark Twain, Immigration, and the American Narrative" that "for Twain […] the immigrant not only cast a long shadow on ideas about

---

America's future, but also threatened to render the American past unintelligible, and even to
dissolve those elements out of which any coherent narrative of nationhood could be forged. "303
These nativist sentiments are particularly evident in Twain's unfinished novel, 3,000 Years
Among the Microbes (1905), which purports to be the autobiographical account of an American's
transformation into a cholera germ. The germ-narrator is transported into the body of a
Hungarian immigrant, Blitzkowski, who – as Henry B. Wonham has noted in Playing the Races:
Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism (2004) – aligns neatly with "the standard
periodical representation of Eastern-European immigrants." 304 This "mouldering old bald-headed
tramp," as the narrator of 3,000 Years Among the Microbes reports, "never shaves, never washes
[…] he is wonderfully ragged, incredibly dirty; he is malicious, malignant, vengeful, treacherous,
he was born a thief, and he will die one; he is unspeakably profane, his body is a sewer, a reek of
decay." 305 He represents a threat – morally and genetically – to normative American culture.

In Pudd'nhead Wilson, Twain draws on the tradition of the code duello as a form of
"sacrificial violence" necessary to reassert cultural distinctions. "In an honor culture," as Vince
Brewton explains in his study of violence and race in the novel, "'An honor as well as a pleasure':
Dueling, Violence, and Race in Pudd'nhead Wilson," "the only means of arresting a form of
social decline decline initiated by violence is, of course, another act of socially acceptable
violence." 306 While the dueling ground itself is strictly confined to the combatants and their


304 Henry B. Wonham, Playing the Races: Ethnic Caricatures and American Literary Realism (New York:

305 Mark Twain, 3,000 Years Among the Microbes, 1905, The Devil's Race Track: Mark Twain's Great

306 Vince Brewton, "'An honor as well as a pleasure': Dueling, Violence, and Race in Pudd'nhead Wilson,"
entourage, the privacy of the affair is deliberately transparent. If not a commodity as such, the community does participate in the duel as an invisible spectacle. The combatants – Judge Driscoll and Count Luigi Capello – expose the theoretical ground that supports the *code duello* by their display of fraternal camaraderie after attempting to murder one another in cold-blooded, ritualized fashion. Having acquitted themselves honorably by exchanging volleys and standing their ground, the men are now at liberty to reaffirm the bonds of white male solidarity. These are bonds that preserve and perpetuate the South's "honor culture."

Despite the importance of the duel as a turning point in the narrative, this violent ritual ultimately fails to reaffirm the traditional patriarchal order. In fact, the twins are later discovered to be innocent of all charges leveled against them. The Capello twins are thus vindicated, but still decide to return to their homeland, a compromise that allows the the people of Dawson's Landing to avoid further confrontation with these "impossible subjects" that challenge a cultural system predicated on the distinction between black and white. According to Vince Brewton, "A powerful ambiguity runs throughout the novel […] and [it] is certainly traceable to Twain's own ambivalence concerning the role of heredity, and especially race, in American life" (101).

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* therefore illustrates the author's own conflicted feelings towards the rising tide of immigration. The young Italian twins are returned to their first position in the town's collective consciousness as "heroes of romance now, and with rehabilitated reputations" (*PW* 178). Meanwhile, the twins future involvement with town life is limited to communal memory. The foreignness of these two adolescent immigrants, the conclusion suggests, will fade, as it becomes merely another romantic element of the local past.
**Part 2 – Faulkner's Southern Nativism**

In the following decades, the ambivalence of Mark Twain in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* would foreshadow the emergence of the American nativism, a reactionary movement against the perceived threat of immigrant contamination. In his groundbreaking study, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995), Walter Benn Michaels begins by citing one of the most revered novels in the Southern Renaissance canon, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), as a work that exemplifies "the discourse of [...] nativist modernism." According to Michaels, this was a discourse that, "in the period just after World War I [...] should be defined as intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e., 'un-American') connections (2, 4). While I argue that Faulkner's focus on immigrant characters is more complex and nuanced than Michael's analysis suggests, I agree that the portrayal of Italian Americans in *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the author's intense commitment to a form of "southern nativism," a dedication to preserving a locally circumscribed regional identity against what he realized were insurmountable odds.

Like Twain, Faulkner's interest in immigrant characters was years ahead of his time. Faulkner was himself the first major writer of the Southern Renaissance to address what he considered the destabilizing effects of "racially interstitial" immigrant communities in the Jim Crow South. In Faulkner's "apparently bifurcated" world of white versus black, nativist vs. immigrant, as Edouard Glissant observes in *Faulkner, Mississippi* (2000), "contradictions and

---


308 For examples of influential nativist texts of the era, see Waldo Frank, *Our America* (1919); Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916); Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920).
multiplicities inevitably arise." The anxieties expressed by the threat of racial indeterminacy are expressed through the character of Ike McCaslin in Faulkner's short story, "Delta Autumn," who rages that the Mississippi Delta has been "denuded and derivered" for generations by the "Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, [who] all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares" (364). Indeed, Faulkner registered a variety of uneasy penetrations into local southern culture by outsiders, whose effect upon his region, in light of America's changing racial and ethnic composition, was as inevitable as it was vexing. In her recent article, "Paternalism, Haiti, and Early-Twentieth Century American Imperialism in Absalom, Absalom!," for instance, Sarah Gerend examines Faulkner's depiction of the "savage" Caribbean laborers imported by the ambitious Thomas Sutpen. Similarly, as I elaborate in Chapter 3, Heidi Lee Kim has also worked to expose Faulkner's ambivalent and often stereotypical portrayals of the Mississippi Chinese in the author's novels and short fiction.

My analysis contributes to the emerging canon of transnational Faulkner studies by considering the implications of the young Italian tomboy, and how her interactions with Quentin Compson in The Sound and the Fury complicate his already troubled image of southern history, a glorious past founded on the myth of female virginity and racial purity. As Randy Boyagoda writes in Race, Immigration and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner (2007), Faulkner's representations of Italian Americans offer valuable insight into the author's idealized conceptions of national and regional identity in the 1920s and 30s. According to Boyagoda,

---


When Italian immigrants in particular appear in Faulkner's writing, they are treated sympathetically only when they remain in prescribed, stereotypical frames. When they appear in his fiction in ways that directly challenge the composition of the South's traditional population, however, Faulkner is effectively antipathetic; the presence of immigrants frustrates his ambitions for internal southern reconciliation between its native-born races, and between the South and the rest of the nation.  

This sense of ambivalence is evident even in the contrasting representations of Italian Americans in Faulkner's early fiction. In his description of the Ginotta family in *Mosquitos* (1927), the narrator alternates between feelings of sympathy and disgust. In the family's working-class restaurant, the "rich heavy odor of Italian cooking" and the charming décor is offset by the dinginess of the room, as well as the stains on the counter. The youngest son is said to possess an exotic beauty, with his "queer golden eyes [...] beautiful as only an Italian lad can be," and yet his filthiness is evident "in his ragged knickers and faded shirt" (*MS* 296). Ultimately, the economic success of the Ginotta family comes at the price of their cultural heritage. Money and the pressures of assimilation lead to familial destruction and alienation, as the widowed Mrs. Ginotta finds herself abandoned. "Her sons were such Americans now," that narrator laments in the conclusion, for they had turned "busy and rich and taciturn" (*MS* 297).

Faulkner resolves the problem of the immigrant presence in *Mosquitos* by emphasizing the corrosive effects of assimilation. The narrator's sympathy for the Ginotta family is premised upon the strict division of an idealized "past life" in Italy against as "present life" in the cultural waste land of America. This distinction is also one of the major themes in Faulkner's *New

---


In *William Faulkner: Self-Presentation and Performance* (2000), James G. Watson notes that "all but two of the speakers are broken by internal divisions [...] The collision of past dreams with present realities [...] divides speakers in themselves as they are divided from one another in the text." These "internal divisions" are particularly demonstrated in the story of "The Cobbler," which begins with the titular character exclaiming "Si, si. Yes, I coma froma – tella in my tongue? Buono signor." In a sudden shift of linguistic registers, however, the cobbler's language turns from broken Italian-English to flowing Italianate English: "I come from Tuscany, from the mountains, where the plain is gold and brown in the barren sun, and the ancient hills brood bluely above the green and dreaming valleys" (*NS* 66). When the cobbler returns to the present, however, his clumsy dialect returns: "I have known joy and sorrow, but now I do not remember. I am very old: I have forgotten much. You getta thees shoes today. Si, si" (*NS* 69). This melancholy ending casts the cobbler's eloquent description of his homeland in stark relief. In so doing, Faulkner sympathetically imagines the comparative ugliness of life in a foreign land by using eloquent prose to evoke the immigrant's past. By adopting an immigrant's English to locate the cobbler in his new nation, the author also articulates – less sympathetically – the ugly dissonance of assimilation. The cobbler's tongue has been essentially forked by immigration; what should be mutually exclusive linguistic registers now mix discordantly.

Both *Mosquitos* and *New Orleans Sketches* establish that there is no place for the immigrant in Faulkner's America. In these early works, however, the author notably

---


sympathizes with the plight of Italian Americans, and spoke favorably of Italian culture. In a 1956 letter to Livio Garzanti, a publisher in Italy, Faulkner writes of "the affection and 'kinship' which I have always felt from my first sight of Italy, for Italy and Italians, as though we were kin, not just in spirit, but in blood too." For Faulkner, the fate of the Italian in America served as a cautionary tale against the dangers of cultural dilution. It is therefore no surprise that the author perceived the emergence of migrant communities to be a threat to his internally homogenous vision of the American South.

The late-1920s would mark a radical departure from Faulkner's earlier sentimental treatment of the immigrant subject. As Quentin Compson's section in *The Sound and the Fury* illustrates, the author was compelled to confront the immigrant presence and its national and regional implications. Two critics in particular – Thomas Argiro and Randy Boyagoda – argue that Quentin's interactions with the young Italian girl exemplify Faulkner's newfound commitment to addressing and renegotiating the place of the immigrant from a native southern perspective. However, these critics are also divided by their radically different understandings of Faulkner's narrative method.

For Thomas Argiro, Faulkner's early sympathies for the Italian community remain distinctly apparent in Quentin's monologue. In his article, "'As Though We Were Kin': Faulkner's Black-Italian Chiasmus," Argiro argues that Faulkner attempts to assimilate the Italian into the biracial logic of southern society by "negroizing" the immigrant. According to Argiro, Faulkner's curious strategy for dealing with issues of ambiguous racial identity [in *The Sound and the Fury*] employs a double-voiced articulation that proceeds by way of a

---

chiasmus, in which the identities of blacks and Italian Americans are assimilated and
reversed in a signifying arrangement involving both displacement and substitution.\textsuperscript{316} Quentin's encounter with the Italian girl thus serves as a fictional tableau upon which Faulkner
articulates the racial similarities between blacks and Italian Americans in terms of appearance
and social status. While the girl is acknowledged in the text as Italian, she is inevitably coded as
black, as Quentin refers to her "coffee" complexion at multiple points in the narrative. In
addition, Faulkner structures the bond between Quentin and his Italian "sister" in such a way as
to "reinforce an unspoken identification operating between the white Southerner and the
ethnic/racial other" (Argiro 120).

While I disagree with Argiro's argument for a "chiasmus," in which black and immigrant
figures are treated interchangeably, his analysis does help account for the latent eroticism that
underlies Quentin's relationship with the Italian girl, who he affectionately refers to as his
"sister." Doreen Fowler's Lacanian reading, "Little Sister Death: The Sound and the Fury and
the Denied Unconsciousness" argues, for instance, that the Italian girl functions as a triangular
relay linking Quentin with his biological sister: "just as Caddy [Compson] is Quentin's double,
the external projection of Quentin's unconscious, so also is the 'dirty' Italian girl, who pursues
Quentin relentlessly as he circles the Charles River."\textsuperscript{317} The Italian girl's "dark" features mark
her as a surrogate for Quentin's beloved sister, and he projects onto her the same primal sexuality
he associates with Caddy, a sexuality perceives as "black": "why must you do like nigger women
do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dark woods" (SF 92).

\textsuperscript{316} Thomas Argiro, "As Though We Were Kin: Faulkner's Black-Italian Chiasmus," MELUS 28.3 (2003)
112. Subsequently cited in text.

\textsuperscript{317} Doreen Fowler, "Little Sister Death: The Sound and the Fury and the Denied Unconsciousness," Faulkner
Subsequently cited in text.
While Caddy's promiscuity has already sullied Quentin's mythic conception of female purity, the Italian girl triggers within him the desire for an Imaginary recuperation of lost innocence. The girl paradoxically becomes a signifier of Quentin's frustrated cathexis with a false ideal, a figure embodying what was lost, a virginal Caddy.

As he is followed through the city, Quentin is also tormented by the castrating effects of female sexuality. In contrast to Caddy's virility – which, for Quentin, is analogous to predatory "black" sexuality – his own virginity and "whiteness" attest to his "feminization," his failure to live up to the ideal of the southern gentleman. This is a devastating blow for Quentin, for, as critic Miho Matsui observes, "Quentin Compson is the most important of Faulkner's characters, and among Faulkner's male characters, the most obsessed with southern tradition" (94). As Thadious M. Davis argues in Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context (1983), Quentin "is an exaggeration of the southern gentleman, whose mind, no longer creative, is locked into sterile types and kinds, codes and manners." Quentin's identity is essentially based on his ability to internalize these ideals, and his failure to adhere to this code as a southern white male drives him to despair. His identity as a southern gentleman is always and already eroded by the recognition that these myths are cultural fictions, rather than absolute truths. As a symbolically "castrated" boy, an increasingly disoriented Quentin appears to compare himself to the figure of the Asian migrant:

Versh told me about a man who mutilated himself. He went into the woods and did it with a razor sitting in a ditch. A broken razor flinging them backward over his shoulder

---


the same motion complete the jerked skein of blood backward not looping. But that's not it. It's not having them. It's never to have had them them I could say O That That's Chinese I don't know Chinese. And father said it was because you are a virgin: don't you see? Women are never virgins. (SF 116-117)

Quentin's futile attempt to lead the girl home thus simultaneously represents a reenactment of his failure to "rescue" Caddy's virginity. It represents, also, the return of his repressed, abject desire for his tomboyish sister. His libido is fraught with the denial that surrounds his own impotence and disillusionment in the face of Caddy's "black" sexuality, which is here reconfigured in the Italian tomboy who regards the world "blackly" behind her "black, friendly stare" (SF 132).

The Italian girl thus serves as an example of the "racialized" tomboy who demonstrates how, in the words of critic Michelle Anne Abate, "the ambiguity of the tomboy's gender mirrors the ambiguity of her purported Caucasian identity" (xxiv). The problem with Thomas Argiro's reading of a "black-Italian" chiasmus in the novel, however, is the biracial logic such a concept implies. By considering race only in terms of "black" and "white" in his reading of The Sound and the Fury, Argiro fails to account for the interstitial status of the Italian girl, a figure whose racial identity is characterized by ambiguity. Thus, a straightforward inscription of the Italian immigrant over the black native fails to account for Faulkner's perception of the immigrant as a "third" race, a presence that complicated his efforts to maintain a regionally-defined southern identity. Instead, Quentin's section in the novel exemplifies what critic Karl Zender calls in The Crossing of the Ways: William Faulkner, the South, and the Modern World (1989) "the effect on Faulkner's art of the disappearance of a traditional South and of the emergence of a modern,
deregionalized America" in the aftermath of WWI.\textsuperscript{320} For Faulkner, as for other American nativists, this was a "disappearance" caused largely by the rising tide of immigration.

As his interactions with Deacon – a black custodian at Harvard – demonstrate, Quentin's camaraderie towards the "negro" differs radically from his distrust of Boston's immigrant population. For Quentin, a white southerner transplanted in the North, the "nigger" serves as an identifiable, and even a nostalgic figure. The nigger, as Quentin comes to realize, is a social construct: "not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among"; he is "that blending of childlike and ready incompetence and paradoxical reliability," with which the white man is intimately familiar (SF 86, 87). Quentin's contempt for immigrants, on the other hand, becomes clear when he spots Deacon parading "on Columbus' or Garibaldi's or somebody's birthday [...] carrying a two inch Italian flag" (SF 82). A troubled Quentin witnesses his black friend's participation "on that Wop holiday [...] obliging the W.C.T.U. I reckon" (SF 98). His use of the word "wop" is particularly telling, for, as Italian historian Richard Gambino explains in Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian Americans (1996), the term itself originated as an acronym for the designation "without papers," and was subsequently deployed as a slur to delegitimize the Italian's claim to American citizenship.\textsuperscript{321}

Thus, Quentin's desire to maintain a rigid dichotomy between black and white relations – a dichotomy necessary to maintain a coherent definition of southern identity – is evident in his use of this particular epithet. By blaming Deacon's action on the Women's Christian Temperance Union, he casts the "nigger" as a victim manipulated by the North into celebrating a "Wop holiday."


Deacon's response to Quentin suggests his own ulterior motive – to find his son-in-law a job in the city – but is also meant to reassure the naïve white southerner that their regional connection to one another remains preeminent. "I don't mind telling you because you and me's the same folks, come long and short," he reassures Quentin, a remark implying racial solidarity against the immigrant threat (SF 99). For his part, Deacon recognizes Quentin's desire for the "nigger" to conform to his "appropriately" racialized identity, to affirm that their connection supercedes any current relationships with immigrants and northern whites. The reassurances of Deacon, however, are not enough to overcome the social and racial contradiction produced by his parading. As Thadious Davis observes, "Deacon is as incomprehensible to Quentin as the rest of the North and South, at least partly because Quentin's mental training in a divided world has been in terms of blacks being like other blacks and whites being like other whites" (Faulkner's "Negro" 96-97). In response, Randy Boyagoda argues the this only partially describes Quentin's anxieties. In fact, it is largely Deacon's appearance in the guise of an Italian that worries Faulkner's protagonist.322

The Sound and The Fury thus marks a turning point in Faulkner's depiction of the Italian immigrant. In a departure from the the ambivalence of his early fiction, the author here portrays both Italian immigrants and northerners as together working to destabilize the regional myths that Quentin depends on characters like Deacon to maintain. It is Quentin's inability to reconcile his traditional understanding of the southern history and identity with the presence of these "impossible subjects" that leads to his tragic and untimely demise.

Ambivalent feelings towards the Italian American in the novel arise from native black, northern white, and Quentin's own interstitial positions of enunciation. The people of Boston,

322 See Boyagoda 92.
for example, treat the immigrant as an ambivalent figure. The city allows for a celebration of traditional Italian culture, which Deacon takes part in, and yet Quentin's only connection with the northern community around him arises from their shared feelings of antipathy towards the "new Italian families" (SF 129). Quentin first senses this contempt when he witnesses a storekeeper's treatment of the young Italian girl in the bakery: "Them foreigners […] take my advice and steer clear of them young man" (SF 127). Quentin agrees, but fails to heed this warning. Instead, his relationship with the immigrant girl places him in an ambiguous position, and further complicates his already tortured relationship to family, region, and nation. As Karl F. Zender notes in "Faulkner and the Politics of Incest," "Interspersing comments about the little girl's status as immigrant […] with memories [of Caddy] frames a disquieting but enticing association between sibling incest, racial and class transgression, physical filth, and cultural heterogeneity."

Faulkner's increasingly agonistic position on the foreigner is evident in Quentin's initial description of the Italian girl's appearance. Immediately after imagining a potential sibling connection, Quentin begins to observe her foreign qualities, such as her heterogenous complexion: "Her face was like a cup of milk dashed with coffee" (SF 125). She is not "inevitably coded as black," as Thomas Argiro asserts, but rather as violently mixed. It is the tomboy's heterogeneity that ultimately forecloses any lasting connection between Quentin as would-be brother and the Italian girl as would-be sister. Soon after, Quentin struggles to identify not only as southern, but as American, as he bitterly redefines America as the "Land of the kike home of the wop" (SF 125). It is this declaration that offers perhaps the most explicit evidence


324 See Argiro 120.
of Quentin's despairing view of the nation's future, a fate that also hangs perilously over his native region.

It takes very little time for Quentin's relationship with the Italian tomboy to become mediated by the community's reaction towards "them foreigners" (SF 126). Local Bostonians, from the bakery lady to the sheriff, all regard the immigrant child with a combination of mistrust and contempt. The two men to whom Quentin turns for assistance automatically assume that the girl "Must be [from] one of them new Italian families," and complain, "Them furriners. I can't tell one from another" (SF 129, 130). Quentin's conflicting feelings prevent him from identifying fully with either the native Bostonians of his young immigrant charge. He shares the prejudices of the northern community, but cannot endorse it, for to do so would be to condone a community that dresses up a "nigger" to celebrate a "Wop holiday" – a conflation of southern black identity and northern immigrant identity – to create a mixture that defies Quentin's Jim Crow sensibilities.

Initially, Quentin is preoccupied with the familial implications of his connection with the immigrant child. As Doreen Fowler's reading of the triangulated relationship between Quentin, the Italian girl, and his sister Caddy illustrates, the foreign tomboy offer Quentin a surrogate figure for the sister he longs for.325 His response, however, is one of tortured ambivalence. Although he expresses fondness towards the girl on multiple occasions, Quentin also expresses an intense yearning to be free of this sibling-foreigner. As he walks the streets with the girl tagging along behind, the recollections of his incestuous passion for Caddy appears within a disjointed internal monologue, in which Caddy's sexuality and lost innocence reoccur along with the memory of his failed sexual initiation with a prostitute named Natalie. Recalling the "dirty

325 See Fowler 14.
girl" Natalie – whose image serves as a psychic counterpoint to the "dirty" Italian girl – and the "periodical filth" of her menstrual blood, Quentin relives his abject immersion in her blood as a crisis that threatens to saturate and overwhelm his sense of selfhood: "Liquid putrefecation like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odor of honeysuckle all mixed up" (SF 128). Thus, Quentin's sororal connection with the child fails to provide the sense of affirmation he so desperately desires. The memory of his sexual abjection – signified by Natalie's menstrual blood – is invoked by the Italian girl, whose foreign blood and "dark" sexuality pose a terrifying threat to the purity of Quentin's southern manhood. For Quentin, who has been raised to believe that women possess "an affinity for evil for supplying whatever the evil lacks in itself," the female presents a constant danger (SF 96).

Indeed, Quentin's attempts to be rid of his young charge gradually expose the vulnerability and impotence that belies his patriarchal façade. When the Italian woman who "spika" no English denies any knowledge of the child's family, for instance, Quentin's response verges on exasperation: "Madam, your daughter if you please. No. Madam, for God's sake, your daughter" (SF 132). Here Faulkner uses immigrant-English to emphasize the division between the American southerner and the Italian southerner, though both have been transplanted in the North. This also importantly marks the first instance in the author's fiction that Italian-English has been deployed to produce an alienating effect. Quentin's desperation stems directly from the fact that he is a young southerner trapped in a city that speaks Italian-English and is being made over into immigrant enclaves: "There were vines and creepers where at home would be honeysuckle" (SF 129). He feels both confused and alienated when he finds himself not only in

326 Quentin's crisis is similar to that experienced by Joe Christmas in Faulkner's later novel, Light in August (1932). For examples, see LA 185, 189.

327 For more on abject femininity and the maternal abject, see Kristeva 13.
the North, which allows him at least an understandable measure of difference, but in an immigrant district of the North, where he feels confronted by the new, foreign, and rapidly proliferating face of the nation.

The emphasis Faulkner places on the immigrant-as-threat, as Randy Boyagoda argues, is clearest in his description of Julio's successful defense of his sister. "There's Julio," the Italian girl announces, and a moment later Quentin finds himself under attack: "I saw his Italian face and his eyes as he sprang at me" (SF 139). As Boyagoda notes, "Quentin is attacked first and foremost by the foreign, not by the defending brother" (95). Such behavior points to what Richard Gambino calls "the insularity of the immigrant generation" (125). Julio's hostility—which stems from his protectiveness towards his sister—typifies Gambino's explanation concerning the Italian American's suspicion towards strangers in the diaspora: "the pattern of Italian-American life is continuous with that of its ancestors. Its verities continue to demonstrate that family, community, and work mean survival and that outsiders are threats to the neighborhood and stability which is necessary to the close-knit life and culture of the people" (343). Julio thus represents the violent reaction of the foreigner against the forces of nativism.

His sibling relationship severs Quentin's connection to the girl because she is now emphatically Italian. She is Julio's Italian sister.

It is at this point, after Julio has taken custody of his sister, that Quentin is placed under arrest by the local authorities. He is escorted towards the courthouse, all the while followed by the group of boys who had pointed him out, as well as a growing crowd of concerned bystanders. As he is escorted through the Italian section of the city, Quentin caustically observes how "people [were] coming out of doors to look at us and more boys [were] materializing from somewhere until when we turned into the main street we had quite a procession" (SF 141).
According to Randy Boyagoda, the language that Faulkner chooses to describe this image creates an unmistakable parallel:

In a brilliant reversal of the first image used to introduce Deacon, Quentin is here parading with Italians for the benefit of locals; Quentin has now become an obverse reflection of Deacon; American southerners both black and white are now intertwined with immigrants and entrapped by northern infrastructure. (95)

The spectacle of Quentin's procession to the courthouse and the farcical trial that ensues both demonstrate Faulkner's commitment to preserving the South against northern political power and immigrant contamination. Critic Richard Godden notes in *Fictions of Labour: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (1997) that the familial dynamics of the trial create an instance of "southern tragedy relocated […] as northern farce that precipitates Quentin into historical revision."³²⁸ While I agree that this does constitute a relocation of "southern tragedy," however, I argue that this shift is not into a "northern farce," so much as a contemporary national reality, a reality which ultimately motivates Quentin's suicide.

Faulkner's antipathy towards the immigrant is also evident in Julio's primitive dialect. Unlike the Italians in Faulkner's early fiction, Julio is not portrayed sympathetically as a victim of poverty, isolation, and cultural assimilation. The author instead depicts Julio in such a way as to illustrate the presence of the immigrant complicates the native-born southerner's claim to a locally circumscribed regional identity. After sending his sister home with a threat – "I beat hell outta you" – Julio accuses Quentin of kidnapping: "Dont I catcha heem, eh? Dont I see weetha my own eyes –" (SF 143). The man's broken Italian-English is somewhat reminiscent of the cobbler in Faulkner's *New Orleans Sketches*, but here takes on more sinister implications. Julio's

language does not shift, like the cobbler's, into an eloquent description of a rich cultural history. Instead, it is meant to crudely express his hostility towards the native-born American stranger. In response to Sheriff Anse's grumblings about "them durn furriners," Julio responds, "I American [...] I gotta da pape" (SF 143). This claim to citizenship based on bureaucratic documentation, however, is made to appear comically inadequate. Julio's choppy and bumbling syntax undercuts his claim to "authentic" American status, while the sound of him scratching himself only serves to reinforce his emphasize his unworthiness.

While Faulkner mocks the inadequacy of a citizenship based on state-sanctioned acceptance, his depiction of Julio does demonstrate his awareness of the rising status of the immigrant in American culture. Julio's arrogance shows that he is fully aware of his rights and is more than willing to exercise them in a court of law. Quentin, however, appears as the impotent southerner placed on trial by a northern authority to answer to the charges of a foreigner. He is ultimately made to pay the court, as well as the victorious immigrant – his "fellow American" – for his own freedom.

The trial itself is a particularly humbling experience for Quentin. His friends even ridicule him as a "damned fool" for "fooling with these damned wops" (SF 145). In addition, Quentin's own anxieties about his queer sexuality – which he first experiences through his incestuous fantasies of his sister – appear to have been confirmed by the state. As Margaret D. Bauer observes in her article, "I Have Sinned in that I Have Betrayed the Innocent Blood: Quentin's Recognition of His Guilt," "Charged with molesting the child, [Quentin's] hysteria increases," and even paying restitution "will not appease Quentin's conscience."

---

Just as he departs the courthouse, Quentin passes the Italian girl one last time: "the little girl stood by the gate […] her face looked like it had been streaked with coal dust. I waved my hand, but she made no reply, only her head turning slowly as the car passed, following us with her unwinking gaze" (SF 147). The girl's fixed position recalls "the nigger on a mule" that Quentin passed earlier in the narrative, while on his way home to Mississippi (SF 86). Back then, the emotions evoked in Quentin when he sees the "nigger," that was "carved out of the hill itself, like a sign put there saying you are home again," are so ambivalent as to make him physically ill (SF 87). The man's "motionless and impatient" appearance and "static serenity" trigger in Quentin feelings of bittersweet nostalgia that "make [his] insides move like they used to do in school when the bell rang" (SF 87, 88). That elderly black laborer is as deeply rooted in Mississippi as the Italian tomboy is now rooted in Massachusetts, and the combined effect of these two figures leaves Quentin feeling displaced in both the Old South and the "new" America.

Faulkner captures this sense of displacement near the very end of Quentin's section, just as it nears its tragic conclusion: "Non fui. Sum. Non sum. […] Mississippi or Massachusetts. I was. I am not. Massachusetts or Mississippi" (SF 174). These reflections, which illustrate Quentin's tangled state of mind, are meant to imply his failure to maintain a regional identity within the modern nation. He is neither Massachusetts, where he fails to establish a new identity in relation to his immigrant "sister," nor is he Mississippi, where he fails to maintain his identity as a southern gentleman.

Critic Barbara Ladd argues in Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner (1996) that The Sound and the Fury explores a "nexus of issues of racial (familial) purity and national legitimacy [that become] clearer as […] the white southerner's own struggle for cultural redemption, that is, for an escape from history into a
millenial New World nation of the United States." Unfortunately for Quentin, there is no place for him in this "New World nation." Unable to avoid or accept the past, the present, or the future, Quentin perceives suicide as his only alternative. He abandons his claim to America because, for him, it has devolved into the "Land of the kike home of the wop" (SF 125).

---

**Part 3 – Tennessee Williams and the Transnational South**

_The Sound and the Fury_ would mark an important turning point in Faulkner's fiction. In his following novels, he would go on to demonstrate a renewed commitment to his native region, where he believed the immigrant posed a critical threat to the South's racial balance. Indeed, just a few years after its publication, Faulkner would compose an unpublished introduction to the text in 1933 linking his anxiety over the "new, terrible" changes in the American South to the arrival of "polyglot boys and girls" from northern cities, the descendants of "Irish politicians and neapolitan racketeers." For Faulkner, the nation's changing composition held dark implications for his own region, as "the indigenous dream of [the South's] collection of men […] is old since dead." "There is a thing known whimsically as the the New South," he laments, "but it is not the South. It is the land of immigrants who are rebuilding the towns and cities.”

Faulkner's prophecy would indeed come to pass over the following decades. According to the Mississippi Historical Society, Italians and other ambitious immigrants would quickly rise to prominence in the southern economy. William Cruso, who had arrived in Biloxi a penniless

---


youth, had by the 1960s founded the largest seafood company on the Gulf Coast. The Alfonso family, who arrived around the same time as Cruso, and their Standard Fruit Steamship Company emerged as a leading importer and distributor of fruit throughout the South and internationally. These and other immigrant enterprises played a substantial role in the "modernization" of the region's struggling economy.

With the rise of these immigrant communities in the South, the popular consensus began to gradually shift in their favor. In contrast to the ambivalence of Mark Twain and William Faulkner, William Alexander Percy – whose father helped found and develop the original Sunnyside plantation – wrote in *Lanterns on the Levy: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941) that Italians in the Delta "quickly merged into the life of the community [...] [they] brought from the Mediterranean thrift and industry, unhurried energy, a sober and simple culture, earthy and warm." Only a decade after Percy's memoirs, playwright Tennessee Williams would publish *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), the first and only work of Southern Renaissance fiction set exclusively within an Italian-American community. Though critics initially dismissed the play as a "vulgar farce" featuring the "child-minded Sicilians," its popularity would rise exponentially over the following years. In 1955, the text was adapted as a major motion picture Daniel Mann, with Anna Magnani picking up the Academy Award for "Best Actress." The play would later enjoy a successful revival in the 1966 season as New York's City Center.

Though Williams's positive representation of Italian Americans is antithetical to Faulkner's, both authors were mutually inspired by their love of Italian culture. Tennessee

---


Williams first traveled to Rome in 1948, and described it in a letter to his friend Oliver Evans as "the capitol of my heart." According to critic Robert Rea in *Globalism in the World of Tennessee Williams* (2010), Williams would go on to maintain lasting friendships within the Italian theater. Director Luchino Visconti, for instance, was a key figure in bringing Williams's work to Italy, while Williams was instrumental in securing roles for Sicilian actress Anna Magnani, a close personal friend. The most important relationship that sustained the playwright's sense of community with the people and culture of Italy was with his lover, Frank Merlo, the whom *The Rose Tattoo* was dedicated. Since their first meeting in 1948, Williams lived with Merlo in Italy for up to six months a year, which according to critic Philip C. Kolin in "'Sentiment and Humor in Equal Measure': Comic Forms in *The Rose Tattoo*" allowed the author to absorb "enough local culture to write knowledgeably about the folklore, language, and characters of the region." Even towards the end of his career, Williams would write in his *Memoirs* (1972) of his plans to "move to Southern Italy or Sicily" and "fulfill [his] promise to acquire a nice bit of land on which to raise goats and geese and finish one more play." Such sentimental descriptions bear a close resemblance to the Louisiana community described in *The Rose Tattoo*.

The fundamental difference between Faulkner and Williams lies in their contrasting representations of Italian Americans. While *The Sound and the Fury* characterizes the immigrant

---


as a nameless, "dark" threat, *The Rose Tattoo* offers the reader a complex and ultimately positive portrayal of an Italian community on the Louisiana coast. Williams himself considered the work his "love-play" to the world, a story permeated with "happy young love" (*Memoirs* 162). The plot traces the sexual reawakening of Serafina Delle Rose, an Italian widow still grieving the death of her husband Rosario. With the support of her daughter Rosa, and the devotion of a new suitor named Alvaro, the headstrong Serafina gradually learns to reconcile her traditional ideals with the reality of life in a new, modernized nation. In so doing, she learns to embrace her American identity, while still drawing from traditional heritage on the support of the ethnic community.

Childhood and the figure of the child play an integral role in Serafina's transformation. As critic Leland Starnes observes in his study of "The Grotesque Children of *The Rose Tattoo*," "In any but the most superficial reading of *The Rose Tattoo*, one cannot help but be struck with the frequency of references concerning the childlike qualities of these characters, and most particularly of Serafina and Alvaro." In his stage directions, Williams describes their interactions as possessing "a curious intimacy and sweetness, like the meeting of two lonely children for the first time" (*RT* 88). When Serafina climbs to reach a bottle of wine, too, she "finds it impossible to descend," and "crouches there, helplessly whimpering like a child," while Alvaro is later described as appearing "like a child peering into a candy shop window" (*RT* 83, 135). In these and other moments throughout the text, the author repeatedly emphasizes that the two are not adults, but rather children trapped in adult bodies.

In addition to the "childlike qualities" of these ostensibly adult characters, Williams also calls special attention to the neighborhood children – Bruno, Salvatore, and Vivi – as they frolic

---

near Serafina's home. Indeed, each of the plays three acts opens with a description of these children at play. Even when the three are absent, as Leland Starnes notes, the sounds of children act as "choric amplification" at particularly emotional moments (365). Childhood thus plays a fundamental role in the the play. In Williams's words, The Rose Tattoo was his attempt to capture "the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance […] Its purest form is probably manifested by children and birds in their rhapsodic moments of flight and play […] it is the limitless world of the dream." It is the "child-like" qualities of the adults, as well, that allows them access to the "limitless world" of the child, a state that recalls the Bakhtinian grotesque that is always in process, that always "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of way of life" (Bakhtin 48). In this way, as adult-children, the tomboyish Serafina identifies with and draws support from Alvaro, a self-described "sissy" (RT 81).

While The Rose Tattoo was perhaps Williams's first play to focus on gender-transitivity, it was certainly not the last. As critic Lee Quinby observes, Williams's later plays such as Orpheus Descending (1957), The Night of the Iguana (1961), and Kingdom of Earth (1967) would also feature tomboy and sissy protagonists that defied traditional gender roles. According to Quinby, the playwright would constantly "seek out the androgynous" in his life and work, and thus deploy "hermaphroditic symbols" such as the rose, which reinforces "the union of opposites […] a unity involving the fusion and balance of the masculine and the feminine, the


spiritual and the physical within the individual's psyche" (12, 13).\textsuperscript{343} It was in *The Rose Tattoo*, however, that the playwright would first emphasize tomboyism – and, to a lesser extent, sissyhood – as an empowering code of conduct.

While critics such as Leland Starnes identifies the critical importance of childhood in *The Rose Tattoo*, he and other critics have neglected to consider the implications of female adolescence in the play, as represented by Serafina's teenage daughter, Rosa Delle Rose. Unlike Rosa, Serafina's identity is rooted in her own idealized version of the past, a history steeped in patriarchal Catholic tradition. For Serafina, the past is an unrealized fantasy of the future; the promise of the "American Dream" that was lost with the death of her husband. In a manner similar to the nostalgia of such traditional southerners as Captain Penderton in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1941), or Quentin Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Serafina derives her greatest pride from her noble patrilineage. She clings to the empty title of "Baronessa," a relic of Rosario's aristocratic bloodline. In her grief, she isolates herself from other women in the community. It is the intergenerational relationship between mother and daughter, however, that proves instrumental to Serafina's "reawakening" and return to the community. *The Rose Tattoo* is therefore more that a celebration of "the Dionysian element of human life." It is also a story compromise and reconciliation between the Old world and the New.

As an Italian American teen, Rosa's cultural perspective differs profoundly from that of her mother. Critic Jacob H. Adler observes the their "environment has made Rosa not Sicilian, not Southern, but American" (365). For her part, Serafina laments what she considers to be the

\textsuperscript{343} For more on Tennessee Williams's interest in androgyny and hermaphrodisim, see John S. Bak, *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 215-216.
detritive effects of assimilation on her daughter, and goes so far as to lock Rosa in the house to prevent her from graduating. As she tells Father De Leo, the Catholic priest,

Today you give out diplomas, today at the high school you give out the prizes, diplomas. You give my daughter a set of books called the Digest of Knowledge! What does she know? How to be cheap already? – Oh, yes, that is what you learn, how to be cheap and to cheat – you know what they do at this high school? They ruin the girls there! They give the spring dance because the girls are man-crazy. And there at that dance my daughter goes with a sailor that has in his ear a gold ring! And pants so tight that a woman ought not to look at him! (RT 71)

In contrast to Serafina's traditional Italian upbringing, Rosa is herself a product of the American education system. The school thus serves as a social space in Rosa's life where the influence of her mother is absent. As historian Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), the school served as a key site for the development of the American adolescent from the 1940s to 1960s, "a self-contained, coherent universe of experience."  

In the face of these cultural forces, Serafina's attempts to confine Rosa to the home prove futile.

The greatest source of conflict between Rosa and Serafina lies in their opposing perspectives on sexuality. Serafina's conservative values are informed by her Sicilian upbringing, and much of the plot involves her efforts to preserve the "innocence" of her daughter. Rosa, on the other hand, is eager to explore the erotic, and her sexual experiences reject her mother's values through a distinctly national framework. In their study, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1988), historians John D'Emilio and Estelle B.

---

Freedman single out Sicilians among various other ethnic groups for their preservation of traditional sexual values: "for southern Italians immigrants […] the virginity of their daughters carried a high value. Unmarried females were carefully chaperoned, and even during courtship couples had little freedom to explore the erotic." During the first half of the 20th Century, however, a new emphasis on sexual freedom was increasingly becoming a part of adolescent life in America. As D'Emilio and Freedman observe, the high school became a place where "dating, necking, and petting among peers became part and parcel of the experience of American youth, providing an initiatory stage, uncommon for their elders, leading to coital experience of adulthood and marriage" (256). Indeed, the dialogue between Rosa and her boyfriend appears to confirm Serafina's fears:

ROSA (holding him): Do you remember what you said to me on the dance floor?

"Honey you're dancing too close?"

JACK: Well it was – hot in the Gym and the – floor was crowded.

ROSA: When my girl friend was teaching me to dance, I asked her, "How do you know which way the boy's going to move?" And she said, "You've got to feel how he's going to move with your body!" I said, "How do you feel with your body?" And she said, "By pressing up close" – that's why I press up close. (RT 46-47)

The high school thus provides a social space where Rosa is free to "explore the erotic." Her taking instructions on how to let a boy lead contradicts her aggressive pursuit of Jack, a reversal of gender roles that serves as a consistent source of humor in the play. Most importantly, her decision to take the advice of a friend demonstrates a system of sexual values determined by Rosa's adolescent peer group, rather than the traditional values of her mother.

When Serafina finally meets Jack, her protective impulses shift into overdrive. As she interrogates the boy, she once again reiterates her attachment to the traditional values of the past, an attachment she expresses in terms of her national heritage:

SERAFINA: We are Sicilians! We don't leave the girls with the boys they're not engaged to!

JACK: Mrs. Delle Rose, this is the United States.

SERAFINA: But we are Sicilians, and we are not cold-blooded – my daughter is a virgin!

She is – or she was – I would like to know – which! (RT 57)

The value that Serafina places on sexual purity – a value essential to Quentin Compson's conception of southern identity in *The Sound and the Fury* – is itself a product of her native Catholic upbringing. A shrine to the Madonna is conspicuously placed in the home, and Serafina prays often to the Virgin Mother to preserve her Rosa's virginity. Much to Rosa's embarrassment, her mother orders Jack to "kneel down in front of Our Lady," and "promise the Holy Mother" to respect her daughter's innocence (RT 61).

If Rosa represents the emergence of adolescent sexual freedom in the early-20th Century, Serafina represents the reactionary backlash among American conservatives. From the 1930s to the 1950s, a reinvigorated "purity movement" battled against public displays of sexuality, and worked to censor what they considered lewd or obscene in American culture. According to D'Emilio and Freedman, "Every step toward greater openness was matched by renewed efforts to hold the line against 'filth' and maintain purity," and "in this new purity crusade, the Roman Catholic church played an initiating role" (281). This "initiating role" would culminate in the establishment of the Legion of Decency, an organization that fought to censor the film adaptation
of Williams' screenplay, *Baby Doll* (1956). In *The Rose Tattoo*, Roman Catholicism serves as the religious framework for Serafina's conservative values. It is these values that must be compromised for her to return to community by the play's conclusion.

Despite her piety, however, Serafina also possesses a secular sense of independence. Evidence of her dissent from the Catholic church is offered throughout the play, and this tomboyish sense of rebellion is essential to her shifting views on sexuality. Serafina's use of folk cures, for example, and her fear of the *malocchio* – the "evil eye" – demonstrate her belief in a syncretism of religious doctrine and ethnic folklore. Father De Leo himself condemns her decision to cremate Rosario as "an abomination in the sight of God," a widow's act of defiance against the patriarchal authority of the church (*RT* 17). These instances all server as proof of Serafina's strength of will, her independence, and her receptiveness to beliefs and ideas that challenge her conservative values.

Once Serafina begins to rethink her notions of sexual purity, a change which is catalyzed in no small part by the influence of her daughter, the stage is set for Alvaro Mangiacavallo to reawaken her desires. Like Serafina, Alvaro too is a Sicilian immigrant, and his uncanny resemblance to Rosario leads her to exclaim, "Madonna Santa! – My husband's body, with the head of a clown!" (*RT* 82). Indeed, Alvaro is in many ways a caricature of Serafina's late husband. In addition to his "clownish" appearance, his surname literally translates as "Eat-a-Horse," and he possesses a bawdy sense of humor. Unlike the "Baron" Delle Rose, he is by his own admission "the grandson of the village idiot of Ribera" (*RT* 94). As Williams later explained in a letter to critic Brook Atkinson, Serafina must acknowledge some key differences between Rosario and Alvaro to transition from "a non-realistic, romantic concept of love relation

---

Alvaro's liberal views on sexuality are similar to those initially introduced by Rosa. At one point, he even chastises Serafina for her overbearing nature: "Poor little worried lady! But you got to face facts. Sooner or later the innocence of your daughter cannot be respected" (RT 108). Alvaro's understanding of sexuality is consistent with Rosa's insofar as it is informed by contemporary American culture. While the adolescent Rosa is conditioned by her high school peer group, Alvaro is himself a modern consumer under the influence of popular American culture. This is evident when he appeals to Serafina: "Baronessa, I am a healthy young man, existing without no love life. I look at magazine pictures. Them girls in advertisements – you know what I mean? A little bitty thing there? A little bitty thing here?" (RT 94-95). In response to this consumer culture, as D'Emilio and Freedman argue, the Legion of Decency and other watchdog organizations fought to censor what they considered obscenity in print media, which, "it seemed, was intent on keeping Americans in a state of constant sexual excitement" (279). Thus, as a modern American consumer, Alvaro's sexuality constitutes a rejection of traditional Sicilian values.

Ultimately, the combined influence of Rosa and Alvaro have a transformative effect on Serafina. Over the course of the play, too, Serafina's disillusionment with the Catholic church becomes increasingly pronounced. The final blow comes with the revelation of Rosario's sexual infidelity, a betrayal that shatters her idealized notions of marriage and heteronormative romance. As her temper begins to subside, she and Alvaro devise a plan to sneak him into her bedroom for a late-night tryst, an act that is as much motivated by desire as it is by anger. Even

---

347 See Devlin & Tischler 384.
before Alvaro's return, Serafina cannot resist releasing her fury and frustration upon the Virgin Mary: "No, no, no, you don't speak! I don't believe in you, Lady. You're just a poor little doll with the paint peeling off, and now I blow out the light and forget you the way you forget Serafina!" (RT 124-125).

In addition to Rosario's betrayal, Williams also uses the adolescent relationship between Rosa and Jack to challenge the traditional values of both the American and Italian South. Much to Serafina's dismay, her efforts to protect her daughter's innocence prove woefully ineffective, and only further strengthen Rosa's determination to consummate the relationship. In traditional fashion, Jack attempts to adopt the role as the dominant role over Rosa, as male guardian, but these attempts to keep their relationship "honorably" platonic only result in shared frustration. As the two say what they believe will be their last goodbyes before Jack's voyage, for example, the sexual tension is palpable:

JACK (taking the cap and hurling it on the ground): Look! Look at my knuckles! You see them scabs on my knuckles? You know how them scabs got there? They got there because I banged my knuckles that hard on the deck of the sailboat!

ROSA: Because it – didn't quite happen? (Jack jerks his head up and down in grotesquely violent assent to her question. Rosa picks up his cap and returns it to him again.)

– Because of the promise to Mama! I'll never forgive her… (RT 130-131).

The preservation of Rosa's virginity does more than just drive a wedge between Jack and herself. It is also a source of distress for them both, as they both feel pressured to resist their natural desires. In the end, in her typically assertive fashion, it is Rosa who takes control of the situation, as she instructs Jack to meet her at a cheap hotel at noon the next day. There is little doubt of her intentions, as her words drip with erotic implication: "I never been to a hotel but I
know they have numbers on the door and sometimes – numbers are – lucky. – aren't they?" (RT 132).

Despite her exposure to the forces of assimilation, I argue that Rosa has not become fully and passively "Americanized" by the play's end. Just as she affects her mother's decisions, Rosa herself is not immune to the influence of her mother, and after planning her date with Jack she appears consumed by guilt and exhaustion. When Jack leaves, she collapses on the couch and, as the stage directions describe, she "begins to cry, as one cries only once in a lifetime, and the scene dims out" (RT 133). It is Rosa, however, who gets the last laugh when she discovers Alvaro's presence in their home the next morning. After failing to conjur up a suitable excuse, Serafina's lies and apologies fall upon deaf ears. It is it that moment that Serafina finally experiences an epiphany: she "turns slowly, shamefully, to face [Rosa] […] like a peasant in the presence of a young princess," and exclaims, "How beautiful – is my daughter! Go to the boy!" (RT 140). As Rosa rushes to find Jack, Serafina finally casts her illusions aside and embraces a new life. The play ends as "She starts up the embankment toward Alvaro and the curtain falls as the music rises with her in great glissandi of sound" (RT 144).

*The Rose Tattoo* thus serves as a celebration of human relationships outside the conventional heteronorms of society. Serafina's sexual fulfillment falls outside a conception of sexuality rooted in marriage and Roman Catholic doctrine. Both mother and daughter, in fact, go against the social conventions that define sexual relationships through traditional Sicilian values. The difference between Serafina and Rosa however lies in how the cultural identity of each character has been configured at the conclusion of the play. While Rosa has been largely "Americanized," Serafina's sexual reawakening coincides with return to her Italian American
community of support. In *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (2007), James Peacock offers an interesting analysis as to how such communities are structured:

New immigrants appear to identify first with family and friends and then enlarge their identities to include both the ethnic and native community [...] regional identity, if they have one, is grounded in these local groupings and cut through with national and global networks less evident among natives but not necessarily absent.348

In *The Rose Tattoo*, Tennessee Williams emphasizes the importance of a strong, thriving immigrant community. Without this support structure – as is evident when Alvaro is mocked as a "Maccaroni," a "Spaghetti," a "Wop," and a "Dago" – the immigrant is vulnerable to nativist attack (*RT* 77). Critic Philip Kolin observes that, "Although living in the American South, Serafina and her neighbors [have] lost not a whit of their native hopes and fears in steerage" (98). Thus, even as she compromises her Old World beliefs, Serafina binds herself to a Sicilian community that preserves its native cultural values even as it absorbs those of the diaspora. The integration of the immigrant figure into society in *The Rose Tattoo* ultimately renders the process of assimilation incomplete, and leaves a cultural gap that allows for the inscription of a transnational identity.

The play concludes as a chorus of Sicilian women ascend a hill to bring Alvaro on of the play's many symbols of passion, a red silk shirt. Before Serafina walks onto the porch to reunite with her lover, she places the broken urn that once held Rosario's ashes in front of the Madonna. This dual image registers both a break from and continuity with the past. Serafina realizes she must break with the conservative tradition, but still preserve the memory of the past, as

represented by her lost husband. Even as Serafina's newfound sexual freedom subverts Catholic
doctrine, the statue of the Madonna still stands as a monument to her homeland. In other words,
her final social position in the local community is structured as a form of transnational identity, a
cultural participation across borders. Only then can social harmony be restored.
Conclusion

While the globalization of the South is demonstrated in Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*, this phenomenon was only one of a myriad factors that contributed to the radical reshaping of this American region and its cultural identity. Indeed, it was during the 1960s that revolutionary changes in agriculture made up a significant part of the South's economic transformation. As historians James C. Cobb and Robert J. Newman have observed, the nation's formerly abject region began to emerge as an industrial powerhouse.349 "In the South," the journalist Marshall Frady later wrote, "the land of Canaan came to consist of a horizon of smokestacks. Industrialization – the devout acquisition of factories – became a kind of second religion there: the secular fundamentalism."350 These developments contributed, as well, to the rapid urbanization of the South, and according to historian Dewey W. Grantham in *The South In Modern America: A Region at Odds* (2001), "The landscape of southern cities, increasingly like their northern and western counterparts, underwent dramatic changes with the appearance of shopping malls, apartment complexes, subdivisions, and traffic loops, as well as inner-city decay and noisome ghettos."351

While such developments contributed to the "americanization" and "globalization" of Dixie, however, they would not eradicate the South as a distinct regional and cultural entity. In fact, as Grantham observes, it was during the 1960s and 70s that "the South demonstrated a capacity to absorb economic and demographic change with relatively little social and cultural


disruption" (312). Writing in the mid-1980s, critic Richard Gray observed in *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (1986) that the region still inhabited two worlds, "two moral territories." While the South's material culture may have changed substantially, its "non-material culture, although altered, still enables southerners to think and talk about themselves in terms of their regional identity, the inherited codes, and, to some extent, still permits northerners to do the same." These sentiments are echoed by sociologist John Shelton Reed, who argues that "southernness" continued to embody, on the one hand, "an undeniable core of shared meanings, understandings, and ways of doing things," and on the other, an insistence by outsiders that the southerner's "group membership was significant."353

While the South remained a distinctive American region, it was during these decades that both its geographical and cultural borders would be radically reconfigured. By the 1970s, Americans outside the South had begun to view the southern region in an increasingly favorable light. Critics and commentators identified this prosperous "New" South with the so-called Sunbelt, a dynamic area stretching from the South Atlantic states to southern California. Definitions of the Sunbelt varied, but most interpreters identify the concept with an expanding southern and southwestern region, a region characterized by its thriving economy and favorable climate.354


Rather than signifying the end of the Southern Renaissance, I argue instead that this Sunbelt era ushered in a new era of southern literary productivity, what feminist critic Linda Tate has described as a "second southern renaissance." As the South has continued to diversify and expand geographically – and further dissociated itself from the patriarchal and pastoral ideals of the Agrarians – its literary canon has likewise expanded to include writers of color, writers from poor and working-class backgrounds, gay and lesbian authors, and writers from the mountains and the cities. To quote Tate,

If the first renaissance represented the unleashing of the creative juices of the well-to-do, and gave wealthier southerners, mostly men, the opportunity to come to terms with the legacy of the past in the present, this second southern renaissance marks the liberation of all southerners. It is very much a postsegregation literature, and while writers seek to come to terms with the past, the emphasis is much less on apology and the purging of guilt and much more the reclaiming of one's voice, one's own citizenship in the South.

While a select number of female authors and writers of color found some measure of success during the "first renaissance," these authors largely toiled under the white, patriarchal shadow of William Faulkner and the New Agrarian legacy. As a result, a number of these authors turned to the child – namely the tomboy and the sissy – as a subversive figure, a character who challenged the heteronormative ethos of adult society. By examining the role of the adolescent tomboy and

---


356 The 1970s saw the emergence the Appalachian Renaissance, which was composed largely of female writers from the mountains. See Tate 496. See also Joyce Dyer, ed., Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998).
sissies in works by Cynthia Kadohata, Dorothy Allison, and Padgett Powell, I hope to open new avenues of inquiry into the role of the child in the new, postmodern South.

While my dissertation considers representations of the immigrant in works such white authors as Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams, it was not until this "second" renaissance that partly-colored author had a voice in the southern canon. Indeed, it was not until the 1960s that immigrant authors began to establish their place in the region's literary landscape. Over the last few decades, as critic Frank Cha observes, "the emergence of texts that place the Asian American experience specifically in the South forces us to reconsider traditional understandings of race, class, and gender in southern literature." As such authors as Susan Choi, Lan Cao, and Robert Olen Butler have worked to represent the immigrant experience in the South from an Asian American perspective, their narratives have continued to shed light on ethnic populations found in the margins of the entrenched black/white binary.

While authors from other immigrant communities have emerged from obscurity, the child plays a particularly significant role in the postmodern Asian American literature of the South. According to Cha, it is possible "to utilize Asian American children in southern fiction as a critical space to explore the impact of expanding immigrant populations on contemporary race relations in the American South" (128). In other words, the experiences of these children uncover the anxieties about the South's ongoing multicultural transformation, and how the increased visibility of Asian Americans point to the ambiguity entrenched in normative constructions of race, class, and gender.


The Asian American experience in the South is rendered with particular poignancy in Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World* (1989), in which the novel's tomboy protagonist narrates the struggles of her Japanese American family.\(^{359}\) A semi-autobiographical work, the story centers on twelve-year old Olivia Fujitano and her family, as they make their way from California to Arkansas in the late-1950s. The "floating world" represents the Fujitanos' relentless search for permanence in the United States, a difficult feat for many Japanese American in the years following World War II internment. This is reflected in the writings of poet and journalist Luis Francia, who argues that the concept of the "moveable home" became a central trope for Asian American authors, for "the moveable home attempts to achieve the stability" sought by migratory laborer in American.\(^{360}\) Thus, just as the adolescent tomboy exists in the "floating world" between childhood and adulthood, this sense of impermanence is likewise reflected in the struggles of Japanese American laborers in the Sun Belt South.

The prejudices that silenced the voice of the immigrant during the "first" Southern Renaissance also relegated poor and blue-collar white laborers to the margins of cultural discourse. When impoverished characters do appear, they are often represented stereotypically as primitive, crude, and immoral, as is the case with the Ewells in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or the Slatterys in *Gone With the Wind*. Since the antebellum era, the white southern writer has been tied to the tradition of gentility. As Fred Hobson observes in *The Southern Writer and the Postmodern World* (1991), "the assumption in the South, through the renascence, was that the man and particularly the woman of letters, with few exceptions, came either from the gentry or from that educated class of public servants, teachers, and ministers – and the assumption was


also the reality in most cases.\textsuperscript{361} As a result, the white lower-class have had little input into the region's representation in literature, and – until recently – the aristocratic-agrarian mode has prevailed.

This trend has shifted during this "second" Southern Renaissance, however, with what critic Matthew Guinn in \textit{After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South} (2000) calls "the rising proletarian chorus in southern literature."\textsuperscript{362} "In pursuing an education and entering the stories of their people into the record," as Guinn argues, such authors as "[Harry] Crews and [Dorothy] Allison have expanded the purview of southern letters to correct this historically limited perspective" \textsuperscript{(5)}.\textsuperscript{363} In the words of one blue-collar southern author, Dennis Covington, these writers are acutely sensitive to "the scorn and ridicule the nation has heaped on poor Southern whites, the only ethnic group in America not permitted to have a history."\textsuperscript{364} The fiction they have created from personal experience, in fact, has worked to supplant the traditional myths of the southern aristocracy with unflinching depictions of the brutal poverty at the bottom levels of the culture.

This commitment to depicting the "reality" facing poor whites in the South – a reality characterized by exploitation, violence, and social stasis – is demonstrated in Dorothy Allison's \textit{Bastard Out of Carolina} (1992), a female \textit{Bildungsroman} based largely on the author's childhood


\textsuperscript{363} For an example of Harry Crew's literature of the poor white in the South, see Harry Crews, \textit{A Childhood: The Biography of a Place} (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

The story, which explores the life of a poor white family in South Carolina during the 1950s and 60s, is set in a largely urban environment, as the characters earn their livelihoods in the cafes, factories, and textile mills in and around the city of Greenville. Through the narration of the novel's protagonist, the tomboyish Ruth Ann "Bone" Boatwright, Allison repeatedly emphasizes the class ramifications of her adolescent development. The tomboy is not so much expected to develop, as she is to conform the societal expectations of her class. Bone's education – her passage to maturity – is not an exercise in free will at all, but serves rather as an initiation into a social hierarchy that allows her no autonomy or self-determination. As she describes it,

Growing up was like falling into a hole. The boys would quit school and sooner or later go to jail for something silly. I might not quit school, not while Mama had any say in the matter, but what difference would that make? What was I going to do in five years? Work in the textile mill? Join Mama in the diner? It all looked bleak to me. No wonder people got crazy as they grew up. (BC 178)

Unlike her long-suffering Mama, however, Bone reacts to this realization with anger rather than resignation. She claims, for instance, that anger "was like a steady drip of poison into my soul, teaching me to hate the ones who hated me. Who do they think they are?" (BC 262). Bone takes particular pride in her intellect and strength as well, as she thinks, "We're smarter than you think we are," and feels "mean and powerful and proud of us all, all the Boatwrights who had ever gone to jail, fought back when they hadn't a chance, and still held onto their pride" (BC 217). Thus, it is possible to read the tomboy as a queer figure in the postmodern South. Even at a young age, she already perceives the power that lies in the righteous anger of the unvanquished poor.

While Kadohata and Allison both rely on tomboy protagonists to narrate their stories of female empowerment, the effeminate sissy boy has similarly remained a ubiquitous figure in the southern literary canon. In works by John Kennedy Toole and Walker Percy, for example, the aristocratic effeminacy of their male protagonists is intended to parody the excess, artifice, and melancholy of the old elite, as they struggle to "reclaim" an imaginary past. A more positive representation of the sissy, however, can be found in Padgett Powell's *Edisto* (1983), a narrative told from the perspective of twelve-year-old Simons Everson Manigault, or as the locals call him, "the Duchess'[s] boy." Set in a small, decaying community on the South Carolina coast, Powell's novel tells the comic tale of a boy struggling to discern fact from fiction, as he deals with the onset of puberty. A quiet, studious boy, Simons is himself torn between "the Duchess" (his mother) and "the Progenitor" (his father) – modern incarnations of the mythical southern lady and the gentleman – who both attempt to mold him in their own image.

I cite these three novels of postmodern southern childhood – stories by Cynthia Kadohata, Dorothy Allison, and Padgett Powell – as just a few of the many examples of adolescent tomboy and sissy characters that have continued to populate the region's literary landscape. These queer children did not disappear with end of the "first" Southern Renaissance, but have instead persisted as figures of queer resistance and expression. Therefore, the purpose of my conclusion – indeed, of my thesis as a whole – is to open new avenues of inquiry, and explore new ways of understanding childhood, adolescence, and the American South in the present postmodern age.

---


Bibliography


Brewton, Vince. “‘An honor as well as a pleasure’: Dueling, Violence, and Race in *Pudd’nhead*...


--. The Grass Harp: Including “A Tree of Night” and Other Stories. 1951. New York: Vintage,
1993.


--. “Yo Ho and Two Bottles of Rum.” *Times Picayune* (27 September 1925).


Francia, Luis. "Inventing the Earth: The Notion of "Home" in Asian American Literature."


Kaye, Harvey E., Soll Berl, Jack Clare, Mary R. Eleston, Benjamin S. Gershwin, Patricia

Gershwin, Leonard S. Kogan, Clara Torda, and Cornelia B. Wilbur. "Homosexuality in


Kolin, Philip C. “‘Sentiment and humor in equal measure’: Comic Forms in *The Rose Tattoo.*”


Ling, Jinqi. “Identity Crisis and Gender Politics: Reappropriating Asian American Masculinity.”


Matsui, Miho. Passing Into Darkness: Sexuality, Race, and Integration of the Segregated in the


--. "Literature and Geography." Chicago Tribune (10 May 1925).


2016.


Nikolajeva, Maria. *Power, Voice, and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. New York:


Quinby, Lee. "Tennessee Williams' Hermaphroditic Symbolism in *The Rose Tattoo, Orpheus_


Rothman, Lily. “Read a Stunningly Frank 1948 Time Letter on Truman Capote and Sexuality.”


Stefanovici, Smaranda. "Gender Roles and Feminism in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.


Putnam’s Sons, 1924.


Trilling, Diana. Rev. of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, by Truman Capote. *Nation* (31 Jan. 1948): 133-134.


