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**Queer Otherness, Mentors, and Performativity:  
Establishing the Queer Southern Gothic in  
Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* (1946), John Boorman's  
*Deliverance* (1972), and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989)**

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## INTRODUCTION

### DEFINING THE QUEER SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Cultural texts reveal what fears haunt the American psyche. The othering of marginalized communities within these texts in turn affects how people are othered in their everyday lives. Particular narrative strategies and locations can influence the reception of cultural texts by large audiences and, consequently, how the bodies present within them are viewed. What happens when othered bodies are imagined as monsters? How does the horror that they then embody magnify in an already othered region? Lastly, what happens when these queer monsters are visualized and projected as film? To explore these questions, I will closely examine queer otherness in the “gothicized” American South and create a category of analysis in order to do so.

The Queer Southern Gothic<sup>1</sup> is a subgenre of American fiction and film. This subgenre unites themes of queer otherness, queer characters, or queer subtexts with gothic imagery and is situated in the American South. While texts within the Queer Southern Gothic borrow elements from Southern Gothic literature and film, they simultaneously redefine them through claiming the existence of queer bodies and voices. E. Patrick Johnson cites the reclamation of queer voices as a validation of queer history and the lives of those who have

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my writing the terms “queer,” “southern,” and “gothic” are capitalized when they are identified together as a subgenre. Each independent term, primarily southern and gothic, are also capitalized when referring to other genres of fiction and film (for example: Southern Gothic or the Gothic). However, the terms are not capitalized when referring to gothic things, queer bodies, or southern texts, for example.

experienced it.<sup>2</sup> This validation is of particular importance within the South because the region holds the reputation of being inhospitable to queer communities.<sup>3</sup> The Gothic, then, allows the unseen to become visible and the dead to come alive. Its conventions ultimately function as the vehicle through which these suppressed queer voices can be heard. Rather than reside in the margins of cultural texts, queer bodies are pulled to the narrative center in the Gothic. These texts consequently allow social terrors to manifest in the form of gothic others, with both positive and negative effects. When texts are authored by those who are at the margins, whether because of race, gender, class, or sexuality, the haunting gothic other is employed in order to attach a literal body to an othered identity. Conversely, when texts are authored by those who are not at the margins, which is demonstrated in my analysis of the film *Deliverance* (1972) in the second chapter, othering is used to demonize queer bodies as terrifying monsters.

As all of these elements have yet to be assembled together in a scholarly text, my aim in this work is to firmly establish the Queer Southern Gothic as a subgenre of American fiction and film. I use the word subgenre to demonstrate the prevalence of the category as well as the texts that can be labeled as such. There are a multitude of texts that can be placed within the Queer Southern Gothic, and thus “subgenre” becomes the categorical term under which it can be defined. In addition to establishing the subgenre, I also intend to explore a variety

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<sup>2</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

of texts that are visible in it. Each chapter is devoted to one text that engages with the subgenre in a different way. Through examining these three different manifestations of the Queer Southern Gothic, I explore the existence of queer bodies across fiction and film. Prior to explaining the framework under which these texts can be identified, it is necessary to define the terms “queer,” “southern,” and “gothic.”

Queer is a term that has recently been reclaimed from its pejorative past and is now used as a category of identification within the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. I have chosen to use the term queer because it functions as an umbrella term for people who either identify as outside of or choose to be identified as outside of rigid sex and gender categories. Thus, queer can include people who are gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual, transvestites, intersexed individuals, as well as fetishists, auto-eroticists, and genderless or genderqueer identified persons.<sup>4</sup> The list of people and relationships that can be categorized as queer extends even beyond this, lending to the term’s appeal. Queer allows for those who identify as or engage in relationships outside of heteronormative hegemony to become part of the larger community without ascribing a specified label to their identity.

The term queer is useful in that it establishes a category of difference without rigid definitions as to what kind of otherness is defined within it. This

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<sup>4</sup> This definition emerges from an amalgamation of sources, primarily from my own experience with encountering the term. Though there is not a specific citation for this reference, elements of it have been influenced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Nikki Sullivan (2003).

fluidity is essential to the first axiom of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she states, quite simply, that "people are different from each other."<sup>5</sup> Before continuing her claim with a long list of perceivable relationships that people may have with sex or their own sexuality, Sedgwick argues that

in the particular area of sexuality, for instance, I assume that most of us know the following things that can differentiate even people of identical gender, race, nationality, class, and 'sexual orientation'—each one of which, however, if taken seriously as pure *difference*, retains the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of the available thinking of sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

Queer, as a term that claims the importance of these differences, deconstructs categories of sexuality, gender, and, consequently, otherness.

A key element for texts within the Queer Southern Gothic is the frequency with which queerness is associated with otherness. In combination with the influence of the Gothic upon otherness, queer persons and queer sexual acts become grotesque and are viewed as something outside of social norms. Although the Gothic can provide significant visibility for queer bodies, it also frequently demonizes them as gothic monsters. Through deeming queer bodies as inhuman, the Gothic reinstates a hierarchy between those who are queer and those who are not. Queerness thus becomes "the other"<sup>7</sup> to its heteronormative counterpart.

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<sup>5</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> I place "the other" in quotation marks here because queerness/homosexuality is viewed as the opposite of heterosexuality in a binaric model of sexuality. I also place "the other" in quotation marks when I refer to the South as "the other" of the American North. Again,



Similarly, the South has long been viewed as “the other” of America’s “civilized” North. This association is also magnified, like queerness, through gothic conventions.

Identified with the gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation’s ‘other,’ becoming a repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot.<sup>8</sup>

To be clear, “The South” is defined as the southeastern region of the continental United States, geographically demarcated by the region’s secession from the American North during the Civil War. The history of the Confederacy, slavery, and segregation continue to haunt America’s cultural memory. This makes it impossible to disassociate cultural texts of the South from its complex and violent past. E. Patrick Johnson reminds us that

The region’s long history of grotesque racial violence—slavery, lynching, cross burnings, etc.—is etched in the American imagination, laid bare like a freshly laundered sheet hung out to dry on a clothesline, a sheet that, after sundown, might glow blood orange before a torched home, car, or body... These images of insidious race hatred pervade the physical landscape and cultural backdrop of the land of Dixie.<sup>9</sup>

It is the past racial violence that haunts the Southern landscape and the cultural texts that the region produces. Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America* analysis of American Literature connects the history of the South to its influence on cultural

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this is because the relationship between the two regions is binaric, and further one is viewed as less than the other.

<sup>8</sup> Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, 1.

texts. In her book, Goddu “is especially concerned with how slavery haunts the American Gothic,”<sup>10</sup> and, thus, how a specific moment in history shapes the use of gothic conventions in American texts.

The South’s violent history is relegated to haunting landscapes and grotesque bodies in the Gothic. The genre thus “resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past.”<sup>11</sup> The Gothic creates a nightmarish world where the dead can be reanimated and monsters move freely in the night. The Southern Gothic is consumed by rotting corpses, both hidden within and pulled from the land, horrific carnival “freak-shows,” and violent images, imagined and real. These conventions extend to “deviant” sexuality, incest, violence, as well as ghosts and apparitions. Through the Gothic, authors and filmmakers can choose to reconstruct how bodies and regions are imagined. Many southern women writers, for example, engage the Gothic and the grotesque to create “characters whose bodies and minds refuse to be average—characteristics extraordinary because they are witless or limbless, crippled, deaf, or blind, hermaphroditic or filled with same-sex desire, Lilliputian or gigantic—hybrid characters with bodies and minds that refuse, or fail to comprehend, the norm.”<sup>12</sup> Patricia Yaeger argues that southern women writers reclaim the violence and darkness of the Gothic in order

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<sup>10</sup> Goddu, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Botting, “In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture” in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 219.

to “invent new forms for thinking about the unthought known and to circumvent the rigid systems of race and gender, the ‘normal’ deformities of southern culture.”<sup>13</sup>

Expanding upon Yaeger’s analysis of southern women writers, I argue that texts of the Queer Southern Gothic employ the Gothic to reclaim the othering of queer bodies. To demonstrate this, I have located three categories of analysis with which I will examine each of my texts. The first is a moment of identification with otherness. This category not only represents the outer world’s recognition of a character’s otherness, but more importantly, the character’s own realization of it. From this moment, otherness is either repressed or rebelled against in hopes of hiding the character’s inability to belong. The second category is the presence of a mentor relationship. Mentor relationships allow the central character to identify with someone else as an other, or an object of sexual desire. Many of the relationships present within each of these texts are with an elder other, who through their own experience help the central character come to terms with their emerging otherness. Lastly, the third category is the active performance of otherness, specifically through gender and sexuality. Drawing upon Judith Butler’s theories of sex and gender performance,<sup>14</sup> I argue that performativity allows each of these central characters to mask as well as claim their otherness to themselves and their community.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

In order to demonstrate the importance of the Queer Southern Gothic, the following three chapters each closely examine a cultural text using the three categories I have identified above. The first chapter establishes the subgenre through an analysis of Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* (1946). This novel is representative of the popularized Queer Southern Gothic novels from the 1940s to 1960s. Its queer-positive themes and images are similar to other queer gothic texts of the South, such as Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and the plays and films of Tennessee Williams. However, these elements are most similar to the film and novel versions of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960; 1962). *Member of the Wedding* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* are both coming of age novels about tomboyish girls who are forced to face the violent racial and sexual realities of the South. The film version of *To Kill A Mockingbird* provides crucial visual representations of these girls. It is as though *To Kill A Mockingbird*'s Scout Finch is a grammar school aged embodiment of *Member of the Wedding*'s Frankie Addams. Scout's non-normative gender expression is made explicit through the image on the screen. Since film, unlike literature, forces an audience to form a detailed image of what characters look like and how they act, this comparison gives the Southern tomboy additional strength.

However, I focus on *Member of the Wedding* as a significant Queer Southern Gothic text because it has been reproduced in multiple media: first, as a novel, which the first chapter analyzes, in 1946, a Broadway play in 1950, a film in 1952, a television special in 1982, a second film in 1997, and most recently,

another production of the play in 2007. Its several adaptations reinforce the presence of *Member of the Wedding* within America's cultural memory and demonstrate its power as a cultural text.

In the second chapter, I examine John Boorman's 1972 film *Deliverance* in order to explore the queering of (hetero)sexuality in the Queer Southern Gothic. The film is about the journey of four white men from Atlanta who decide to take a canoe trip down the Cahulawassee River of central Georgia. They imagine the trip to be a reconnection with their masculinity until the four men are confronted by the horrifying realities of homosexual otherness. *Deliverance* works against texts like *Member of the Wedding* that function in favor of queer and othered bodies. However, through its destructive representation of homosexual acts, *Deliverance* actually reinforces the Queer Southern Gothic as a subgenre of film and fiction. Underneath its masculine and overtly heterosexual exterior, the fear of the homosexual other, and ultimately the homosexual self, persists as the one uncontrollable reality for the film's central character. The film is adapted from the well-known 1970 novel by James Dickey, which, like *Member of the Wedding*, demonstrates its weight as a culturally influential text in several media. Further, it is the film version of *Deliverance* whose images resonate in America's cultural memory. Through visualizing homosexuality in the physical form of a "hillbilly," Boorman's *Deliverance* gives white masculinity something to fear.

In my third and final chapter, I examine Randall Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) because, rather than coding queerness underneath suggestive text, it outwardly claims queer bodies as queer. The novel tells the story of Horace Cross, an African-American gay teenager on the night of his suicide. *A Visitation of Spirits* features bold images of homosexual sex alongside its examination of how the realities of homophobia and racial discrimination influence those who are othered within society. Through Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, I will demonstrate how texts within the Queer Southern Gothic can expand the scope of what the queer gothic south is imagined to be. Rather than demonizing sexual otherness to the deviant "hillbillies" of *Deliverance* or praising it in the success of the adolescent white lesbian of *Member of the Wedding*, *A Visitation of Spirits* reimagines the gothic horrors that can accompany sexual and racial otherness.

Despite the range of texts that are analyzed in the following chapters, I am fully aware that particular kinds of texts are not represented. Most significant is the absence of an African-American lesbian or female-centered queer text. From the earliest stages of this project, I intended to include a Queer Southern Gothic film about an African-American female. Its exclusion is not due to a lack of effort, but rather an apparent lack of existence of such texts. Throughout my extensive research, I was unable to find any. It is important to note that queer African-American female voices lack visibility, especially in mainstream cultural texts, which may account for their absence here.

Additionally, in all my research, I was unable to find a novel or film that centered itself upon the story of a transgendered person. As the term “transgendered” is relatively new, it is not surprising that I had difficulty finding a text with this particular kind of content. Though both of these kinds of texts may be present in short stories or short films, this work focuses on longer-format narrative film and fiction. Consequently, I think that this dearth demonstrates the possibilities that exist in establishing the Queer Southern Gothic. Through exploring the subgenre further, I think that numerous queer identities can be reclaimed in cultural texts. Hopefully, it will also contribute to the creation of a space in which future works can include them. It is in claiming this subgenre that the silenced voices and hidden bodies of social others can be asserted. The following chapters demonstrate the existence of queer others as well as how their active othering haunts American cultural texts. The Queer Southern Gothic, thus, allows those who are othered to “haunt back”<sup>15</sup> against those who have oppressed them.

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<sup>15</sup> Goddu, 1997.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ESTABLISHING THE SUBGENRE: THE “BABY DYKE” OF CARSON MCCULLERS’S *MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* (1946)

There are innumerable ways in which othered bodies haunt the Queer Southern Gothic. To demonstrate the existence of the subgenre, it is necessary to, first, create a language through which these bodies can be analyzed. By using Carson McCullers’s *Member of the Wedding* (1946) as a foundational text, the following chapter establishes a rubric under which texts of the Queer Southern Gothic can be categorized. I have chosen to begin my analysis with *Member of the Wedding* for two distinct reasons: first, it is chronologically the earliest text that I am analyzing and, second, it represents the popularized queer gothic texts of the American South from the 1940s to 1960s. As I stated in the introduction, the queer-positive images and themes found in *Member of the Wedding* are also visible in the work of Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and Harper Lee.

*Member of the Wedding* is a coming of age novel about a young girl, Frankie Addams, growing up in the American South amidst the politics of Jim Crow and WWII. Frankie is a tomboy attempting to understand her otherness and find acceptance within her southern community. She decides that her only hope for acceptance is through escape. Frankie becomes consumed by the idea of becoming a member of her brother, Jarvis’s, wedding. She imagines herself as the third member of the wedding couple, seeing Jarvis and Janine, the bride-to-be, as



the “we of me.”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of her attempts to disguise or reject her otherness, Frankie cannot escape. She is ultimately forced to navigate her gothic world and find acceptance within her small community.

The novel begins in the summer with twelve-year-old Frankie lamenting about her otherness. From the second page, McCullers visually and emotionally establishes Frankie as an other. “This summer she had grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long. She wore a pair of blue track shorts, a B.V.D. 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.”<sup>2</sup> Through changes caused by puberty, Frankie’s non-conforming gender presentation has gradually become more visible. I argue that McCullers presents Frankie not as a mere tomboyish adolescent but, more accurately, as a young lesbian who is beginning to understand her sexual otherness. Frankie is a “baby-dyke.”<sup>3</sup> Her emerging queerness, paired with McCullers’s skillful use of the Gothic, makes *Member of the Wedding* a foundational novel of the Queer Southern Gothic.

Frankie’s strange desire to be the third member of her brother’s wedding couple furthers her positioning as a queer other. She seeks this relationship in hopes of finding inclusion in what, as a lesbian, is an unattainable sphere of

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<sup>1</sup> Carson McCullers, *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 291.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 258.

<sup>3</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985), 108.

society: heterosexual marriage. The marriage represents an ideal existence for Frankie in which she has no obligation to present herself as either masculine or feminine. The bride and groom already occupy these two gender roles, thus Frankie does not need perform her gender identity in any particular way. Frankie's emerging homosexuality becomes visible in her transgressive gender presentation, as demonstrated in the first passage; she has a boy's haircut and wears boy's clothes. This visibility becomes more evident in her repeated attempts to align herself with heteronormativity. To expand upon these concepts in defense of the subgenre, I will examine the three analytical elements of the Queer Southern Gothic. In turn, these following traits reveal the affirming presentation of queer otherness within *Member of the Wedding*: one, a moment of identification with otherness, two, the presence of mentor relationships, and, three, Frankie's active performance of her gender and sexuality.

The first element, a central character's identification with or of their otherness, is a moment or series of moments in which the lead character becomes conscious of their difference. In *Member of the Wedding*, I mark Frankie's moment of identification during a visit to the "freak show" at a traveling carnival. In this scene, Frankie identifies herself alongside the "freaks" in the carnival sideshow and, from this experience, begins to see herself as an other.

The second analytical category for defining the Queer Southern Gothic is the presence of mentor relationships in a text. These relationships are with people who are also viewed as others within society, whether because of sexuality, race,

or physical difference. Frankie benefits from having two mentors: Berenice, her African-American caretaker, and John Henry, her gender transgressive cousin. Through these two relationships Frankie is able to cultivate multiple identities in an attempt to understand her otherness. With their support, she survives her gothic world and successfully maneuvers the condemnation of her non-conforming sexuality and gender.

The final category is the active performance of gender and sexuality, primarily in opposition to heteronormative social conventions. This is represented in Frankie's calculated attempts to transform her queer and "freakish" body into something "normal." Frankie reinforces her status as an other through these attempted transformations. Furthermore, her performativity is what allows Frankie to demonstrate the connection between social control over sexuality and gender and the conventions through which normative structures are stabilized.

It is not only these three elements that make *Member of the Wedding* a Queer Southern Gothic text, but how they work together to create an environment in which Frankie can acknowledge and eventually accept her otherness. Frankie is only able to find this acceptance after she has endured a series of gothic trials, fully rejecting herself and her community. The novel culminates in the failed wedding escape, after which Frankie decides to run away. She attempts to negotiate potential identities for herself, mentally transitioning between the desire to be a male marine and a femme girl in her "dotted Swiss dress."<sup>4</sup> However,

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<sup>4</sup> McCullers, 381.

there is no real escape, as evident in what happens to Berenice and John Henry. In order to survive, Frankie must accept her otherness within her gothic world. It is only after being pushed within and consumed by the horrors of the Gothic that Frankie is able to explore her same-sex desires through the promise of an idyllic and romantic relationship with Mary Littlejohn. I argue that through these experiences Frankie is given the opportunity to understand the “wonder of her love.”<sup>5</sup>

One dimension of Frankie’s otherness is visible in her emerging homosexuality, which, as evident in her flawed obsession with the wedding, she fails to hide under a veil of heterosexuality. Prior to the startling realization she experiences at the carnival “freak-show,” Frankie’s otherness is marked in an unnamable sexual encounter. I argue that the first category is a moment of identification that signals a character’s *conscious* realization that they are an other. Although this encounter signifies Frankie’s otherness, she does not understand this experience or her reactions to it as a component of her sexual otherness. The scene, in which Frankie commits a “queer sin” with a neighbor boy, actually functions as a prelude to Frankie’s moment of identification. It magnifies the significance of the later scene and demonstrates that Frankie’s otherness has influenced previous behavior.

The sexual encounter also reinforces the presence of the Gothic in Frankie’s world, ultimately becoming a haunting nightmare for Frankie.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 389.

One Saturday afternoon in May she committed a secret and unknown sin. In the MacKeans' 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 the bed at night she planned to shoot him with the pistol or throw a knife between his eyes.<sup>6</sup>

This sequence acts as one of Frankie's earliest attempts to position herself as a participatory member of heterosexuality. Frankie commits this "sin" with Barney in order to "unfreakify" herself. The sin is an attempt to hide her freakishness within socially acceptable forms of sexual conduct. Instead of becoming an experience that hides her within "normative" sexual activity, the encounter repels her further from it.

Frankie refuses to understand what happened in the garage with Barney that afternoon. By labeling her actions as "secret and unknown," she is able to temporarily repress their meaning. Furthermore, Frankie remembers the experience with violence and aggression. Through these negative emotions she disguises the fears she has about what her reaction means. This, ultimately, demonstrates her emerging homosexuality. She does not act in this manner because she is unaware of what she has done, as argued by Gary Richards who claims that "even as McCullers insistently establishes Frankie's multiple transgressions of normative gender, she simultaneously emphasizes Frankie's thorough naiveté regarding sexuality, both others' and her own."<sup>7</sup> Instead, I argue

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 277.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 186.

that Frankie is fully aware of herself as sexual being and her chosen ignorance serves a very specific purpose. Through rejecting the reality of this experience, and her reactions to it, Frankie allows the otherness of sexuality to remain hidden. As an adolescent lesbian Frankie cannot allow herself to understand. If she understood her actions, then her fears of becoming a freak would be confirmed.

As summer progresses Frankie states that, “there was only fear of Barney, her father, and the Law. But even these fears were finally gone; after a long time the sin in the MacKean’s garage became far from her and was remembered only in her dreams.”<sup>8</sup> Frankie cannot erase the memory of Barney from her past and continues to be haunted by it in her dreams. Their unnamable sin becomes a gothic nightmare that reminds Frankie of her emerging otherness. If her encounter with Barney symbolizes a failed attempt at heterosexuality, then Frankie’s nightmare represents her fear of being a sexual other. Frankie represses her otherness by “gothicizing” it. Her homosexuality, thus, becomes something that can only exist in the terror and solitude of night. It no longer has power over Frankie’s reality.

This nightmare is reanimated during Frankie’s moment of identification with the “freaks” in a circus sideshow in early fall. This, the first category of analysis for the Queer Southern Gothic, prevents her from further repressing her otherness. In this moment, she aligns herself with a group of “others” that live on the outer margins of society. “She was afraid of all of the Freaks, for it seemed to

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<sup>8</sup> McCullers, 227.

her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you.”<sup>9</sup> Not only does Frankie fear what these “grotesque-ified” and overwhelming others physically represent, but she fears what they represent for her own identity. She is one of them, similar to the communal chant within Tod Browning’s film *Freaks* (1932): Frankie is “one of us.”<sup>10</sup>

In response to this fear, Frankie connects the otherness of the performers within the “House of Freaks” to heteronormative coupling. “I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding,” she said. “Those Freaks.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Frankie defines freakishness as something in opposition to heteronormative marriage, thus placing her own fears surrounding her sexual otherness upon the “freaks.” Her identification with heterosexual marriage as normative is echoed in her relationship with her brother Jarvis’s wedding. Frankie sees the wedding as an opportunity for her to participate in a normalizing social convention.

A second facet of Frankie’s experience at the carnival unites the acknowledgement of her otherness with her mentor relationships. This second identification, and specifically what it means for other people, expands Frankie’s notions surrounding race and otherness. Further, it benefits the relationships she shares with her mentors, as well how she understands her gothic community. Her

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<sup>9</sup> McCullers, 272.

<sup>10</sup> *Freaks*, DVD, directed by Tod Browning (1932; New York, NY: MGM/UA Home Video, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> McCullers, 272.

second “coming to consciousness” occurs at the “freak-show,” when Frankie witnesses the sideshow performance of the “Wild Nigger.”

The Wild Nigger came from a savage island. He squatted in his booth among dusty bones and palm leaves and he ate raw living rats. The fair gave free admission to his show to all who brought rats of the right size, and so children carried them down in strong sacks and shoe boxes. The Wild Nigger knocked the rat’s head over his squatted knee and ripped off the fur and crunched and gobbled and flashed his greedy Wild Nigger eyes. Some said that he was not a genuine Wild Nigger, but a crazy colored man from Selma. Anyway, Frankie did not like to watch him very long.<sup>12</sup>

Frankie first sees what is superficially at the forefront of the “act.” She acknowledges the savagery that is created for and encouraged by the audience. Unable to witness it for very long, she casually states that she has been told that he is possibly not a “genuine Wild Nigger” but a man from a neighboring town. “McCullers’s story of the Wild Nigger is sad and horrifying; his bone-crunching and rat gobbling abjection must be politicized (that is, read through the grid of segregation fantasies) in order to be made bearable.”<sup>13</sup> Frankie’s blasé attitude towards the authenticity of the “Wild Nigger” demonstrates her desensitization to the treatment of African-Americans within the segregated American South. I argue that the passage concludes with Frankie’s rejection of the performance. Above all, it is a rejection of the stereotyping of African-Americans as savage and animalistic as well as a refusal to participate in the perpetuation of those stereotypes like the other white people in the audience.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 229.



This moment in the text is layered with the complex racial history in which it was written. As argued by Patricia Yaeger, McCullers's makes a political statement with her through her use of the grotesque and highly gothicized inclusion of the act of "Wild Nigger". By embodying the racial terror of segregation, which echoes the social terrors present during slavery, the "Wild Nigger" represents the fears that white Southerners had of "the uncontrollable other." Frankie's actions, which reject the racist ideologies that circulate within her community, are not implicitly anti-racist. At twelve, Frankie is too young to fully understand the complexities of race relations within the South or support anti-racist efforts. However, in this scene she recognizes that otherness is something that can be feared and thus controlled by society. She begins to see how the otherness of those around her has been hidden, ignored, and managed by her community.

Frankie's understanding of the difficulties associated with otherness deepens through her relationship with Berenice. Over the course of their relationship, Berenice reveals some of the Gothic realities of being an African-American in the segregated South. Berenice's traumatic marital experiences allow Frankie to understand that though heterosexual marriage appears to be normalizing it can be accompanied with violence and horror. Among Berenice's four marriages all but one became gothic nightmares. It is only through her memory of her first husband, Ludie, that Berenice is able to survive these men.

The three other husbands were all bad, each one worse than the one before, and it made Frankie just blue to hear about them. The

first was a sorry old liquor-drinker. The next went crazy on Berenice: he did crazy things, had eating dreams in the night and swallowed a corner of the sheet; and what with one and another he distracted Berenice so much that she finally quit him. The last husband was terrible. He gouged out Berenice's eye and stole her furniture away from her. She had to call the Law on him.<sup>14</sup>

The inclusion of Berenice's marital trials begins almost comically. Though her second and third husbands were frustrating, she doesn't say that they were physically abusive like her fourth husband was. It is with the story of her fourth and most recent husband that Frankie is given an idea about the painfully grotesque realities that can accompany racial otherness and heterosexual marriage. Though the memory of heterosexual coupling provides Berenice with the hope of escape, she knows that it will not solve all of her problems. Throughout the novel, Berenice speaks truthfully about the horrors of reality and through that honesty allows Frankie and her cousin John Henry to see some of the ways in which people of color are othered within society.

“We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. Be we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself. Is that what you was trying to say?”

“I don't know,” F. Jasmine said. “But I don't want to be caught.”

“Me neither,” said Berenice. “Don't none of us. I'm caught worse than you is.”

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<sup>14</sup> McCullers, 279.

F. Jasmine understood why she had said this, and it was John Henry who asked in his child voice: “Why?”

“Because I am black,” said Berenice. “Because I am colored. Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself. So we caught that firstway I was telling you, as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored people also.”<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, Berenice informs Frankie and John Henry of their fated realities as others. Each of them, despite their otherness, is independent of one another. She stresses that the two white children, while victims of the world in which they live, are not “caught” in the same way that people of color are “caught.” Using her friend Honey as an example, she continues, “Sometimes a boy like Honey feel like he just can’t breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself. Sometimes it just about more than we can stand.”<sup>16</sup> Berenice defines this difference as more suffocating for people of color, who have fewer ways in which to “widen ourself free.”<sup>17</sup>

This passage also reveals Berenice’s investment in marriage. “For instance, me and Ludie. When I was with Ludie, I didn’t feel so caught. But then Ludie died. We go around trying one thing or another, but we caught anyhow.”<sup>18</sup> Through the hope she places in marriage and love, Berenice expresses her desire to escape her otherness even though she knows she cannot. Not only does marriage provide Berenice with a level of agency that she otherwise would be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 357.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 357.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 357.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 357-358

denied as a single, African-American women, but more importantly, through marriage she may also find love.

Through defining their individual situations as “caught,” Berenice links each child’s queer otherness to her own racial otherness. Although they each will have very different lived experiences, accompanied by different modes of social control, the three characters are still able to connect with one another as outsiders. Berenice’s mentoring allows Frankie to understand that people, including herself, are seen as others. This creates an environment in which she can see how those closest to her are as equally affected by the social terrors of their community. Frankie’s relationship with John Henry allows her to see how otherness, based upon gender and sexuality, can impact a child’s perception of itself. Like Frankie, John Henry’s otherness becomes visible through his active performance of gender and sexuality. Although he is only six years old, John Henry is coded as a queer other through his engagement in transvestism.

At two points in the novel, John Henry attempts to emulate the central female characters. In the first instance, Frankie “heard him shuffle carefully across the room...he had put on Berenice’s hat and was trying to walk in Berenice’s high-heeled shoes.”<sup>19</sup> Unlike Frankie, John Henry’s open cross-dressing and imitation of his female mentors does not come across as threatening. Instead, his transvestism is viewed as harmless child’s play.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 351.

The second instance of John Henry's cross-dressing occurs later in the novel, after an intense conversation about race, otherness, and the horrors of reality. Frankie saw that "John Henry stood like a little old woman dwarf, wearing the pink hat with the plume, and high-heel shoes."<sup>20</sup> In a moment of overwhelming emotions and truth, John Henry is again in women's clothing, alluding to the authenticity of his continued performance. Although there is no "authentic" or "original" performance or gender presentation, as argued by Judith Butler, John Henry's conscious transgressions place him within the category of queer.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, these transgressions hint at the possibility of a homosexual future for the young boy. This demonstrates that John Henry is not "playing around" with how his gender and sexuality are read. Rather, he too is a queer other.

For Frankie, this otherness can be identified through particular moments of sexual activity. John Henry is too young to engage in sexual activity, and, thus, cannot be textually defined as either homosexual or heterosexual as a result. Gary Richards argues that "his actions are those of a stereotypical sissy. He...is prone to meddle and...willingly assumes roles of mothering inculcated in girls during childhood."<sup>22</sup> It is his embodiment of the "sissy" that codes him as a queer other, rather than the presence of sexual activity. Just as Frankie is aligned with Scout Finch of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), John Henry's otherness is likened to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 360.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss. (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Richards, 179.

Scout's friend Dill Harris and Joel Knox from Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). All three boys are feminized through their "sissy-ness," which is magnified through their ill-health. Unfortunately for John Henry, it is this feminization through illness that prevents him from escaping the horrors of the gothic like Frances.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the summer, "John Henry had meningitis and after ten days he was dead."<sup>24</sup> His final days are consumed by pain and darkness, incomprehensible to Frances.

Frances bought John Henry a walking stick and sent him the rug she had won at Lotto. But Berenice remarked that he was beyond all of this, and the words were eerie and unreal. As the bright days followed one upon the other, the words of Berenice became so terrible that she would listen in a spell of horror, but a part of her could not believe. John Henry had been screaming for three days and his eyeballs were walled up in a corner, stuck and blind. He lay there finally with his head drawn back in a buckled way, and he had lost the strength to scream.<sup>25</sup>

John Henry is punished for the transgressivity of his otherness more grotesquely than any of the other characters within the novel. Since he was not socially punished in life for his transgressions, he is forced to gruesomely suffer through blindness and agonizing pain in his death. It is not until Frankie sees his small coffin that she fully understands John Henry's death. Even after this, John Henry is reanimated in her dreams.

He came to her once or twice in nightmare dreams, like an escaped child dummy from the window of a department store, the wax legs moving stiffly only at joints, and the wax face wizened and faintly painted, coming toward her until terror snatched her awake...She

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<sup>23</sup> Frankie identifies as Frances around the time that she befriends Mary Littlejohn.

<sup>24</sup> McCullers, 390.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 391.

remembered John Henry more as he used to be, and it was seldom now that she felt his presence –solemn, hovering, and ghost-gray. Only occasionally at twilight time or when the special hush would come into the room.<sup>26</sup>

It is as though John Henry looms as the physical embodiment of the horror of being an other in the gothic American South, with his stiff wax legs and silent wax face. He haunts Frances to stake his position within her life and to continue their mutually othered friendship in his afterlife. Unlike the nightmare dreams of her sin with Barney MacKean, Frances' nightmares of John Henry are nameable and haunt her as a reminder of how otherness can be socially controlled within a gothic world.

Before his death, John Henry's friendship with Frankie allows her to re-experience childlike innocence surrounding queer gender presentations and sexualities. Without being punished for his otherness, John Henry is able to openly identify himself alongside the "freaks" of the sideshow when Frankie fears any association. "John Henry held out an imaginary skirt and, touching his finger to the top of his big head, he skipped and danced like the Pin Head around the kitchen table. Then he said, 'She was the cutest little girl I ever saw. I never saw anything so cute in my whole life...'"<sup>27</sup> Not only does John Henry favorably recall this experience with the "Pin Head" girl, but he uses her otherness to defend both his own and Frankie's.

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<sup>26</sup> McCullers, 391.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 272.

John Henry continually demonstrates his admiration for Frankie as an elder other. When Frankie tells John Henry and Berenice about the clubhouse girls' gossip, "I think that they have been spreading it all over town that I smell bad,"<sup>28</sup> John Henry makes several attempts to disprove their gossip. "I don't think you smell so bad," he said, "You smell sweet"... "I can smell you the minute you walk in the house without even looking to see if it is you. Like a hundred flowers"... "Like a thousand flowers," said John Henry, and still he was patting his sticky hand on the back of her bent neck."<sup>29</sup> Even though Frankie ignores his kind words, John Henry continues to defend her because he looks up to her.

Despite her seemingly careless attitude towards him, Frankie understands that she and John Henry are both others. Behind her aggressive exterior, she genuinely cares for John Henry and seeks moments in which the two can share their mutual otherness.

He lay freckled and small in the moonlight, his chest white and naked, and one foot hanging from the edge of the bed. Carefully she put her hand on his stomach and moved closer; it felt as though a little clock was ticking inside him and he smelled of sweat and Sweet Serenade. He smelled like a sour little rose. Frankie leaned down and licked him behind the ear...for now, with somebody sleeping in the dark with her, she was not so much afraid.

Despite the potential that this passage has for being read as a moment of adolescent sexuality, it is sexually innocent. Frankie doesn't desire John Henry sexually, but wants to find herself within his non-threatening and visible otherness. McCullers allows the reader to smell, taste, and feel John Henry's

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 265.



sweat from the musky, summer heat. Frankie licks John Henry behind the ear in order to consume as much of him as possible. Through taste and partial consumption she can begin to feel a closer connection with another outsider. A kiss on the cheek wouldn't allow her to gain any closeness with him. By tasting his skin, she not only removes something from John Henry, but replaces it with some of her own bodily fluids. Through this act she binds the two together with spit and skin, in what is a highly visceral example of non-sexual queer child relationships.

Frankie's active performance of her gender and sexuality combats social constructions of normativity. As a tomboy, Frankie is unable to dress like the feminine Southern belle that she is told to be. This, along with her middle-class status, prevents her from succeeding in the realm of "proper," upper-class femininity. Instead, Frankie adorns an adolescent form of female masculinity through pairing her bodily appearance with male-coded behavior. "Her behavior is no more feminine than her appearances. She curses, angrily threatens Berenice with a knife, and shamelessly abuses John Henry. A lack of delicacy pervades almost all these interactions, as symbolized when she attempts to extract a splinter from her foot with a butcher knife rather than a needle, as Berenice urges."<sup>30</sup> Frankie reacts to confrontation with violence and explosive anger. Each aggressive outburst, as a result, marks her less and less feminine. This anger only begins to demonstrate Frankie's frustration with her othered body. Throughout the

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<sup>30</sup> Richards, 185.

novel, she repeatedly attempts to distance herself from her otherness. When confronted by the reality of that otherness, Frankie has to rebel. To escape herself, she behaves in any way necessary that allows her to become, or merely appear as, anything other than herself.

One of the most significant ways that Frankie escapes herself is through recreating herself. Frankie changes her name twice in the novel as part of these frequent identity shifts. As she shapes herself into F. Jasmine, Frankie reminisces about the girl that she used to be before becoming a “regular grown girl.”<sup>31</sup>

The old Frankie had liked to go around the town playing a game. She walked all around- through the north side of town with the grass-lawned houses and the sad mills section and the colored Sugarville –wearing her Mexican hat and the high-laced boots and a cowboy rope tied around her waist, she had gone around pretending to be Mexican.<sup>32</sup>

Frankie’s complicates her coding as an adolescent boy by pretending to be an exoticized, racial other. This problematic “Mexican game,” in which Frankie pretends to be Mexican, encourages stereotypes through her dress and “mock Mexican” speech: “Me no speak English –Adios Buenos Noches –abla pokie peekie poo.”<sup>33</sup> For Frankie, adopting the identity of a Mexican is far less dangerous than adopting that of an African-American, even though both are racially marked and socially controlled categories. Within the framework of her rural Southern town and the complex racial history of the South, it is “easier” to pretend to be an other that is not as aggressively persecuted.

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<sup>31</sup> McCullers, 367.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 306.

Despite the problematic racial complexities of Frankie's game, McCullers figures this behavior as one of Frankie's attempts to be distanced from her otherness. Frankie innocently masks her own otherness by adopting that of another societal other. I argue that McCullers's choice to include this as one of Frankie's games is not a racist employment of "local color." Instead, this game demonstrates the racism present in Frankie's southern town. McCullers could have presented Frankie's "Mexican Game" as something like that of the "Wild Nigger's" act in the carnival sideshow, in which Frankie would have developed her character through an interaction with a white audience. This interaction would reinforce the racial stereotypes that the carnival audience encourages. The exploitation and social fascination with otherness, evident in the crowd that gathers around Frankie, is present in the treatment of all the others in this community. The "freaks" of the circus sideshow, as well as the African-American community of the town, specifically Berenice, all become "fascinating" examples of others.

When Frankie first hears of her brother's wedding, she makes an immediate attempt to hide her otherness for her first meeting with the wedding couple. Berenice observes Frankie rushing down the stairs with her pink "organdie dress on and lipstick a inch thick from one ear to the next."<sup>34</sup> In order to be accepted by the couple, Frankie feels the need to repress her non-normative femininity by hiding her day-to-day gender presentation. The thick, suffocating

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 279.

lipstick that reaches across Frankie's face reinforces the camp element of her attempts at femininity. "Gender in McCullers's texts is produced as *deliberate* masquerade, that is, as the self-conscious wearing of one's own appropriate gender: the female who performs femininity and the male who performs masculinity."<sup>35</sup> Frankie's clown like make-up is a visible marker of the grotesque and imitative nature of her gender performance. She does not actually present herself as a feminized version of the tomboyish girl she is. Instead, Frankie models herself after an amalgamation of feminine characters, ranging from Berenice to the clubhouse girls to Janice, her brother's fiancée.

Butler argues that "*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*"; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself."<sup>36</sup> This imitation is evoked as Frankie transforms into F. Jasmine, once again costuming herself into a childlike imagining of femininity. "She dressed carefully that morning in her most grown and best, the pink organdie, and put on her lipstick and Sweet Serenade."<sup>37</sup> F. Jasmine returns to her first costume and adds perfume to reinforce her female-coded performance. She then begins to craft and perform what she believes Southern femininity to be, trying to authentic the "original." F. Jasmine no longer engages in aggressive or raucous behavior, but behaves like an honorable and poised young lady.

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 69.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, 313.

<sup>37</sup> McCullers, 298.

Though F. Jasmine “performs as the fool when she aspires to ‘womanliness,’”<sup>38</sup> she believes that she will be accepted into the wedding couple because of her femininity. Convinced of this, she masquerades her new identity around the town as a final farewell. Insisting that she has “to buy a wedding dress and some wedding shoes and a pair of pink, sheer stockings,”<sup>39</sup> F. Jasmine demands that her father allow her to go shopping. As the day continues, F. Jasmine’s costume becomes more visibly grotesque. The southern heat begins to destroy the surface, melting F. Jasmine back into Frankie. “The sun burned like an iron lid on her head and her slip was stuck to her chest, and even the organdie dress was wet and clinging in spots also.”<sup>40</sup> The grotesque image of a twelve-year-old baby-dyke hiding beneath an organdie dress and a mound of lipstick, covered in running makeup and sweat, reveals the mockery of F. Jasmine’s attempts at femininity defined by heteronormative relationships and performance. Gary Richards argues that

Frankie’s masculinized body masquerading in feminine attire reaffirms that her gender-transitive performances have become so routinized that any deviations from them –even in displays of normative gender –are just as disruptive as her everyday performances, if not more so. Thus, rather than allaying Frankie’s anxieties, her attempts at gender conformity only augment her sense of freakishness.”<sup>41</sup>

Throughout her continuous attempts at reshaping and renaming her gender, sexuality, and identity, Frankie is unable to do so in a manner that allows

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<sup>38</sup> Gleeson-White, 89.

<sup>39</sup> McCullers, 299.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>41</sup> Richards, 186.

her to be outside of her “freakness.” However, through her relationship with Mary Littlejohn, Frankie begins to find herself and perform her chosen gender without attempting to imitate a specifically feminine or masculine role.

I have argued thus far that *Member of the Wedding* is a coming-out narrative within the Queer Southern Gothic subgenre of film and fiction. Frankie Addams is an adolescent lesbian who through her relationship with Berenice, her African-American caretaker, and her young, queer cousin, John Henry, is able to identify and eventually come to terms with the otherness of her emerging sexuality and transgressive gender presentation. Frankie lives in a rural Southern town that is marked by and consumed in the objectification and perverse fascination of sexual, gender, and racial others. This town is an example of how complicated racial and gender politics in the South are executed on the bodies of others, rather than a rule for the South as a whole. Despite the gothic realities that surround her, Frankie is able to successfully come to terms with her otherness without being destroyed by the social and cultural prejudices that consume the American South.

Unlike her fellow others, Frankie (Frances) is able to negotiate this gothic world and succeed through her friendship, and potential romance, with Mary Littlejohn. The novel culminates in Frances’ rejection from the wedding, and resulting behavior. She attempts runs away from her home and her otherness, but is pushed back into her gothic world. Upon her return, everything within her life changes: John Henry dies, Berenice quits and marries Honey, her father moves

them to a new house, and Frances starts a friendship with Mary Littlejohn.

Though Frances cannot physically escape her community, her relationship with Mary develops as an escape from the Gothic elements of her former world.

Frances talks about Mary as though they are in love with one another. The two read poetry together and dream of traveling the world alone. Frances defends Mary when Berenice calls her “lumpy and marshmallow-white.”<sup>42</sup> All of these elements culminate at the novel’s closure as Frances awaits Mary’s arrival for dinner.

Frances turned back to the window. It was almost five o’clock and the geranium glow had faded from the sky. The pale colors were crushed and cold on the horizon. Dark, when it came, would come on quickly, as it does in wintertime. “I am simply mad about —” But the sentence was left unfinished for the hush was shattered when, with an instant shock of happiness, she heard the ringing of the bell.<sup>43</sup>

Frances’ dark world of gothic terror is beginning to be transformed through her affection for Mary Littlejohn. In the passage above, Frances begins to state, what I argue, to be her love for Mary. Through her statement, “I am simply mad about—,” the reader can assume that Frances would have said, “I am simply mad about Mary” if the doorbell had not rung. This relationship demonstrates Frances’ queerness, as well as the possibility for her to engage in same-sex relationships as an adult. Frances is no longer the aggressive southern tomboy, instead she has emerged from the gothic shadows as an adolescent lesbian figure. McCullers allows Frances to escape this world at the cost of John Henry’s life and Berenice’s

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<sup>42</sup> McCullers, 389.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 392.

freedom. There is no complete escape from the clutches of the Gothic that is detached from trauma or terror. *Member of the Wedding* presents a narrative of the Queer Southern Gothic in which a queer character is able to survive.



## CHAPTER TWO

### QUEERING HETERONORMATIVITY: FEAR OF THE HOMOSEXUAL IN JOHN BOORMAN'S *DELIVERANCE* (1972)

Though *Member of the Wedding* provides a positive outlook for queer others of the Gothic South, it does not represent the role of intrinsically homophobic texts present in this subgenre. In order to question the presence of queer-negative texts, I will analyze representations of sexuality in John Boorman's film *Deliverance* (1972). In the previous chapter, I used *Member of the Wedding* as an establishing text of the Queer Southern Gothic because it possesses multiple themes and characters types that reappear in other texts of this subgenre. In order to expand the breadth of this subgenre, it is necessary to examine texts whose condemnation of queerness in turn reifies the category. *Deliverance* both engages in and rebels against tropes of the Queer Southern Gothic. Based upon the 1970 novel by James Dickey, *Deliverance* follows the horrific journey of four city men down Georgia's Cahulawassee River. They set out to conquer what is "just about the last wild, untamed, unpolluted, un-fucked-up river in the South,"<sup>1</sup> as a way to defend their masculinity.

*Deliverance* establishes that a "civilized," citified, Southern white man's greatest fear is to be countrified. Since this "contrifiction" occurs via the act of male anal rape, the fear is ultimately that of being emasculated through the

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<sup>1</sup> *Deliverance*, DVD, directed by John Boorman (1972; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1999).

feminine-coded act of penetration. The fear of the South is not grounded in the danger of nature or the presence of dead bodies that lie underneath the surface—two of the film’s main gothic elements—but in the fear of being consumed by queer otherness. *Deliverance*, thus, reinforces the othering of queer bodies through the overwhelming fear that it attaches to male homosexual acts.

The film is an applicable text for the Queer Southern Gothic because it pathologizes the fear of queerness that was discussed in Chapter One. I chose to include *Deliverance* because it is necessary to understand what kinds of texts exist within Southern Gothic film and fiction that demonize queer otherness. This is not to say that all other texts within the Queer Southern Gothic end successfully with their main characters triumphing over social condemnation and policing. Rather, many of them present narratives that center upon the *possibility* of success. They are not focused on the fear of queerness or the “strange horror” of it like *Deliverance* is.

*Deliverance* features the three signifying elements of the Queer Southern Gothic: a moment of identification with otherness, a mentor relationship, and the active performance of gender and sexuality. Their presence within the text, however, functions differently from those discussed in *Member of the Wedding*. The moment that signals a coming to consciousness with or of otherness is in the film’s infamous “squeal like a pig” anal rape scene. The film’s mentor relationship occurs between “straight” lead characters Ed Gentry and Lewis Medlock. Unlike the mentor relationships of *Member of the Wedding*, in which

the relationships are acknowledged mutually, Lewis is unaware of Ed's feelings towards him. Drawing upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on homosexual panic<sup>2</sup>, I argue that Ed is sexually attracted to Lewis, but fears his homosexual impulses. The third category, the active performance of gender and sexuality, is present in the repeated negotiations of masculinity and fears surrounding emasculation. This third category affects each of the four characters in how they respond to the horrors of the river. Beyond these categories, this chapter will also examine issues of race as well as themes of voyeurism, rape, and oral sex within *Deliverance*.

To begin accessing the Queer Southern Gothic elements of the film, I want to explore how particular sequences from *Deliverance* have had an impact upon America's cultural memory. *Deliverance* has influenced American notions of homosexuality and the rural American South, specifically through its depiction of anal rape. This sequence not only demonstrates the film's cultural resonance, but it also acts as the "coming to consciousness moment" within it.

The scene begins with Ed and Bobby, the only bachelor on the trip, stopping at a small clearing on the bank of the river. As the men take a momentary break, two male "hillbillies"<sup>3</sup> approach them from the top of the small

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<sup>2</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> I have placed "hillbillies" in quotation marks, on its first appearance, to show that this term comes out of *Deliverance*. It is not a word of my choosing, however it best reflects the rural characters depicted in the film. Unlike the use of "freak" and "Wild Nigger" in *Member of the Wedding*, the term hillbilly is naturalized in *Deliverance*. Other theorists have also used the term "mountain man," however I find that the term "hillbilly" best embodies how these men are coded as immoral social others.

hill brandishing a rifle and a hunting knife. The hillbillies threaten them and ask them why they are somewhere they don't belong. Ed and Bobby are immediately separated. Ed is tied to a tree with his own belt and forced into powerlessness, while Bobby is commanded to disrobe in the clearing. After the hillbillies secure Ed to the tree trunk, they run towards Bobby, gun in hand. Bobby, wearing only his underwear, is then chased up the hill by one of the men. In his feverish attempt to escape, Bobby frantically crawls up the hill. As he struggles, he becomes covered in dirt and the hillbilly pulls him down to the bottom of the hill. He starts grabbing at Bobby's chest, stating that they have a "sow instead of boar," thus feminizing Bobby in anticipation of his impending rape. The man starts shouting at Bobby to "squeal like a pig" while he spanks him from behind. "Get them britches down! Come on squeal! Squeal! Eeeeeeee! Eeeeeeee!" Images of their faces crosscut back and forth alongside their mutual squealing. "Eeeeeee! Eeeeeeeee!" The tension of the scene escalates through this crosscutting until it hits its apex as Bobby is penetrated. The second hillbilly laughs throughout the scene, while Ed writhes in agony, reaffirming his discomfort with seeing a homosexual act.

The camera distances itself from the pair as the rapist removes himself from Bobby's rectum. A close-up shot of Bobby reveals his defeat and total emasculation. The two hillbillies approach and release Ed from the tree. He falls to the ground and is angled against the zipper of the second hillbilly's pants. The hillbillies talk about "what a pretty mouth" Ed has, telling him "to pray, and pray

good.” Before he is forced to fellate the second hillbilly, Ed is saved and his masculinity preserved. Ed is rescued, not through his own efforts, but by the penetration of Lewis’ arrow. Drew and Lewis quietly approach the clearing and shoot the rapist in the back. The second hillbilly escapes, allowing the threat of homosexuality to remain lurking in the woods.

Although the rape happens to Bobby, he has already been feminized to such an extent that the heterosexual male audience can no longer sympathize with him. Bobby is unmarried, deemed a “sow,” and then penetrated. The audience’s voyeurism is instead through the eyes of Ed. Like Ed, the audience is forced, powerless, to watch the destruction of Bobby’s masculinity.

In the movie, the rape is filmed at a distance, distancing the spectator from the act, but the camera moves among the four men’s faces, focusing primarily on the horrified face (and thus gaze) of Ed, bound to a tree with his own belt, as if it situates the (heterosexual? male?) viewer in the position of the bound and threatened male protagonist.<sup>4</sup>

Ed Madden argues that the audiences’ identification with Ed allows disassociation from the homosexual acts present in the scene. “Forget Darth Vader, Freddie Krueger, Jason, and Hannibal Lecter: nothing registers true evil in the straight male mind like a buggering hillbilly.”<sup>5</sup> By directing this scene towards a white, male, heterosexual audience, *Deliverance* asserts that nothing is more

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<sup>4</sup> Ed Madden, “The Buggering Hillbilly and the Buddy Movie: Male Sexuality in *Deliverance*” in *The Way We Read James Dickey: Critical Approaches for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. William B. Thesing and Theda Wrede. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 201.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

emasculating than uncontrollable homosexuality. However, it is not the mere suggestion of homosexuality that induces such terror, but the explicit, and visual, details of male homosexual sex. The fear lies in being “topped,” attributing emasculation to penetration. In the straight, male mind, penetration symbolizes a woman’s position in heterosexual intercourse. Hence, if a man is penetrated, he occupies the “woman’s role” and is, consequently, feminized.

Pamela Barnett expands upon this notion of emasculation in relation to the novel’s historical context. She claims that

Homosexual rape is the novel’s unforgettable figuration of white male anxiety about being feminized and queered by a cultural moment. Published one year after Stonewall, it is not surprising that anxiety about emasculation would be figured as anxiety about homosexuality. Ed must vanquish both threats, thus redeeming white masculinity, if he is to live into the 1970s with manhood intact.<sup>6</sup>

Barnett believes that the impact of the novel’s cultural context is the primary reason why white male anxiety is embodied within the threat of homosexuality.

After Stonewall and with the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement, white masculinity feared the possibility of losing power to homosexual men or women.

Barnett states that in order for white masculinity to prevail, or in the least return to “normalcy,” *Deliverance*’s Ed must eradicate the possibility of homosexuality. I argue that this is crucial for Ed because of his latent homosexual desire for Lewis, evident in the film as well as the novel. In order for Ed to reject the possibility of homosexuality, it is placed upon the hillbilly and then marked as criminal

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<sup>6</sup> Pamela E. Barnett, *Literature of Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence Since the Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 35.

deviance. Thus, his attempts to destroy the queer other become justified as rightful vengeance.

Place is incredibly important to this scene's representation of homosexuality and deviance. In placing the rape scene in the middle of the Southern backwoods, director John Boorman and screenwriter James Dickey allow the rural South to function as a symbol of deviance. *Deliverance* claims that male rape is most possible outside of the city. It is the rural South, and its citizens, that breed this particular kind of deviance. Homosexuality does not exist in the masculine city. Ed Madden demonstrates the impact of region as well as the hillbilly's squeals in the rape scene, claiming that

The hillbillies in *Deliverance* are actually represented not as homosexual but as bestial. The phrase "squeal like a pig" appears in the film version, not the novel, suggesting that the hillbillies 'are pig fuckers, not homosexuals. Historically constructed as outside the bounds of proper gender roles, hillbillies were often characterized by excessive or deviant sexual behavior (rape, incest, sexual violence), so that, as Mason argues sexual deviance is seen as 'endemic to the region and its people.'<sup>7</sup>

If the hillbillies are coded as bestial, then their actions are not homosexual. This distances the four men, as well as the heterosexual male viewer, from the possible questions that Bobby's rape could provoke. Thus, because the hillbillies are willing to engage in sexual activity with anything, even animals, the homosexual reality of the act is neutralized. Madden further claims that their sexual deviance

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<sup>7</sup> Madden, 198-199.

is viewed as “endemic” to the rural South. This distances homosexuality as a purely regional problem.

Similarly, Teresa Goddu, in *Gothic America* (1997), demonstrates how racism is framed as a “Southern problem” in American literature. By indemnifying racism to the South, it is no longer something that plagues the entire country. This analytic frame can also be used to examine, specifically, how homosexuality functions in *Deliverance*. By placing homosexuality upon the hillbilly, the film signifies that queerness is only within the rural South. Homosexuality then, is no longer a national “problem” but a region specific issue dismissible because the South has proved its “backwardness” in the past.

In addition to its impact on queer representation, the scene’s location in the rural American South is crucial to the function of gothic terror. It is not just the South that adds to the horror of the rape scene, but the specific geography of this landscape and how it functions in relation to the concealment and expulsion of bodies. When the men are debating about how to dispose of the hillbilly’s body, Lewis, who is in favor of burying it, asks them to think about what could be buried underneath a river. “Man, that’s about as buried as you can get!” There is no way to know about everything that can be buried underneath the landscape. Lewis’ comment echoes Patricia Yaeger’s discussion of bodies in the Southern gothic landscape in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing 1930-1990* (2000). Yaeger identifies a “growing obsession with disfigured



bodies”<sup>8</sup> in Southern Literature that is compounded “with (a) culture of neglect and landscapes made out of throwaway bodies.”<sup>9</sup>

Lewis’s comments are embodied in a later scene of the film. In Aintry, Ed sees graves being exhumed as countless bodies are pulled out of the ground in anticipation of the river’s expansion. The river consumes bodies just as easily as it expels them. Even though the men are able to successfully conceal the bodies of both the hillbillies that they murder, there is no reassurance that they won’t emerge again. Evident in the final scene from the film, Ed’s nightmares are haunted with the gothic image of the hillbilly he has murdered floating to the surface of the river. This moment of terror, however, is less about an actual fear of the reanimation of the dead. Instead, it is about Ed’s fears surrounding the looming threat of homosexuality that is embodied in the hillbilly’s body, and his own homosexual desires towards Lewis. Upon awakening from his nightmare, Ed is comforted and welcomed back into the world of heterosexual normativity by the body of his wife. Though this final shot of the film appears to secure Ed in his heterosexuality, there is no resolution. The hillbillies and the threat of homosexuality that they represent remain, lurking in the shadows, awaiting the opportunity to haunt their oppressors.

The persisting fear of homosexuality in the film is explicitly linked to Ed’s relationship with Lewis. Their mentor relationship differs greatly from those

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<sup>8</sup> Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

examined in *Member of the Wedding*. Neither party involved wants to acknowledge what really bonds them together. Superficially, Ed fawns over Lewis because of masculine prowess: his body, his ability to hunt, and his overall mastery of nature. Although these elements warrant the relationship between them, and particularly Ed's adoration of Lewis, deeper issues complicate their friendship. I argue that Ed's affections are not merely a "man crush," as insisted in recent scholarship, but instead function as his homosexual desire. Jennifer Schell describes man crushes as something that "generally develop(s) between two heterosexual men, such as Ed and Lewis, and the term is used to denote an intense, homosocial, *nonsexual* admiration."<sup>10</sup> If Ed's admiration were nonsexual, then the audience would be told why Ed goes on "these trips" with Lewis.

To answer this, it is necessary to examine how Lewis is presented apart from Ed. First, it is important that in the film Burt Reynolds performs the part of Lewis. Reynolds's status as a national sex symbol in the 1970s reinforces Ed's visual fascination with Lewis's body. Reynolds's body is positioned as something that merits looking. His overt displays of masculinity highlight his presentation as a spectacle. Steve Neale argues that masculinity can become an erotic spectacle, claiming that in films

we see male bodies stylized and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not direct, it is heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved....scenes demonstrating masculinity are then

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Schell, "Ed Gentry's 'Man Crush': Idolatry, Power, and Love in James Dickey's *Deliverance*" in *The Way We Read James Dickey: Critical Approaches for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. William B. Thesing and Theda Wrede. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 213.

designed to minimize and displace the eroticism they each tend to involve, to disavow any explicitly erotic look at the male body.<sup>11</sup>

The eroticism of Lewis's body is thus diffused through his extreme acts of masculinity. It is difficult to identify the potential erotic voyeurism of the audience because his body has been "mediated" through the looking of the other characters.

Throughout the film, the three men continually defer to Lewis as a figure of authority. He is identified as their leader before they even get on the river. The first character driven scene of the film locates the four men as they drive up to a visibly abandoned house in search of men to drive their cars down to Aintree, where they intend to leave the river. Bobby gets out of the car and walks ahead of the others. When a man emerges from the house he calls for Lewis. For some reason Bobby isn't given the power to speak to the man himself. Despite Lewis's mystifying power over all of the "civilized" men, he consistently favors Ed. After they find drivers for their cars, Lewis and Ed ride together towards the river's entrance. Lewis drives aggressively, refusing to ask for help from the two rural men. Regardless of the potential for danger that Lewis's driving holds, Ed remains stupefied by him. As he is being thrown about the cab of the truck, Ed lovingly gazes at Lewis, waiting to be acknowledged. Moments later, upon their entrance to the river, Lewis tells Ed that his bow is in need of a repair. Lewis's knowledge of weaponry reinforces his masculinity. Ed gazes at Lewis in

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<sup>11</sup> Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 14, <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org> (accessed April 8, 2010).

response, exactly as he does in the car, as if his word is all that matters. Ed's looks are those of a lover, rather than those from a homosocial "buddy."

Ed's trust in Lewis's abilities appears when the group hits their first set of rapids on the river. Lewis and Bobby's canoe heads through the rapids first. Ed tells Drew to "watch Lewis, maybe we can learn something." Upon passing the rapids, Ed again affirms Lewis's power of him. He says, "What did I ever tell you? He's something else, ain't he!" Here Ed affirms Lewis, but also asks the others if they see him in a similar light. It is as though Ed needs to be told by Drew and Bobby that his desire for Lewis is normal and not deviant. Ed is not the only member of the group who is concerned about his affections towards Lewis. At the end of their first day on the river, Ed and Lewis leisurely talk alone in one of the canoes. Lewis is fishing with his bow, another act of grandiose masculinity. He doesn't even require conventional hunting tools to kill his prey. While Lewis is hunting, Ed reclines at the back of the canoe with his legs relaxing open. Lewis begins berating him about his bourgeois lifestyle, and asks, "Why do you go on these trips with me Ed?" "I like my life, Lewis," Ed responds. "Ya, but why do you go on these trips with me?" Ed honestly replies, "You know, sometimes I wonder about that." This scene demonstrates Lewis's own concerns about Ed's affection towards him. Neither of them can understand why Ed leaves his comfortable life to spend time with another man, especially when he doesn't have an aptitude for the outdoors. Ed's commitment to his friendship with Lewis connotes his homosexual desires. There is little to nothing for him to gain by

spending time away from his “ideal life.” Through his relationship with Lewis, and their trips together, Ed is able to gain something that is “normal” life lacks. Ed can maintain a close relationship with a man that he desires without being gay. After every trip, Ed leaves Lewis to return to the safety of heteronormativity.

When Ed’s homosexual desire reappears in the form of the “buggering hillbilly,”<sup>12</sup> his feelings for Lewis become something to be feared. Jennie Lightweis-Goff claims that “Ed’s own homosexual desire for Lewis is posited as a challenge to be overcome, a threat consummated by the mountain men’s rape of Bobby and attempted rape of Ed.”<sup>13</sup> Prior to Bobby’s rape, Ed’s homosexual desires were costumed as friendly admiration. He is no longer able to comfortably hide his desires. Thus, Ed must conquer them in order to remain successful in his heteronormative world.

The rape scene has two functions in the construction of Ed and Lewis’s relationship. First, it represents Ed’s fear of his sexual attraction towards Lewis. Second, it is what saves both Lewis and Ed from the horror of homosexuality. Within the framework of *Deliverance*, homosexuality is a fate worse than death. It is the ultimate emasculator, relinquishing all power from white, heterosexual men. In witnessing Bobby’s rape, Ed is repulsed by his own desires. This then preserves the sanctity of Lewis’s and his own heterosexuality. Ed is saved again,

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<sup>12</sup> Madden, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Jennie Lightweis-Goff, “‘How Willing to Let Anything Be Done’: James Dickey’s Feminist Praxis” in *The Way We Read James Dickey: Critical Approaches for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. William B. Thesing and Theda Wrede. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 240.

by the grace of Lewis's arrow. Just as the second "hillbilly" is about to force Ed to fellate him, Lewis shoots the other man in the back. This saves Ed's heterosexuality, and ultimately masculinity, from being "ruined" by gay homosexual acts. However, it is through Lewis's penetrative arrow that Ed is saved. Here the arrow stands in for Lewis's penis, consequently acknowledging the possibility of his own attraction to Ed. Through using a prop rather than his body, Lewis maintains his masculinity. By saving Ed, he also dispels any potential for Ed to act on his looming desires for Lewis.

The mentor relationship between Ed and Lewis is complicated through the figuring of homosexuality as a gothic horror. Ed's attraction towards Lewis is visible in the introductory scenes of the film. Later in the narrative, Lewis expresses his concerns regarding Ed's attraction. Since their trips are intermittent and Ed has a secure role within heteronormativity, there is no real fear that Ed will act upon his homosexual desires. This allows both men to ignore them and Lewis to carry on as a mentor for Ed. It is only after Bobby's rape and Ed's attempted sexual assault that the reality of the relationship becomes evident. Ed must overpower his desires and Lewis must destroy all threats to their masculinity. Through preserving both men's heterosexuality, neither has to acknowledge that they had homosexual inclinations about one another. Although Lewis's "attraction" towards Ed is less defined, I argue that through his extreme performance of masculinity he is able to deflect any assumptions.

This brings me to my next category of analysis within *Deliverance*, the active performance of otherness. Again, unlike the other texts in this project, the four men of *Deliverance* do not perform otherness in the same manner as Frankie of *Member of the Wedding*. They are not othered in the text because they are queer or racial others. They instead are others because of their status as city-folk. In contrast with the other characters present in the film, they are not residents of the rural South. As outsiders, the men have to defend their masculinity in a new context. In this final category, the four men all actively perform their otherness through their individual performances of masculinity. All are feminized to different extents because of their citification and, thus, attempt to reclaim that lost masculinity on the river.

The first two characters I wish to address are Lewis and Bobby. Under the construction of masculinity, they are foils to one another. Lewis is extreme in his desire to assert his masculinity. To the others, he is the ideal man. He hunts, conquers nature, and doesn't ask for directions. Bobby is the absolute opposite. He is the only unmarried one of the four men, allowing confirmation of his heterosexuality to remain unanswered. Bobby is further feminized through his dress and actions. When he arrives at the river, Bobby appears as an exemplary feminized "city-man." He wears a sweater tied around his neck and is unable to successfully get into his canoe. Unlike Lewis, who gets applauded for his actions, Bobby is criticized and deemed unfit for the wilderness. All of this coding occurs before Bobby's rape, which completely emasculates him. After the rape, Bobby is

so traumatized that he has to be dressed by Ed, like a child. As Bobby is emasculated, Lewis's masculinity is reinforced. Lewis is the one who saves their lives through shooting the rapist and decides how they should dispose of the body, again conquering unknown territory.

Ed and Drew, then, are not foils to one another as Bobby and Lewis are. During their time on the river, their prior masculinity or effeminacy do not escalate. Rather, Ed and Drew experience shifts in the importance of their masculinity. This is in connection to how their masculinity is useful for the overall power of the group. Throughout the film, Drew is coded as passive. He does not react to their environment or their experiences in the same manner as strongly as the others, for some reason there is less at stake for him. However, he does play a significant role in the narrative, at the beginning of the film and in his death. Drew's guitar playing initiates the men into the gothic world of the river and its inhabitants. The "Dueling Banjos" song that occurs functions similarly to the rape scene, it is what remains in the viewer's memory long after the film has ended. This scene reinforces Drew's role as a passive participant. He engages with the hillbillies, who become violent carriers of otherness, without concern.

Drew's importance is also evident when he becomes the symbol of "civilized law." After Lewis has murdered the rapist, Drew demands that they turn the rapist's body over to the town sheriff. Here Drew, again, participates within this gothic world, rather than at odds with it. He recognizes that they cannot conquer whatever forces are challenging them, which threatens the overall



masculinity of the group. In this scene, Drew is overpowered by Lewis and thus unable to assert his masculinity in the narrative. It is only through his death that Drew becomes an idealized figure of manhood. Shortly after they bury the body and return to the river, Drew falls in. The men believe that Drew dies at the hands of the second hillbilly and his gun. They cannot admit that he was a victim to the horrors of the Gothic because this would, again, threaten the masculinity of the group. When Drew's body is finally found, Ed ties him with rocks so that he will sink to the bottom of the river. During the burial, Ed says a few parting words about Drew to emphasize his strength as a father and husband. Through this, Ed raises Drew from the level of a passive character and willing participant to a symbol of idealized masculinity. "He was the best of us," Ed announces as he lets the body sink. From this, Drew then occupies the role of the masculine ideal. The horrors of the river die with Drew, for out of the four he was the only one willing to admit the powers that the queer, gothic others of the river possessed.

Similar to Drew, Ed is a primarily passive masculine figure throughout the film. It is only after Drew's death, Lewis's broken leg, and Bobby's rape that Ed is able to become a strong masculine presence. After Lewis breaks his leg, the masculine power of the group shifts to Ed. Though, by the end of the film, Drew becomes the symbol for masculinity for the men, Ed has to falsely occupy this role in order to save their lives. He maintains this new masculine power by murdering another hillbilly. Thinking that this man is actually the second hillbilly they encountered earlier, Ed shoots him with an arrow to secure the safety of the

other men. Upon killing the man, Ed examines his mouth, grabbing at his lips and gums, to check if he was the original toothless hillbilly from before. Though Ed realizes that he has killed an innocent man, Ed allows both Bobby and Lewis to believe that he has succeeded. This secures Ed's masculinity through the lie that he must perpetuate for their survival. The falsity of his masculinity is revealed toward the end of the film, when Ed begins sobbing at a dinner table. The men have finally arrived in Aintree and are now being taken care of by members of the town. All of the events of the river bombard Ed when he is finally able to realize that they have lived through the Gothic, forcing him to cry. By showing this particular "weakened" emotion, Ed demonstrates that he was never the real carrier of the group's masculinity. The four men all presented their masculinity in a specific way, in defense of their heterosexuality and the overall capabilities of the group.

By the end of the film, Lewis is emasculated and the possibility of his queer desire for Ed has been revealed. This is most evident when they arrive in Aintree and Lewis, dehydrated and wounded, grabs hold of Ed to demonstrate his faith in Ed's masculinity. Ed was never the masculine or heterosexual symbol of the film. Though he was the central character, it is his struggle with homosexual desire that threatens the heterosexuality of the group. Consistently placed in a feminizing role, Bobby, too, never held any masculine power within the film. Lastly, Drew survives, in death, as the embodiment of heterosexual, white masculinity. Though, as I have demonstrated in the previous section, he

threatened the survival of the group through his willing participation in this gothic world. *Deliverance* concludes with an imagined sense of secured heterosexual masculinity, rather than a confirmation that these men have conquered the horrors of the Queer Southern Gothic. Through its homophobic rendering of queer otherness, *Deliverance* actually gives queer bodies more power than what was seen in *Member of the Wedding*. McCullers's novel concludes with Frankie Addams coming-out and securing her position as a functioning member of her community. By inducing fear, the queer otherness present in *Deliverance* subverts power roles and leaves those who have caused this otherness to be haunted victims.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### OUTING THE OTHER: RACE, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND MASCULINITY IN RANDALL KENAN'S *A VISITATION OF SPIRITS* (1989)

Randall Kenan's 1989 novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, is a Queer Southern Gothic text that foregrounds race as a central category of otherness. Through analyzing the novel, I will examine the Queer Southern Gothic's negotiation of difference outside of sexuality. Just as it is impossible to disconnect the violent history of the South from its cultural products, an examination of the region would be incomplete without the inclusion of a text by an African-American author. Thus far, I have claimed the existence of the Queer Southern Gothic by analyzing Carson McCullers's novel *Member of the Wedding* and John Boorman's film *Deliverance*. These texts explore important components of the subgenre, most significantly the reclamation and severe torment of queer bodies. *A Visitation of Spirits* unifies these contrasting elements by simultaneously asserting the existence of homosexuality and punishing it with death. The novel narrates the tragedy of what happens when an environment, specifically one that is already marginalized, refuses to accept otherness.

*A Visitation of Spirits* tells the story of Horace Cross, a gay, African-American teenager who succumbs to the horrors that his community's homophobia creates. Horace is introduced on the night of his suicide where he has been propelled into a realm of monstrous visions and nightmares. Consumed by his feared reality of being gay, he is haunted by actual gothic demons. These

demons emerge from the dire attempts Horace has made to please his community through the denial of his homosexuality. Horace's suicide is an attempt to escape. Though, as demonstrated in the fates of John Henry and Berenice of *Member of the Wedding*, real escapes do not exist in the Gothic. Even when select others are able to survive their traumatic environments, the Gothic maintains its hold by haunting their nightmares. Through allowing Horace to haunt his community after death, Kenan demonstrates that it is impossible to escape the Gothic and, more importantly, impossible to escape homophobia.

*A Visitation of Spirits* exposes the extreme oppression and rampant homophobia present in contemporary society. Within the novel, Kenan “repeatedly illustrates how formulations of black identity based upon sexual othering are problematic and how contemporary black refusal to challenge these formulations perpetuates oppression within their community.”<sup>1</sup> Tims Creek, Kenan's created North Carolinian town, is shaped into an ideal gothic community in which the hatred and ignorance of others festers into violent repression. By moving back and forth in time, *A Visitation of Spirits* exposes how a community can destroy itself through controlling the transgressions of its citizens.

Religion functions as the central mode through which these transgressions are policed in Tims Creek. Religion affects every member of the community and is one of the driving forces behind Horace's internalized homophobia. On the

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<sup>1</sup> Maisha Wester, “Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan's Re-inscription of Difference in *A Visitation of Spirits*,” *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* 30, 4 (Fall 2007), 1035.

night of his suicide, the first place Horace haunts is his family's church. He has been brought there by demons to interact with the ghosts of the past. His experience in the church is a highly gothicized example of why Horace is unable to challenge his community's homophobia. Upon their arrival, Horace encounters his deceased grandfather giving a sermon about sexual immorality. In his sermon, Reverend Barden preaches:

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lust of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves....For this cause God gave them up into vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working with that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.<sup>2</sup>

This section of his sermon focuses on the immorality and sinfulness that accompanies homosexuality. The demons chose to bring Horace back to this moment in time in order to demonstrate the homophobic power that religion holds over Tims Creek. Horace's life is sacrificed as a result of the community's fervent religious commitment.

To seek revenge upon this erasure of homosexual lives, the demons tell Horace that he must kill his grandfather. Since Horace is unable to commit the murder, a "reaper-esque" figure emerges to complete the task.

The figure raised the shining sword and without pause brought it to bear on the thin, wizened neck that held the praying head of the old man, loping it off with such elegance that Horace first registered admiration rather than terror; and as the head rolled through the air, rolling like a football, the mouth still working, crafting holy words

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<sup>2</sup> Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 77.

to its Lord, rolling toward Horace, there came a deep rumble, louder, louder. The head hit the carpet with a dull thud before Horace, the eyes staring, and Horace heard one word from those brown lips: Unclean.<sup>3</sup>

This graphic passage indicates the gothic terror that religion can possess. The image of the Reverend's head talking after it has been severed from its body joins gothic horror with religious tenacity. The Reverend's final word, "unclean," returns this passage to the internal torment that Horace experiences. Even though this moment intends to secure revenge for Horace's death, it also confirms Horace's hatred of himself.

To further investigate the combined influence of religion, social policing, and the Gothic upon *A Visitation of Spirits*, I will examine the three signifying elements of the Queer Southern Gothic: first, Horace's moment of identification with his otherness, second, his relationship with a mentor, and, lastly, the active performance of gender, sexuality, and race. I argue that the first category is present in Horace's romantic and sexual relationship with his "boyfriend" Gideon Stone. Though the whole of Horace's relationship with Gideon functions as his coming to consciousness with his homosexuality, I mark the relationship's violent end as Horace's actual moment of identification with his otherness. Through their conflict, Horace realizes that he is gay and that his identity cannot be denied.

The mentor relationship within the novel occurs between Horace and his cousin Jimmy Greene. Jimmy, as a pastor, represents the religious oppression that constitutes much of Horace's self-hatred. However, what complicates their

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 82.

relationship is that fact that Jimmy, too, is a queer other. Though a symbol of religious purity, and thus heteronormativity, Jimmy's past homosexual experiences and present attempts to conceal his otherness align him with Horace. Their mutual otherness and internalized homophobia reinforces the impact of this mentor relationship and, consequently, the negative ramifications it has upon Horace.

The performance of Horace's gender, sexuality, and race is most evident during a flashback he has towards the end of the novel. Through using gothic apparitions, the scene reveals Horace's inner torment and explains how his identity is influenced by the pressures of his community. Beginning with his emerging sexual awareness as an adolescent, Horace experiences several shifts in his understanding of what it means to be a black, gay man.

Many of these shifts are evident in his relationship with fellow classmate, Gideon Stone. Horace's complicated relationship with Gideon begins while the two boys are in middle school. Though their relationship functions as Horace's coming to consciousness with his homosexuality, it is also a site of extreme torment. As an adolescent, whose sexuality and difference was beginning to emerge, all Horace desired was a girlfriend. "Horace became obsessed with having a girl friend. He had had a feeling that if a girl saw something in him, perhaps the reflections of a man to be, perhaps irresistible cuteness, or perhaps just the fact that somebody liked him, somebody outside his family and church



members, then he would be whole.”<sup>4</sup> It is through having a girlfriend that Horace believes he will become normal and “whole.” Even before Horace sees himself as an other he makes attempts, similar to those of Frankie in *Member of the Wedding*, to be aligned with heterosexuality. While Horace sought heteronormativity, his sexual and emotional desires for Gideon grew over time as he began to understand his homosexuality.

Upon first mention of him, Gideon is coded as a queer character. “Gideon Stone was without a doubt the prettiest boy in Horace’s class. And everyone used that term for him. Pretty...He cultivated a dainty, feminine air, delicate and girllike. His hands formed flowery gestures in midair, and he had something of a mincing walk.”<sup>5</sup> Here, Horace establishes his awareness that particular mannerisms and gender performance can make someone an other, and more accurately make Gideon an other. At this point in the novel, the boys are in the sixth grade and too young to define their sexual identity, therefore Horace’s acknowledgment of Gideon’s effeminacy does not mark his future homosexuality, rather, it shows that Horace is conscious of his difference.

As the boys enter high school, their relationship quickly changes. Horace acknowledges the ways in which Gideon’s body has matured, and how “he would be lying to himself if he said he had not been attracted to Gideon...but admitting this resulted in such overwhelming guilt.”<sup>6</sup> The moment that Horace addresses the

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<sup>4</sup> Kenan, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 97-98.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 146.

“sin” of his emerging homosexual desires, he punishes himself. Marking Horace’s continual denial and embracement of his homosexuality that occurs throughout their relationship.

As their relationship progressed, Horace “suddenly became fully aware of his responsibilities as a man, and the possibilities of his being homosexual frightened him beyond reason.”<sup>7</sup> Immediately confronted with the fear of his own homosexuality and how it could redefine his masculinity, Horace quickly ends his relationship with Gideon despite his strong feelings for him. In an act of rebellion, Horace denies his homosexuality. He transforms his identity in order to distance himself from his otherness. He reinvents himself as a jock, joins various clubs, and begins “to hang around those white students known as “the beautiful people”—the folks with money, the looks, the brains, and the attitude to be successful.”<sup>8</sup> He begins dating girls, and gets fairly serious with one girl, Gracie May Mayfield whom he sleeps with a few times, to assert his heterosexuality.

Shortly after Horace’s identity change, he encounters Gideon in the showers of the gym locker room. Gideon attempts to reach out to Horace and find out why he has been ignoring him, but is pushed away. As Horace removes his shirt, Gideon comments “My, oh my, but you have been doing some developing.”<sup>9</sup> Gideon is met with anger, “*Don’t touch me.*”<sup>10</sup> Assuming that Horace is kidding, Gideon continues with his flirtations and asks Horace to have

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 163.

sex with him in the locker room. “Come on, let’s do it here. Right here. It’ll be great. No one’s here. Nobody will know....I know you’ll like it. You want to. Come on.”<sup>11</sup> Horace meets his request with anger, disgust, and physical violence. He calls him a “faggot” and hits him in the face. Gideon immediately recoils, and condemns Horace for his denying his identity:

I know what you’re thinking. I see what you think you’re doing with your ‘new’ friends. But remember, black boy, you heard it here first: You’re a faggot, Horace. You know? You’re a faggot. You can run, you can hide, but when the shit comes down... you suck cock, you don’t eat pussy.<sup>12</sup>

Gideon reminds Horace that regardless of his white friends he will never be a white man, and that regardless of his denial of homosexuality, he will never be straight. No matter how Horace attempts to remove himself from the reality of his identity, he will never be able to change who he is. Gideon’s abrasive words not only represent the internal struggle that Horace experiences as a result of conflicting identities and self-inflicted homophobia, but also the repercussions that his actions have on those he has chosen to love.

The relationship’s negative ending reflects Horace’s inability to accept his true identity as a queer person. Horace’s initial acceptance of and eventual denial of both Gideon as a young, gay man and the reality of his own homosexuality, functions as his coming to consciousness with his otherness. This coming to consciousness between the two characters is not marked by a defined moment of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 164.

initiation through a sexual act. Rather, it is their entire relationship that represents this initiation into a gay identity as well their awareness of that identity.

Through his relationship with Gideon, Horace is able to acknowledge his queer otherness. Similarly, his mentor relationship with his cousin Jimmy Greene allows him to verbalize his difference. However, rather than providing a space in which Horace is able to form a queer identity, his relationship with Jimmy reinforces the religious policing of his homosexuality. The two characters are confronted by homosexuality when Horace, on the brink of suicide, admits to being sexually active with men. Jimmy casually responds to his declaration, “Horace, we’ve all done a little...you know...experimenting. It’s a part of growing up. It’s...well, it’s kind of important to—.”<sup>13</sup> “But it’s not experimenting. I like men. I don’t like women. There’s something wrong with me.”<sup>14</sup> “Horace, really. I have reason to believe it’s just a phase. I went through a period where I...you know, experimented.”<sup>15</sup> In this scene, Jimmy refuses to admit that Horace is gay. He reduces Horace’s homosexuality, and the experiences that have accompanied it, as just a phase that will pass in time.

Upon admitting his own homosexual experiences, Horace demands to know whether Jimmy enjoyed having sex with men. Stunned, Jimmy replies, “En...Enjoy it? Well... I ...you know. Well, the physical pleasure was... I guess

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 113.

pleasant. I really don't remember.”<sup>16</sup> Jimmy is unable to lie about the pleasure he received from his homosexual experiences. Thus, this brief moment connects Jimmy to Horace through their mutual homosexual experiences and resulting desires to reject them. Jimmy's past experiences with homosexuality influence his reaction to Horace and, though he openly admits to having sexual encounters with men, this doesn't allow Horace to see his homosexuality as something normal. In the moment of their confessions, Horace writhes with guilt while Jimmy denies any existence of his homosexuality. By denying it, Jimmy encourages Horace to see it as something that has already changed. “Horace you'll cha—Change? Well, there's nothing to change. You're normal. Trust me.”<sup>17</sup> In her 2007 essay, “Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan's Re-inscription of Difference in *A Visitation of Spirits*,” Maisha Wester states that “Jimmy's and Horace's confessions reveal that they are both trapped between the same heteronormative worlds.”<sup>18</sup> Though Wester continues by emphasizing Jimmy's problems within a heteronormative society outside of his visible homosexuality, I argue that Jimmy is also trapped as a result of his homosexuality. The two characters are bound together by their mutual refusal and frustration with their sexualities.

As the novel moves through time, Jimmy marries a seemingly perfect woman. He all too eagerly illustrates his sexual desire for her, reinforcing the falsity of his performed heterosexuality. “My tongue knew every crevice of her

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Wester, 1044.

body from the indenture at the base of her neck to the mole on her left shoulder, from the birthmark on the inside of her left thigh to the curve of her waist...from the taste of the juices of her mount to the lush redness between her legs.”<sup>19</sup>

Through his excessive descriptions, Jimmy reveals his fears of homosexual possibilities. He over-performs his heterosexuality, which in turn reveals his attempts to hide it. This performed heterosexuality is similar to Horace’s experience dating girls. Both seek these relationships in order to deny their homosexual desires.

After his wife’s death, Jimmy is able to remain celibate. I argue that his celibacy is not only a result of grief but his active and absolute refusal to engage in homosexual activity. By labeling this celibacy, Jimmy’s actions will remain unquestioned by the outside world. He can refuse the “demons of homosexuality,” without having to falsely identify within heteronormative society. It removes his sexual identity. With this additional plot element, Jimmy’s homosexuality is undeniable. As a queer character and symbol of religious control, Jimmy sympathizes with Horace but also reinforces the sinfulness of homosexuality. In honor of his religious vows, Jimmy cannot acknowledge that homosexuality is normal. Since he cannot do this for himself, he is unable to defend Horace’s homosexuality as something that isn’t “wrong” in the eyes of the Bible. Though Jimmy and Horace’s mentor relationship features many of the same elements present in *Member of the Wedding* and *Deliverance*, it does not function in the

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<sup>19</sup> Kenan, 172.

like these other relationships. Rather than provide either member of the relationship with reassurance about their otherness, Jimmy and Horace deny it. Their community's homophobia refuses to allow productive mentoring for queer characters. *A Visitation of Spirits* takes the Queer Southern Gothic elements of mentor relationships, and pushes them further into the Gothic in order to magnify the horrific reality of homophobia.

Though homophobia has impacted the central characters in *Member of the Wedding* and *Deliverance*, it has never killed them. *A Visitation of Spirits* expands the definition of otherness within the Queer Southern Gothic to show how multiple othered identities experience their gothic worlds. The categories of gender and sexuality have provided sufficient space in which Queer Southern Gothic characters can be analyzed, but *A Visitation of Spirits* demands more. In addition to analyzing the performance of Horace's gender and sexuality, it is crucial to examine the role of race in the construction of his otherness. Further, because the demands of social expectations are extreme in Horace's case, these three fields must be examined in relation to how Horace serves his community.

In order to isolate Horace's performativity, though it is present throughout the novel, I will focus on one flashback that skillfully depicts Horace's gothicized struggles with his race, sexuality, and gender. The flashback begins with Horace remembering the various gay, male actors that he worked with during a community theatre production. He recalls their physical features and the

temptation they represented, observing that “clearly here lay danger.”<sup>20</sup> From this memory, Horace is suddenly propelled back to present time and finds himself in front of the theatre’s costume barn. He enters the building on his own volition, not by the command of the demons that surround him, and gets the sense that he is not alone.

The closer he got to the light, the more he felt there was indeed someone there. He heard something and stopped stock still...He pulled back a coat, clutching the gun, and saw someone in front of a mirrored dresser, putting on makeup. He was a black man, dressed in a sun-bright costume, orange and green and blue and red, like a harlequin’s. As Horace looked into the mirror, the face appeared more and more familiar, though it was becoming obscured by milky white greasepaint. He realized. Saw clearly. It was him. Horace. Sitting before the mirror, applying makeup. Off all the things he had seen this night, all the memories he had confronted, all the ghouls and ghost and specters, this shock him the most. Stunned, confused, bewildered, he could only stare at his reflection, seeing him and him and him.<sup>21</sup>

Horace observes this second Horace cover his entire face in the white paint, after doing so the figure then motions to Horace to do the same. Horace refuses, but the apparition “put the tube in his hand and forced him to make a mark on his face.”<sup>22</sup> When Horace looks into the mirror to see himself, his reflection begins to warp and settles upon a memory of Horace “and Antonio Santangelo, in a room, on a blanket, naked, engaged in sex, almost violent, their mouths touching, their tongues probing one another, their hands grasping, clutching...”<sup>23</sup> This passage connects Horace’s internalized fears that his homosexuality would sever links to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 221.



his blackness. This apparition informs Horace that in order to be gay he must be white—otherwise he would be an imposter, as evoked through his doppelganger’s jester-like appearance.

Maisha Wester argues that in *Tims Creek*, “homophobia aligns homosexuality with whiteness and failed manhood by locating homosexuality outside of black masculine identity.”<sup>24</sup> Using Wester’s argument, Horace sees that his homosexuality is something abnormal to black masculinity. Therefore, by being gay Horace cannot be the man that his family pushes him to be. It is this thinking that drives Horace to suicide. He imagines himself as an abomination of his family and his black community because of how *Tims Creek* regulates its citizens. There is no room for people who have multiple othered identities. However, through evoking this with the Gothic, Kenan allows Horace to call out his community’s discrimination. This, in turn, disrupts how Horace’s death and his multiple identities are remembered. Kenan’s negotiation of Horace’s identities “manages to disturb our understanding of what the labels ‘black,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘man’ mean.”<sup>25</sup> Horace will forever haunt *Tims Creek* as a reminder of the destruction that homophobia and discrimination can cause.

*A Visitation of Spirits* employs the Queer Southern Gothic to demonstrate the detrimental power that accompanies racism, homophobia, and social policing. The novel expands the subgenre by propelling race from the margins of analysis to the center. This provides a structure for further discussions of race as a central

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<sup>24</sup> Wester, 1047.

<sup>25</sup> McKoy, 34.

category of otherness within the Queer Southern Gothic. The three categories of analysis of the Queer Southern Gothic all locate Horace as a queer character and allow him to understand himself as an other. However, through this understanding Horace is tortured by the reality of being gay.

In this examination of the subgenre, *A Visitation of Spirits* provides the strongest depiction of how queer bodies are punished within society. Though the central characters of *Deliverance* and *Member of the Wedding* are punished for their otherness, and potential transgressions, neither dies because of it. Homophobia manifests as demons and harpies in Horace's mind, convincing him that his only escape is through death. Kenan kills his queer character and brings him back to life to haunt those who caused his pain. *Deliverance* ends with possibility of the homosexual other becoming reanimated, but *A Visitation of Spirits* actually does it. Shannon Patricia Holland even goes as far to argue that "bringing back the dead...is the ultimate queer act."<sup>26</sup> Thus, through sacrificing Horace and telling his life through his death, the attempted erasure of homosexuality is prevented. Kenan claims the existence of queer bodies and gives them a voice that refuses to be silenced. Holland continues, stating that "by crossing the line into (an)other space, Horace comes alive, in the flesh, for the first time...he appears naked and visible and haunts our imaginative attempts to

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<sup>26</sup> Shannon Patricia Holland, "(Pro)Creating Imaginative Spaces and Other Queer Acts: Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Its Revival of James Baldwin's Absent Black Gay Man in *Giovanni's Room*," in *James Baldwin Now*, edited by Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 266.

erase him from our fruitful landscapes, and our canons.”<sup>27</sup> Though Horace becomes a tragic martyr for all othered bodies within the Queer Southern Gothic, it is through his death that one can begin a larger dialogue.

Through close examinations of *Member of the Wedding*, *Deliverance*, and *A Visitation of Spirits*, this work has located and defended the Queer Southern Gothic as a subgenre of American fiction and film. The three chapters have explored various aspects of the subgenre to example its breadth, which I have analyzed through three categories: a moment of identification with otherness, the presence of a mentor relationship, and the active performance of gender, sexuality, and race.

*Member of the Wedding* functions as the establishing text of the subgenre. The text is a foundational coming-out novel that skillfully engages the three analytic categories of the Queer Southern Gothic. *Deliverance* reconstructs the subgenre by queering heterosexuality and revealing queerness through its attempts at hiding it. Additionally, as a film, *Deliverance* performs differently from the other two texts present in this examination. Through the nature of the medium, *Deliverance* personifies the gothic threat of homosexuality. “Filming...Gothic novels immediately creates new meaning for...texts simply because of the characteristics of the different media. The monsters of...novels virtually escape definition, whereas the visual nature of film necessitates a focus

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 285.

on portraying the image of the monster.”<sup>28</sup> It is this focus that allows the gothic terror of *Deliverance* to resonate in America’s cultural memory.

*A Visitation of Spirits* expands the categories of the subgenre even further through defining race as a central category of otherness. Though the subject of race was explored in *Member of the Wedding*, it is through *A Visitation of Spirits* that the complexities of multiple othered identities are examined. The violent histories of slavery and segregation continue to haunt the American South and its cultural products. Therefore, *A Visitation of Spirits* demonstrates the persisting power of these historical facts and their impact upon present-day African-Americans in the South.

Though the focus of this examination has been on close readings of these three texts, future explorations of the Queer Southern Gothic should integrate the element of history to whatever texts are analyzed. In doing so, larger connections can be made to question the impact of Queer Southern Gothic texts upon society. Any future study of Queer Southern Gothic texts will further ground the category as a subgenre. Such study, in turn, will build a space wherein more silenced voices can be heard and texts like these can continue to be created.

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<sup>28</sup> Heidi Kaye, “Gothic Film” in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 190.

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