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DON'T ASK, DO TELL: QUEERING THE COLD WAR SOUTH

by

Nathan Glen Tipton

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Major: English

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DEDICATION

For “Muh,” who always knew I would.

And for Paul, who always knew I could.

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Many thanks go to my committee members Leslie Graff and Ladrica Menson-Furr for giving their generous time and support to this project and to my research. Special thanks go to Charles Hall, who has known me for more years than both of us care to admit, and who has pushed and prodded me to get this project finished. Verner Mitchell, my committee chair and sage adviser, has been a constant source of strength and motivation for me throughout this process, and deserves more thanks than I could possibly bestow on one person.

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My parents, sister, and brother-in-law, deserve my undying love and gratitude for cheering me on during this dissertation and always.

And, of course, my eternal thanks and love to Paul. Now it's your turn.

ABSTRACT

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During the American Cold War period, a relatively small set of narratives were generated, disseminated, and rigidly enforced. These narratives included national unity, heteronormativity, and conformity. Yet in spite of insistent conformist pressures (and intimidating threats of blacklisting for failing to conform), Cold War-era Southern writers nevertheless flouted these national narratives by insistently foregrounding their own narratives, defending their own cultural and literary traditions, and generating a panoply of wonderfully—if surreptitiously—queer presences. In so doing, these writers at once successfully evinced surface obedience to Cold War sociocultural and political normative dictates while also offering subversive critiques of these same norms.

This study examines representations of Southern queerness in selected texts from the Cold War era. It argues that even though American Cold War rhetoric, narratives, and ideology all conspired to successfully marginalize queers, the visibly queer presences in Southern writers' works during this period ensured that they would not be completely eradicated.

Eudora Welty's novella *The Ponder Heart* begins this study's discussion by firmly situating Southern queerness in the Cold War-era South. An exploration of Robert Penn Warren's poem "The Ballad of Billie Potts" and the long "tale of verse and voices" *Brother to Dragons*, along with Tennessee Williams's short story "Desire and the Black Masseur" take up the problematic intersection of race and queerness. The study concludes with a "flipped paradigm" of queer characters whose real subversion comes from being outed as Southern in Patricia Highsmith's noir novel *Strangers on a Train*.

Although there is certainly no shortage of textual explorations of Southern literature, there remains a relative paucity of queer approaches to these texts, and none that focus specifically on Southern texts published during the Cold War period from 1950-1955. This dissertation thus represents the first sustained study of how queerness was represented and negotiated in Cold War-era Southern texts.

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INTRODUCTION
DON'T ASK, DO TELL:
QUEERING THE COLD WAR SOUTH

*“Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there.
Why do they live at all”*

Shreve McCannon to Quentin Compson
William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (142, italics in original)

I would venture a guess that anyone with more than passing acquaintance to Southern literature (or, God love ‘em, William Faulkner) is at least somewhat familiar with Shreve’s famous—and famously querulous—command in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). It is, in fact, an admonition that has nagged, infuriated, frustrated, haunted, and ultimately propelled me throughout this project. Tell about the South. Tell about my South. *Tell about my queer South. What’s it like there. What do I do there. Why do I live there. Why do I live at all?*

On surface, these are all fair questions, but they’re not always easy to answer. I’ve learned to rather pithily summarize my dissertation—to any and all that dare ask—as being “about Southern writers in the 1950s.” Never mind that what I’m *really* doing is scripting another chapter in the still-evolving narrative of queer Southern history, specifically the queer literary history of the Cold War-era South, so that I can better understand my own place as both queer and Southern in this history. Yet, as I have discovered through research, writing, and commiseration with fellow queer Southern scholars, my unconsciously deliberate “elevator-speech” elision of this project’s salient queerness is not uncommon. For instance, after presenting portions of Chapter One at a recent conference devoted solely to Eudora Welty, I was approached by one of the conference organizers, who remarked in a notably hushed tone that my queer approach

was “exactly the direction in which Welty studies needs to go.” Naturally, I agreed wholeheartedly but couldn’t escape the irony that, in 2013, the act of “queering” past and present Southern writers and Southern writing is seen as an exciting proposition, but one that is also widely considered to be subversive, possibly dangerous, and something that should be undertaken cautiously and surreptitiously. This dissertation necessarily disavows any surreptitiousness, gleefully throws caution to the wind and (to coin a phrase) boldly goes where few men or women have gone before: deep into the queer heart of the Cold War South.

Finally, before I turn to “the problem” this dissertation seeks to address and confront, I want to return again to Shreve’s directive to Quentin Compson. In spite of the aforementioned trepidation and exasperation this statement has provoked in me, I nevertheless take much comfort in the fact that it is, according to Michael Bibler, part of a larger and deeply intimate conversation between two decidedly queer men. In his recent book *Cotton’s Queer Relations*, Bibler argues that Quentin and his Harvard roommate Shreve “share a homoerotic bond that has to be read as an egalitarian homo-ness because it challenges the heterosexist conventions that define male homosexuality in terms of gender inversion and masculine difference” (64). It is precisely this socially unconventional and subversive Southern “homo-ness” that that my dissertation seeks to unclose.

Primary Texts

The texts on which I have chosen to focus in this dissertation are novels, novellas, short stories, poems, and dramatic works. I have selected my discussion of Eudora Welty’s novella *The Ponder Heart* (1954) to begin my excavation of Southern queerness.

Two poetic works, “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943) and *Brother to Dragons* (1953), a “tale in verse and voices” by Welty’s mentor Robert Penn Warren are then discussed, as is Tennessee Williams’s short story “Desire and the Black Masseur” (1954). My study concludes with a consideration of suspense writer Patricia Highsmith’s first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950).

I had originally conceived this project as one that would neatly follow a temporal straight line (pardon the pun) from 1950 to 1955, years that are considered historically as the height of the American Cold War era. However, other works outside this narrow time frame presented themselves as the study progressed. For example, as I began excavating and revisiting Robert Penn Warren’s Cold War-era “tale of verse and voices” *Brother to Dragons* (1953), I detected a distinct sense of shared textual familiarity—along with a surprisingly prescient Cold War sensibility with his earlier frontier-esque poem “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” which appeared in 1943. So too are there textual reverberations in Eudora Welty’s *The Ponder Heart* (1954) that originated in its ostensible predecessor, *Delta Wedding* (1946). Because Welty’s earlier novel does not share the same level of Cold War clairvoyance as does Warren’s “Ballad,” however, I have effectively “marginalized” its presence in my discussion of *The Ponder Heart*, while including “Ballad” as an important component in my Warren chapter.

This project, of course, could also have been much larger in scope, and my selection of these sources was at least partially in giving myself manageable size and time limits. Unfortunately, these same limits necessitated my exclusion of three other important Cold War works: Ralph Ellison’s magisterial novel *Invisible Man* (1951), Tennessee Williams’s unmistakably queer play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and

Patricia Highsmith's creepy, quasi-Southern work *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). Given the wealth of queer criticism already devoted to Williams's play, my omission of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* from this study ended up being a personal decision. The excision of Highsmith's most famous text was more difficult choice, as was my exclusion of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Even though Highsmith was an openly queer Southern writer whose two most famous novels appeared coterminous with the incipient Cold War, *Ripley* stubbornly refused my attempts at overlaying a Southern scrim. Likewise, Ellison's work contains significant Southern elements but ultimately proved remarkably resistant to my "queering" efforts. That being said, the challenges presented by these two novels offer an exciting avenue for future research that I hope to undertake eventually.

Defining "the Problem": Queering the Cold War South

My notation of textual resistance here is intentional. After all, when I began this project I was, *pace* Judith Fetterley, a classic resistant reader. I had read precious few Southern texts, classic or otherwise—save a disastrous high school foray into Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*—and had actively avoided engaging Southern writers. In fact, it wasn't until my graduate school years that I was effectively introduced to the likes of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright. Reading these authors' works was revelatory, and I soon discovered a peculiarly special fondness for Southern Renaissance writers and writing. According to historian C. Vann Woodward, this particular period stretched from 1929 to 1955 and represented not only what he called a "flowering of the literary arts—poetry, fiction, and drama" (222), but also supplied a prolonged defense against persistent negative national conceptions of and about the "problem South."

The ostensible origins of this “problem South” notion can be located in H. L. Mencken’s much-maligned essay “The Sahara of the Bozart,” which first appeared in November 1917. In “Sahara,” Mencken assailed the South as being, among other things, a cultural wasteland that was full of people who were “crass, gross, vulgar, and obnoxious” and who evinced an “almost pathological estrangement from everything that makes for a civilized culture” (161). Predictably, Mencken’s work unleashed a firestorm of criticism from outraged Southerners, but it also essentially sedimented in the minds of many Americans a lingering (and still existing) perception that the South was an intractable national problem.

For the most part, writers and intellectuals during the Southern Renaissance successfully attempted to confront and address this “problem” by exploring what Richard King has called the ambivalent and ambiguous relationship between present and past. King, the author of what is perhaps the definitive book on the Southern Renaissance, explains that for these writers, “It was vitally important for them to decide whether the past was of any use at all in the present; and, if so, in what ways?” (7). What I find troubling about King’s summation here is that this protracted engagement with the South’s “present past” certainly did not end in 1955. Nor do I agree with his dismissive note that, after 1955, “the apogee [of Southern writing] had been reached” (4), the best Southern writers were “either dead or past their creative peaks” (3), and that the South was “preoccupied with ‘other voices, other rooms’” (3). Indeed, the very fact that King overtly references—but does not give actual attribution to—queer Southern writer Truman Capote’s debut novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) is particularly

problematic because it gives the impression that King doesn't believe that "other voices" deserve incorporation in the august Southern literary canon.¹

I respectfully beg to differ, precisely because the emergence of these "other voices" in what King would consider the waning stages of the Southern Renaissance seems to indicate that, to gloss on Mark Twain, rumors of Southern writing's demise were greatly exaggerated. I do, however, agree with King's underlying assertion that these "other voices" heralded a perceptible change in the way Southern writers negotiated their "place" in the rapidly changing American sociocultural and political landscape of the Cold War era. After all, the Cold War not only signaled the *per se* end of the Southern Renaissance, but it also reinvigorated the "problem South" conundrum. As historian Alan Nadel has observed, during the Cold War period a relatively small set of narratives were generated, disseminated, and rigidly enforced. These narratives included national unity, heteronormativity, and conformity, and Nadel notes that within these narratives lay the power to "unify, codify, and contain—perhaps *intimidate* is the best word—the personal narratives of its population" (4).

By insistently crafting their own narrative, creating their own tradition, and clinging stubbornly to their own identity, Southerners presented a huge problem for and direct challenge to this unifying American Cold War narrative. Indeed, Jennifer Greeson notes in her recent study that the South has consistently and historically displayed a remarkable fluidity in which "'our South' aligns with and diverges from 'the United States' writ large, creating a symbiotic *ideological juxtaposition* in which each term is defined by reference to the other. Such fluidity of meaning is terrible for conceiving a

¹ It should be pointed out that King also excludes from his study Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter.

coherent political program or a rational social analysis, but it is wonderful for generating works of the imagination” (1, emphasis in original). Wonderful, granted, until this “remarkable fluidity of meaning” conflicted directly with the nation’s overarching conformist narrative, and worse even when the “ideological juxtaposition” undergirding this fluidity foreclosed in its “works of the imagination” the presence of a distinctively queer Southern otherness. Yet in spite of insistent conformist pressures (and intimidating threats of blacklisting for failing to conform), Cold War-era Southern writers nevertheless flouted these national narratives by generating a wide panoply of wonderfully—if surreptitiously—queer presences. In so doing, these writers at once successfully evinced surface obedience to Cold War sociocultural and political normative dictates while also offering subversive critiques of these same norms.

Some Important Terms: Cold War, Queer, and Southern

Like the Southern Renaissance discussed previously, the temporal and definitional contours of the Cold War are surprisingly elusive. As historians Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert have observed, the “Cold War” was labeled as such in 1947 by Bernard Baruch but for all practice purposes began on August 6, 1945, when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan and ushered in a nearly 50-year period of anxiety over nuclear annihilation. Yet the Cold War was never simply about fears of a nuclear holocaust. Kuznick and Gilbert explain, for instance, that in the nascent Cold War:

What is not new or unique to politics of the Age of Cold War is character assassination, opportunism, anticommunism, smear, and guilt by association—in other words, “McCarthyism”—although its late 1940s and 1950s practitioners, including not only Nixon Republicans but Harry Truman and many of his Democratic colleagues, took these practices and turned them into an art form. During its most virulent phase, the firing of respected professors, including top scientists from major universities, blacklisting of Hollywood celebrities, persecution of policymakers and

lower-level government employees, targeting of homosexuals, and celebration of the stoolpigeon as the citizen par excellence, induced widespread fear and temporarily silenced some of the nation's most creative voices. (7)

In the 1960s and 1970s anticommunist rhetoric remained high, but fears of nuclear holocaust had subsided drastically. These fears, in fact, did not become paramount until Ronald Reagan's presidential tenure in the 1980s. Ironically, Reagan's unrelenting recapitulation of possible nuclear warfare coincided with the nostalgia narrative he attempted to foist on Americans especially during his 1984 presidential re-election campaign. Historian David Lowenthal has remarked that though this campaign, which was prominently highlighted by the "It's morning again in America" political advertisement, "Reagan revived mythic 1950s American family values and upbeat optimism" (33). As Lowenthal points out, this nostalgic rhetoric for a renewal of 1950s optimism and "family values" was for many Americans entirely fallacious due in large part to Reagan's own presidential policies that were responsible for shuttering mental institutions, slashing social programs, and ostracizing homosexuals. Yet as this dissertation proposes, while Cold War rhetoric, narratives, and ideology all conspired to successfully marginalize queers, it nevertheless failed to eradicate them completely.

My repeated use of "queer" here and throughout my project is ultimately a personal and personally validating decision. Etymologically, I defer to the contemporary definition of the term that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, first appeared in 1914. "Queer" is thus defined adjectively as an American colloquialism meaning "Of a person: homosexual. Hence: of or relating to homosexuals or homosexuality." The *OED* goes on to note that:

Although originally chiefly derogatory (and still widely considered offensive, esp. when used by heterosexual people), from the late 1980s it began to be used as a neutral or positive term (originally of self-reference, by some homosexuals; cf. *Queer Nation*) in place of gay or homosexual, without regard to, or in implicit denial of, its negative connotations. In some academic contexts it is the preferred adjective in the study of issues relating to homosexuality (cf. queer theory); it is also sometimes used of sexual lifestyles that do not conform to conventional heterosexual behaviour, such as bisexuality or transgenderism.

I understand but do not agree with the *OED*'s repeated conflation of "queer" with "homosexual" precisely because it necessarily limits desire as being entirely dependent on sex vis-à-vis sexual behavior or, as the *OED* puts it, "sexual lifestyles." Moreover, while I am somewhat placated by the *OED*'s nod to queer theory—something I will discuss in the following section—I believe, like many other queer theorists, that "queer" can and should be used more generally, coterminous with non-normative or "other." This effectively liberates the term from being collapsed into the essentializing conceptual categories of sexual identity or sexual orientation. In this way, I subscribe to a particular strand of queer theory that, as Tim Dean and Christopher Lane have observed, "suggests that the commitment to identity is itself part of the problem, and that sexuality should be understood differently. . . . Rather than offering a politics based on individual identity, this school of thought advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms—a politics that connects gender and sexual oppression to racial discrimination, class inequities, ethnic hierarchies, and national chauvinism" (7). Ultimately, then, I argue that "queer" demarcates a desire that is, as Rachel Adams concludes, not contingent upon an "opposition to normative behaviors and social distinctions" but, rather, "counters a range of normalizing regimes and calls into question the knowledge/power system from which identity-based categories are derived" (556).

I would add that while I identify many of the characters in my primary texts as queer, I am nevertheless hesitant to apply this same appellation to their creators. In fact, while I have drawn upon and utilized biographical information about these writers when appropriate, as my colleague and friend Gary Richards has stated in his fine study *Lovers and Beloveds*, I make “no stronger arguments about these persons’ sexualities than that their fiction consistently displays a keen preoccupation with issues of sexual and same-sex desire in particular” (6). Thus, this study focuses primarily on how these writers textually represent and negotiate Southern queerness rather than attempting to label the writers themselves as queer.

Having said this, if I am hesitant about wholesale queer labeling, this hesitation certainly does not extend to identifying and categorizing these same authors and their textual creations as Southern. Interestingly enough, though, in terms of actual meaning, “Southern” is at least as elusive, problematic, and contentious as is “queer.” For example, after spending nearly fifteen pages of his recent Mencken-esque “manifesto” *Better Off Without ‘Em* trying merely to establish the South’s geographical contours, Chuck Thompson finally concludes, with no small amount of exasperation

With Texas standing as the most debatable omission, the Appalachian anomaly of West Virginia as the most contentious inclusion, and Florida the most difficult case of all, I eventually settled on a South encompassing twelve contiguous states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia. Though if border Missourians in Dunklin, Pemiscot, and Ozark counties feel unhappy about being left out, they have my blessing to crash the party. (xvii)

Geography, of course, plays an important part in defining what are Southerners and what is “The South.” However, as the recent spate of articles, books, courses, academic

programs, and entire academic departments devoted to “Southern Studies” attest, there is a great deal of definitional ground still to be covered.

Southern studies scholar Leigh Anne Duck, for instance, calls the South “the nation’s region” and observes in her eponymous book that the South has long been viewed as a site of “enduring regional distinctiveness,” so much so that it has become imbued with “profound cultural alterity” (9). This distinctiveness and alterity, not surprisingly, provided the undergirding for the South’s longstanding perceptible difference, a region both a part and apart from the overarching American nation.

What exactly comprises this Southern “distinctiveness” and “alterity,” however, is something that remains consistently up for debate. As Larry Griffin has pointed out, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all definition of Southern distinctiveness or alterity or, for that matter, difference writ large precisely because “when we define ‘the South’ and when we ask how it differed from America, we must understand what we are doing, and what we are doing is affirming and thereby imposing on ourselves and on others “*a South*” and “*an America*” that are seamless, unitary, undifferentiated notions—“*a South, an America; one South, one America*” (62, italics in original). Interestingly, it is exactly this same imposition of a unitary self/other binary that I struggle with in queer theory, and I find myself enmeshed in this same conundrum here. As an “essential” Southerner, I want to believe that my identity is linked rather tidily to the concept of, in Griffin’s words, “*a South.*”

But then I am forced to stop and reconsider. It is true that I am happy to declare myself (especially to Northerners) as “*a Southerner.*” I was, however, born and raised in, and still identify myself as *being from*, south Louisiana. It is precisely through this

rhetorical identification—this *being from*—that I am able to accede to the proposition Griffin lays out above. Simply put, Griffin argues that rather than there being one monolithic South, there are instead multiple Souths with multiply distinct cultures. There is an Appalachian South that differs drastically from the Deep South; a Coastal South that defines itself differently from the Mid-South; a Cajun and Creole Louisiana South that is decidedly dissimilar from the Tidewater Virginia South; and so on. This infinite variety of “Souths,” in fact, reinforces Jennifer Greeson’s notion of the “remarkable fluidity” undergirding Southern identity and, I argue, effectively and fundamentally transforms the South into an undeniably queer place.

The authors of my primary texts, in fact, represent exactly these multiple Souths. Eudora Welty was born and lived the majority of her life in Jackson, Mississippi. Robert Penn Warren was born and raised in the Cumberland foothills of Guthrie, Kentucky, and lived and worked in Nashville, Tennessee and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Tennessee Williams was born in the “hill country” of Columbus, Mississippi, raised in St. Louis, Missouri and also lived in Memphis and New Orleans. Patricia Highsmith was born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas.² What unifies them, though, is their cognizance, understanding, and translation of the shared sense of place, history, and difference that makes their texts queerly Southern.

Project Outline

This project follows what is best described as an idiosyncratic format. I have chosen “‘You Aren’t a Bit Straight’: Queering the Cold War South in Eudora Welty’s

² Welty attended college in Wisconsin and also lived in New York City and San Francisco. Warren also lived abroad, including stints in England and Italy, and lived the final years of his life in Vermont. After becoming famous, Williams relocated to New York City. Highsmith attended high school and college in New York City before finally moving to France and, finally, to Switzerland.

The Ponder Heart,” to serve as Chapter One. In this chapter, I establish the rough contours of Southern queerness at the height of the Cold War era by providing a broad theoretical overview of how concepts of “queer” and “Southern” intersected during this contentious time period in Southern and American history. To illustrate and properly situate this intersection, I employ a queer reading of Uncle Daniel Ponder in Welty’s comedic novella *The Ponder Heart* using queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussions of “the closet” and “homosocial desire,” as well as Judith Butler’s concept of “performativity,” as useful touchstones showcasing the multifarious ways in which queer desire was expressed (or suppressed) in the Cold War South. In addition, with contributions from historians such as Alan Nadel, Pete Daniel, and Elaine Tyler May, among many others, Chapter One also includes an extensive sociocultural and historical overview of the South’s precarious place in the larger confines of Cold War America. Finally, the problematic discourses of exceptionalism and difference are also mapped through the lens of Southern cosmopolitanism as explicated by Leigh Anne Duck and Noah Mass, as well as by Southern queer theorists John Howard and William Mark Poteet.

The thorny issue of race and its intersection with Southern queerness is first explored in Chapter Two, “Queer Be Dragons: Homoerotic Identity and Cold War Poetics in Robert Penn Warren’s ‘The Ballad of Billie Potts’ and *Brother to Dragons*.” Like Welty’s *Delta Wedding*, Warren’s “Ballad” was written during the wartime years but thematically anticipates many of the social, racial, and moral prohibitions that would become highly visible in the Cold War era, and on which Warren would focalize explicitly in *Brother to Dragons*. In this chapter I begin delving into the concept of what

Warren calls “black lust,” or queer miscegenation, a subject that has received little if any historical or textual exploration.

I continue my exploration of queer miscegenation in Chapter Three, “What’s Eating Anthony Burns?: Dismembering the Bodies That Matter in Tennessee Williams’s ‘Desire and the Black Masseur,’” but superimpose my discussion with the overlay of lynching. For this explication, I draw upon African American literary theorists Trudier Harris, Toni Morrison, and Robyn Weigman. Integral too for this discussion are contributions from film semiotics scholars Kaja Silverman and Richard Dyer, whose interpretation of the “male gaze” provides the important undergirding for my assertion of a homoerotic desiring component in the lynching act.

Finally, my study concludes with a discussion of an author and her characters that are proudly queer but problematically Southern. In Chapter Four, “Others From a Southern Mother: Southerning the Queer in Patricia Highsmith’s *Strangers on a Train*,” I move my discussion from race to place in order to show how, in the Cold War era, the South’s prominence as a regional other was widely interpreted as and conflated with queerness. I use Highsmith’s first novel, *Strangers on a Train*, to illustrate how this conflation was physically and psychically borne out through characters that are grotesque, murderously pathological, masochistic, or sexually deviant. But while in the Cold War era these characters would certainly be considered as dangerously “queer,” my chapter argues that what makes these characters truly subversive and truly uncontained is when they “come out” as Southern.

Contributions to the Field

Although there is certainly no shortage of textual explorations of Southern literature, there remains a relative paucity of queer approaches to these texts, and none that focus specifically on Southern texts published during the Cold War period from 1950-1955. This is the first sustained study of how queerness was represented and negotiated in Cold War-era Southern texts. Its intersection with both regional and national history offers a unique way to examine how Southern queerness “came out” in various manifestations during this contentious period in American history. This dissertation would interest scholars of literature, Southern studies, queer studies, regional and American history, and popular culture.

CHAPTER ONE
“YOU AREN’T A BIT STRAIGHT”:
QUEERING THE COLD WAR SOUTH IN
EUDORA WELTY’S *THE PONDER HEART*

Bless Eudora Welty’s heart. This tried-and-true Southern expression containing equal measure of genuine sympathy and subtle condescension seems particularly fitting for the person whose life and literary works have, according to Michael Kreyling, at once elevated her to the status of an iconic “official fixture in the history of American civilization” (“Free Eudora!” 758) while also enmeshing her—albeit unwillingly—in the contentious vortices of race, social class, politics, and gender. Even today, for most Americans (and especially Southerners), these vortices represent complicated issues that are not easily discussed, let alone resolved, in company (polite or otherwise). Welty, for her part, dealt with these issues in typical Southern fashion by deploying what Kreyling has brilliantly termed a “velvet hand-grenade” approach, deftly using broad humor and ebullience to counterbalance her disturbing and often grim storylines (“Free Eudora!” 760).

While readers can see this velvet hand-grenade being tossed liberally throughout Welty’s literary oeuvre, it is definitely and almost defiantly lobbed in the obliquely lighthearted Cold War-era novella *The Ponder Heart* (1954). To extend this metaphor a bit more, although this piece contains within it numerous targets including, but certainly not limited to, fraught terrains of class distinctions, the domestic sphere, feminism, inexorable progress and, of course, marriage, it could be easily argued that the intended primary bulls’-eye of Welty’s grenade is men or, more accurately, one man in particular: Uncle Daniel Ponder.

While many of Welty's early works including *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Delta Wedding* modestly peek inside the closet of incipient sexual otherness in the South, Welty's comic novella *The Ponder Heart*—which appeared in 1954—utterly blows the closet door off its hinges. Indeed, with its hilariously capering, almost campy dialogue, along with the assorted outbreaks of mayhem and foolishness that infect the denizens of Clay, Mississippi, *The Ponder Heart* could easily be considered the queerest of Welty's works. This is no small feat, considering the profound and bizarre expressions of otherness that populate Welty's canon prior to *The Ponder Heart*.

For example, in his essay “Queer Welty, Camp Welty” Axel Nissen reaches back to the short story “The Hitch-Hikers” (1939) and effectively unclosets Tom Harris, the story's protagonist, as decidedly “queer in our eyes, though not necessarily in the eyes of the Mississippi of the 1930s” (217). Nissen reaches this conclusion judiciously by suggesting that though Harris may not be gay (or, for that matter, would not recognize or identify himself with that label), his “chief emotional investment is in another man,” the tramp Sanford, to whom he demonstrates a rather obvious queer attraction (“Queer Welty” 217).

The thematic queer attraction noted by Nissen reaches new heights in *Delta Wedding* (1943) but certainly does not end there. Susan Donaldson has stated that six years after the publication of *Delta Wedding*, the same porous boundaries and hierarchies of community and marginality are repeatedly broken down in Welty's second short story cycle *The Golden Apples* (1949) “despite the sometimes suffocating presence of the community” and its predominating role in creating, guiding, and carefully governing discourse (496). As a result of this breakdown, according to Donaldson, Welty's

characters become transformed into “emblems of transgressed boundaries and hidden possibilities” that are “simultaneously foreign and familiar” (500).

These notions of carefully governed discourse and characters that are “simultaneously foreign and familiar” are especially applicable both politically and socioculturally in *The Ponder Heart*, which appeared concurrent with a particularly contentious and portentous episode in American history: the McCarthy/House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings. These hearings were the most prominent part of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy’s dogged campaign, beginning in 1950 and lasting for over four years, to rid the country of not only any and all suspected communists (popularly derided as “Reds” or, more frequently, “commies”) but also a wide array of allegedly sympathetic “fellow travelers” including homosexuals that, like communists, were thought to be effectively hiding in plain sight.

During the Cold War period, there were of course manifold social prohibitions about displays, or even perceptions, of queerness. Alan Sinfield, for example, has noted that during this time, cultural constructions of the queer were beginning to become more concretized, even if they were almost always filtered through the more narrowly focused and universally demonized purview of homosexual desire. Historian Marc Stein has also observed that Cold War ideologies about sexuality were extremely conservative, and almost uniformly affirmed the “supremacy of adult, heterosexual, monogamous, marital, familial, domestic, private, and procreative forms of sexual expression” (494).¹

¹ See especially John Howard’s pathbreaking work on the history of queers in the South, particularly his “Southern Sodomy; or, What the Coppers Saw” and *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. As well, see Margot Canaday’s numerous explorations of sexual citizenship in and around the Cold War years including, but not limited to, “Who is a Homosexual?: The Consolidation of Sexual Identities in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Immigration Law,”

Furthermore, according to Robert Corber, the dominant discourse of the Cold War period claimed that homosexuality and lesbianism not only “represented developmental disorders” which caused them to be maladjusted and thus alienated from mainstream American society, but it also tried to show that “homosexuality and lesbianism promoted communism and fellow traveling” (*In the Name* 8). In short, homosexuality during the wartime and Cold War eras represented an across-the-board threat both to national security and to the compulsory heterosexuality model *cum* “cult of domesticity” imposed on American society generally and the American family specifically.²

In fact, Sharon Deykin Baris has noted that, without actually naming names, Welty utilized her darkly comic novella to call to mind “certain famous or infamous political and legal cases” during the mid-1950s (181). Baris continues, “With seeming irrelevance, the narrator’s comments include references to well-known events, social and commercial developments, and elements of common usage in conversations and newspapers of the period. Welty thus definitively locates her novel’s action in the culture of its time” (181).

It should be noted that while Baris name-checks the McCarthy hearings as part of the overarching legal apparatus operating during the Cold War period, her manuscript’s primary focus is on how Uncle Daniel’s trial in *The Ponder Heart* has surprising echoes to the infamous Julius and Ethel Rosenberg trial. This trial, which began in March 1951

“Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Social Citizenship under the 1944 G. I. Bill,” and *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*.

² For a comprehensive exploration of how the Cold War “cult of domesticity” was created and promulgated in American society, see especially Elaine Tyler May’s seminal work *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. The notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” was first explored in Adrienne Rich’s classic essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”

and ultimately climaxed with the couples' execution in June 1953, ostensibly centered on charges of espionage but in reality became a much larger indictment of American anti-Communist anxieties. Not coincidentally, the trial also provided Senator McCarthy with the impetus necessary to begin his latter-day witch-hunt against commies and queers.

Andrew Ross has explained that the Rosenbergs were perceived of as a social threat “not because they harbored violent and subversive anti-social or revolutionary views (they did not seem to), but because they were *too* much like an ordinary, patriotic American couple; they represented the *indifference* of ‘Americanist’ Communism not only to its Bolshevik origins, but also to its alleged Fifth Columnist role in the Cold War” (62, emphasis in original). Simply put, the idea that Communists could be living next door or even displaying patriotic obeisance was terrifying for most Americans, and it was precisely this fear that allowed governmental operatives to create and promulgate an atmosphere of constant, hyper-vigilant paranoia.

Although this paranoia is not foregrounded in Nissen, Donaldson, and Baris's illuminating—if wildly disparate—interpretations, it nevertheless undergirds these scholars' overarching explorations of personal biography, deceptive appearances, and boundary crossing in Welty's works published during this contentious time period in American history. It is precisely this thematic undergirding that informs my own reading of *The Ponder Heart*, in which I argue that lurking underneath Welty's hilariously comic commentary on small-town Southern life are two critical components shaping Welty's life during the 1950s. First is a surreptitious novelistic nod to Welty's torqued romantic relationship with homosexual paramour John Robinson, a relationship that ebbed and flowed during the 1930s and 1940s but finally fizzled in 1951. Second, *The Ponder Heart*

also contains elements that brilliantly if covertly catalog, comment on, and critique broader paranoia-laced Cold War social upheavals.

In her incisive contribution to *Eudora Welty and Politics*, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw has observed that Welty's "witnessing a World War in the 1940s, McCarthyism in the 1950s, and the violent resistance to the civil rights movement in the early 1960s all greatly lessened whatever trust she had had in the political macrocosm and bolstered her belief in the microcosm as the only efficacious, viable sphere of human understanding and negotiation" (38). While it is true that Welty took pains throughout her life to be at best tangentially active in and with politics, there is also ample evidence of prevailing political events throughout her works, even if this evidence is frequently and carefully secreted away behind deceptively innocuous, placid façades.

In *The Ponder Heart* this façade (or, *pace* Prenshaw, microcosm) is the small, quaint town of Clay, Mississippi and its rural environs. As Robert Holland has pointed out in his early critical appraisal of Welty's novella, the community of Clay represents a "closed society of intimate relationships" where "everybody is quite at home with everybody else" (353). Holland extrapolates on this close-knit community familiarity by first offering a clever riff on David Riesman's influential early Cold War sociocultural work *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950), explaining that "There is no lonely crowd in Miss Welty's South" (353). In other words, according to Holland, the South portrayed by Welty is a region free from the rigidified social institutions and neurotic alienation from work and family life experienced by the

majority of Cold War-era Americans. Put more simply, and to borrow from the 1980s sitcom *Cheers*, Clay is a place where everybody knows your name.³

However, as Holland acknowledges, this hidebound familiarity also came with notable pitfalls, foremost among them the fact that not only does everybody know your name, but they also know everything about everyone else. He observes, for instance, “The lineaments of these people have been shaped by long cultural involvement. Their idiosyncrasies are themselves long-lived, and even their crudities and enormities are understandable only in the context of tradition” (353). These long-standing cultural idiosyncrasies, crudities, and enormities are in fact precisely the mechanism by which Southerners had historically set themselves distinctly and resolutely apart from overarching “American assimilationist” narratives.⁴

Interestingly enough, this same idiosyncratic mechanism also ostensibly created a twofold sense of paranoia. Southerners, who tacitly accepted expressions of non-normativity (especially those expressed by family members), nonetheless lived under constant fear of having this same family “business” publicly exposed. Conversely, Americans writ large raised suspicious eyebrows over the South’s regional quirkiness, its laissez-faire attitude toward difference, and its defiant separatist ethos. Taken together,

³ In fact, throughout *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman specifically and repeatedly points out the South’s deviance from the American sociocultural landscape. For example, he observes, “It remains true, as when Tocqueville was here, that Americans, at least outside the South, lack feudal traditions, a strong established church, and extended family ties; they are people who believe themselves to be pragmatic, and sometimes are; on the whole (again outside the South) they tend to be optimistic for themselves, their children, their fair city, and their country; and they are mobile in terms of rank and region” (xix).

⁴ There is no shortage of critical exposition on Southern exceptionalism that explores both its good and bad aspects. In addition to W. J. Cash’s classic tome *The Mind of the South*, more recent appraisals include Michael Kreyling’s “Southern Literature: Consensus and Dissensus” and his “Toward ‘a New Southern Studies.’” Also see Houston Baker Jr. and Dana Nelson’s preface to the *American Literature* special issue “Violence, the Body, and the South.”

these attributes were viewed as threatening for those social and governmental entities seeking to formulate and adjudicate a unified, coherent American identity.

In fact, by simultaneously rejecting and accepting sociocultural variation, Southerners created for themselves a sense of cosmopolitanism that, as Noah Mass has explained, grew out of tensions between the South as “the internalization in U.S. culture of that which is openly disavowed and the South as the domestic space upon which American imperialism and conquest can be rehearsed” (226). Mass goes on to point out that “provincial cosmopolitans” such as Welty and many of her literary contemporaries worked judiciously “against the grain of regional parochialism in their texts and sought to make interventions in contemporary certainties about what counted as southern” (227). In the 1950s in particular, Southerners employed this cosmopolitanism as a way to not only articulate but also to negotiate their *lived experience* in these two supposedly competing worlds (past/present, private/public), which in turn allowed them to carve out a liminal space in the American containment narrative.

Not surprisingly, though, the South’s “in-between-ness” presented a profound conundrum for, and a monumental affront to, arbiters of national conformity and containment. Writing about what he terms “containment culture,” historian Alan Nadel has observed that in an attempt to keep the Cold War narrative both literally and figuratively straight, “containment equaled containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression” (5). More specifically, with regard to the South’s insider/outsider status in the American psyche, sociologist Wini Breines also sees Cold War containment as a “defense of masculinity and whiteness” and notes that “the changes that accompanied the

formation of an advanced capitalist society were perceived as threats from those outside American borders and from those who had been excluded within those borders, women and blacks and homosexuals” (10).

The Ponder Heart prominently features these border crossers by foregrounding among its coterie of hilarious, over-the-top denizens a wide array of strong women ranging from the deceptively ditsy Bonnie Lee Peacock to narrator Edna Earle Ponder, as well as blacks such as Narciss, the Ponder family’s domestic “help.”⁵ Welty’s novella also introduces its readers to a number of sexually ambivalent characters that could easily be interpreted as resolutely queer. For example, itinerant drug salesman Mr. Springer manages to stubbornly elude Edna Earle’s simmering desires in favor of keeping close company with Uncle Daniel Ponder who, in spite of his almost Peter Pan-esque playfulness, nevertheless displays a readily observable (if never actually acknowledged) polymorphous sexuality. In so doing, the novella becomes a testament to Welty’s seeming defiance of the overarching American containment narrative and its firmly embedded “cult of domesticity,” which dictated that men would be the sole economic breadwinners while women would take care of the “home front.”

Writing about this Cold War-era “cult,” historian Elaine Tyler May has explained in her pathbreaking work *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* that the typical 1950s household was ostensibly designed and regulated according to the following structure: “In its idealized form, the home would contain sexual enjoyment, material comfort, well-adjusted children, and evidence of personal success for husbands

⁵ For an insightful exploration of Southern household African-American domestics and their interaction with white employers, see Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help*. Although Stockett’s work is fiction, it nevertheless provides a surprisingly realistic portrayal of black/white relations in the late Cold War South.

and wives who performed well their clearly defined roles” (164). May’s inclusion of “sexual enjoyment” within this matrix is surprising given the Cold War era’s atmosphere of systemic, angst-ridden sexual repression. This repression stemmed in large part from fallout following the publication of Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s groundbreaking works *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953).

Kinsey’s works challenged conventional beliefs about sexuality and shone a bright light onto subjects that had previously been regarded as taboo, including but certainly not limited to male homosexual experiences, marital sex, and sadomasochism. In so doing, they created a public sensation but also drew almost immediate condemnation from sociopolitical commentators who viewed Kinsey’s findings as exacerbating what was seen as an American “masculinity crisis” that manifested itself as an epidemic of moral corruption, psychological immaturity, and male emasculation in the postwar and Cold War years. As May has observed, this crisis was born out of fears that, because of the war, returning veterans would be effectively feminized, unable to conform to gendered societal expectations, and incapable of resuming their positions as “responsible citizens and family men” (76).

This masculinity crisis was further complicated, ironically, by the duplicitous role female sexuality played in the Cold War era. Alan Nadel has explained that female sexuality had the burden of supporting the monolithic goals of cold war America by at once attracting and stimulating male sexual drives while also not gratifying them, thus “simultaneously valorizing and domesticating male sexuality” (117). This bifurcation of male sexuality was in fact central to the anxieties fomented by Kinsey’s studies. In her study on Kinsey’s effect on the sexual character of American males, Miriam Reumann

explained that *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* “offered the perfect site around which Americans’ inchoate fears about sex could crystallize. It revealed that virtually all American men violated the dominant culture’s code of respectability, along with the law, by engaging in sexual activities outside of marriage” (21).

Kinsey’s findings, in fact, provoked a wrenching revision of American sexual mores that both enlightened and enraged readers and reviewers across class and educational lines. As historian Estelle Freedman has pointed out, in Cold War America a complex relationship was formed between psychiatry, social change, and sexuality that resulted in a “public concerned with changing gender relationships [that] seized upon the threat of ‘uncontrolled desires’ to help redefine sexual normality and deviance in modern America” (87). This “new normal,” naturally, presumed and demanded rigid conformity that was both reflected and promulgated through the blissful Cold War domestic arena illustrated by Elaine Tyler May. Indeed, with the exception of sexual enjoyment, May’s other descriptors otherwise perfectly delineate the components of typical (read: “normal”) Cold War-era existence. They depict a rosy picture of American households where men were always successful breadwinners, women were always perfect stay-at-home domestic goddesses, and children were always well bred and well behaved.

It almost goes without saying, of course, that this idealized (and idealizing) American domestic milieu was obviously just a dream, an elaborate mythology actively marketed to and almost exclusively circulated under the guise of cultural and social uplift for a distinctly homogenous bourgeois audience. This mythology was initially given the idealized (and idealizing) label of the “American Dream” in 1914 by journalist Walter Lippmann, but the phrase came into popular parlance in 1931 with the publication of

historian James Truslow Adams's book entitled *The Epic of America*. Adams's conception of this dream was very much centered on a prevailing proletarian optimism in which "each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth" (404).⁶

In the space of little more than a decade, however, the American Dream was essentially transfigured into an indelible part of the Cold War suburban cultural landscape, where it was typically situated in an idyllic—albeit entirely fictional—world constructed and reserved exclusively for affluent heteronormative whites. This suburban utopia was also decidedly exclusionary, in that it conspicuously barred blacks and homosexuals, but its promulgation through popular television shows such as "Leave It to Beaver" (which ran from 1957 to 1963), "Ozzie and Harriet" (broadcast from 1952 to 1966), and "Father Knows Best" (which aired from 1954 to 1960) created a particularistic view of the Cold War American Dream as an essentially whites-only space. This view has drawn both profound introspection and intense critical scrutiny especially from scholars such as James W. Loewen and Andrew Wiese.

Loewen, for example, has observed that between 1890 and 1940 (the so-called "nadir of race relations"), race became literally embedded in the American geography and, as a result, "Suburbs used zoning and informal policing to keep out black would-be residents and eminent domain to take their property if they did manage to buy some" (61). Wiese, however, has noted that in spite of these concerted segregationist efforts, during the 1940s and 1950s an emerging black middle class, especially in the North and

⁶ See also John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson's "The Making and Persistence of the American Dream" in their edited collection, *The American Dream in the 21st Century*.

West, actively sought to construct for themselves a suburban existence, although this often meant settling in “older, inner-ring suburbs adjacent to older concentrations of African American population inside the city limits” (597-598).

Wiese points out as well that suburbanization also increased in some metropolitan Southern cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, and Charlotte, North Carolina. However, the South experienced a unique phenomenon of separate suburbanization that, as Jonathan Mark Souther explains, “reflected a compromise between white leaders who hoped to avert racial turmoil and uphold segregation and black leaders who viewed material improvement as social progress even if it entailed extending Jim Crow into suburban space” (597). Admittedly, this compromise was decidedly imperfect given the brutally exacting strictures wrought by Jim Crow laws. Cultural historian Pete Daniel has explained that Jim Crow, while certainly omnipresent across the South, was actually more observable and enforceable in urban and suburban areas than in rural locales. Daniel remarks that, especially in the Cold War years, “In cities, blacks and whites competed for jobs, housing, recreation, and seats on public transportation, and the problem of the color line assumed pressing urgency. In rural areas, most folks knew each other and could make allowances, but in cities, segregation ruled all public spaces” (9).

Sadly, it is well beyond the scope of this chapter for a lengthy discussion of Cold War Southern race relations. Instead, I want to concentrate on the moral distinction Daniel draws between rural denizens and city/suburb dwellers, especially his argument that rather than following clearly drawn racial and sexual codes of conduct, rural folk were more inclined to make “allowances” for non-white or non-normative identities. According to Daniel, these allowances sprang from a spatial closeness in rural areas that

seemed to breed (if not tacitly encourage) an informal understanding among all races, classes, and identities. Though even the most perfunctory glance at Southern history reveals a long and active tradition of racism and homophobia, blacks and homosexuals were nevertheless accepted as an integral, inevitable, and intractable part of the Southern rural landscape.

Daniel contextualizes this inbuilt quasi-intimacy within a larger movement toward what he terms a “rural consolidation” that resisted the type of American suburbanization commonplace in urbanized locales, and is perhaps best described as a pronounced agrarian response to the alarming upsurge of Southern urbanization. As he notes in this long excerpt:

Rural people emerged from World War II deeply suspicious of what the future might bring. Many expected the depression to resume; some had hoarded money as a protection against hard times. To their amazement, good times continued, unleashing a pent-up demand for consumer goods. Women insisted on having “cooking utensils, dishes, linoleum, chairs, beds, and other basic items of furniture.” Rural people sought electricity, running water, telephones, and paved roads. Installing red and brown “composition brick siding” became the most popular way to touch up unpainted tenant houses. Nearly all farmers dreamed of having a farm truck or pickup. The rural South was putting on a new face, or at least applying makeup to the old one (42-43).

Interestingly enough, this description seems to neatly encapsulate how the American Dream was essentially marketed to Southerners, highlighting both its promise (“nearly all farmers dreamed of having a farm truck or pickup”) and its pressures (“unleashing a pent-up demand for consumer goods”). But, as Daniel comments, this facile optimism was also met with no small amount of uncertainty (“deeply suspicious of what the future might bring”), along with the realization that previously closed closets were liable to be

thrown wide open and the “other” within unleashed (“The rural South was putting on a new face, or at least applying makeup to the old one”).

Notions of “Otherness” and “the closet,” commonplace in queer theory, have only recently been intersected with Cold War historicity. Apropos of the Kinsey backlash discussed earlier, Alan Nadel observes that in spite of promulgating the ideals of health, wealth, and heteronormative domestic bliss, forces both social and government in the 1950s also widely promoted the understanding that all matters of personal sexuality were to be repressed, if not completely oppressed, under the aegis of silent self-surveillance which dictated adherence to socially-adjudicated, “proper” ways of publicly acting, appearing, and talking. Any breach of this silence “potentially revealed the Other—the subversive—everywhere but in the place he or she was known to be,” thus raising the ubiquitous possibility for incrimination for either being perceived of as Other or having knowledge of someone who was Other (84). For Nadel, this silence effectively closeted everyone, regardless of sexuality, and forced society to adopt and rigidly enforce a paranoiac heterosexist presumption that “each citizen was potentially both the threat and the threatened” (75).

Nadel draws much of his inspiration from the foundational work of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who, in her work *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) notes that being “in the closet” is a “performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (3). It is important to note that Sedgwick does not delimit this closeting act as something performed only by “others” (read: persons with “non-normative” sexualities). Rather,

Sedgwick interprets “closetedness” as something situationally negotiated and ultimately dependent on social narratives, though not necessarily the prevailing or predominating social narratives of a specific time period.

Sedgwick clarifies that acts such as staying in the closet and keeping a careful silence are integral parts of a “fragile, precious representational compact by which a small, shadowily identified group both represent(s) the hidden, perhaps dangerous truths about a culture to itself, and depend(s) on its exiguous toleration” (56-57). Put more simply, in order to maintain a peaceable status quo, society (writ large) agrees to tolerate and tacitly accept others so long as these same others play by the rules: keep a low profile, don’t be too public, and if nothing else don’t make any open secrets too open.

These rules and their accompanying tense potentiality functioned well as a disciplinary mechanism for American social narratives and social norms. In the Cold War South, however, this discipline was tempered by a pronounced historical ambivalence for and surprising double standard about difference, whether social, sexual, or otherwise. Physician and historian William Lowry observes for instance that, especially in terms of sexual matters, “the frontier and parts of the South embraced a more liberal stance” while “the core of New England puritanism held to sexual asceticism, to the church as the agent of social control” (16-17). Although Lowry does not articulate the specific word “rural,” it nevertheless undergirds his comparative placement of more liberalized sexual views and mores.

This comparison is echoed by Daniel, who points out that “the rural nature of the South, its class system, and segregation created a distinct gay and lesbian culture. . . . Although most Southerners considered them perverts and thought they were damned,

Southern lesbians and gays offered neighbors enough ambiguity to guarantee their acceptance and security” (155). Queer Southern historian John Howard has observed further that even though most Southerners, especially during the Cold War era, took it for granted that homosexuality was sinful and was legally proscribed by various state sodomy statutes, “like so many other vices, homosexuality and gender insubordination were acknowledged and accommodated with a pervasive, deflective pretense of ignorance” (*Men Like That* xi).

Ultimately, then, as William Mark Poteet has noted, the South had—and continues to have—an “ambivalent penchant for both celebrating and reproofing difference, as opposed to hiding it away.... It is basically this simple—in the South you don’t put your ‘touched’ great aunt in a home somewhere; you put her out on the front porch, give her a pretty hat, and ask her advice, which usually comes from an unexpected angle and turns out to be pretty good” (1). More to the point, Poteet adds significantly, “Everybody in the South has a gay uncle—everybody” (1). These family members, in addition to seemingly omnipresent butch sisters, swishy nephews, and proto-metrosexual daddies, made the South a very queer place.

Daniel, in fact, overtly acknowledges this Southern queer possibility by observing that “most Southerners accepted neighbors and friends whom they might have labeled as ‘sissies’ or ‘old maids.’ Rural and small-town people might have whispered or giggled about ‘queers,’ but they seldom took public action. As long as people played a role in the community and were discreet about their sexual preferences, they could live ‘normal’ lives” (155). It is exactly this sense of acceptance, if not tolerance, that deeply informs my interpretation of the various, hilarious goings-on in *The Ponder Heart* and how the

novella creates a decidedly potent, if deliciously circumspect, skewering of specious Cold War containment and consensus ideologies foregrounded particularly during the McCarthy/HUAC hearings.

Throughout *The Ponder Heart*, the small town of Clay appears to mirror perfectly the bifurcated tensions between rural/urban, public/private, and straight/queer that ran rampant in the Cold War South. Indeed, even though the novella begins with precious few signs of the turbulent changes circulating outside the seemingly placid confines of the town, there is no shortage of homegrown in-town turbulence in the form of the rambunctious, decidedly eccentric, and suspiciously pansexual “Southern other” Uncle Daniel Ponder. As Edna Earle Ponder, *The Ponder Heart*’s omniscient—if wildly unreliable and oddly asexual—narrator intones in the novella’s opening gambit, “My Uncle Daniel’s just like your uncle, if you’ve got one—only he has one weakness. He loves society and he gets carried away” (7). But lest readers conjure any preconceived notions undergirding Uncle Daniel’s exploits (be they sexual or otherwise), Welty entrusts Edna Earle to account for everything that transpires in and around Clay, especially anything that might involve Uncle Daniel.

Unsurprisingly, Edna Earle’s accounting is almost instantly overlaid by her ironclad control over any and all narratives emanating from various town- and country-folk. In so doing, she becomes almost McCarthy-esque in her presumptive populist authority to speak on behalf of each and every one in metropolitan Clay, at once disallowing the reader “direct access to others with different assumptions” while also effectively sanctioning her “specific narrative redaction of her Uncle Daniel” (Seaman and Walker, 66). In fact, Edna Earle moves well beyond being a simple storyteller and

instead becomes so rhetorically dominant that she transforms herself into what Welty herself calls a “monologue that takes possession of the reader” (*OWW* 13). For example, following some breathless introductory remarks to the novella’s seemingly hapless (and maddeningly silent) addressee, Edna Earle states in characteristically pointed fashion, “*You’re* only here because your car broke down, and I’m afraid you’re allowing a Bodkin to fix it. And listen: if you read, you’ll put your eyes out. Let’s just talk” (11; emphasis in original).

Although seemingly innocuous on its surface, Edna Earle’s directive carries with it tremendous force, effectively commanding her quarry to hush up and listen. Indeed, Edna Earle’s remark has remarkable (and remarkably disturbing) echoes to Joseph McCarthy’s infamous announcement in February 1950 to the Ohio County Women’s Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, that he held in his hand a list of 205 Communists presently working in the U.S. State Department. This statement put McCarthy squarely in the spotlight, a position he relished and fought hard to maintain. As historian Ellen Schrecker has noted, “McCarthy knew how to get his message on the front pages. . . . The more sensational his allegations, the better” (242-243).

Even though McCarthy’s authoritative rhetoric riveted the nation, Schrecker observes that he “often had no idea what he was talking about” (243). Nevertheless, McCarthy was not about to let facts get in the way of a good story or a stirring public performance. Instead, he relied heavily on a twofold strategy: first, adherence to a single-minded agenda of flagrant self-promotion and second, having enough tactical ammunition—in the form of bluster and threats—to back it up. And, of course, if bluster

and threats didn't work, McCarthy was hardly shy about deploying devastating innuendo to both titillate his supporters and intimidate his rivals.

This strategy is almost identical to the one Edna Earle maintains in *The Ponder Heart*. Indeed, while readers are offered a glimpse of this strategy in her admonitory salvo to the novella's addressee, she soon brings it into sharp relief by declaring, "I don't run the Beulah Hotel for nothing: I size people up: I'm sizing you up right now" (11). While I certainly don't mean to suggest that Edna Earle Ponder exemplifies the vilifying arch-Rightist conservatism deployed by Senator McCarthy, there still remain some disturbing traces of McCarthyism-lite extant in her narratological vise grip. After all, throughout *The Ponder Heart* Edna Earle maintains strict narrative control through a series of judgments and pronouncements—backhanded or otherwise—about townspeople's backgrounds, religious affiliations, professions, appearances (physical or otherwise) and, of course, personal associations.

She also deploys a number of dark insinuations, particularly when the troublesome topic of Uncle Daniel enters the conversation. Her often snide, if always snappy, gambits to anyone within earshot have a dual function of squelching disruptive dissent while protecting and promoting Clay's ostensible greatest asset: the Ponder family name. To extend the Edna Earle/Joseph McCarthy comparison one step further, Edna Earle's rhetoric and attendant actions perfectly encapsulate conservative William F. Buckley's definition of McCarthyism as a "movement around which men of good will and stern morality can close ranks" (132).

In fact, Welty imparts evidence of Edna Earle's closing ranks almost from the novella's very beginning. Her "Let's just talk" entreaty, for instance, immediately

establishes a set of conversational ground rules, albeit rules that are entirely one-sided on the part of Edna Earle. It is precisely these rules, in fact, that allow Edna Earle to effectively close ranks against any and all outsider's counter-narratives that might disturb her carefully crafted scripting of Clay, Mississippi as a latter-day Southern utopia generally and Ponder perfectibility specifically. Unsurprisingly, these ground rules are first and foremost part of Edna Earle's steadfast determination to keep up appearances at all costs, a mindset perfectly in common with the majority of Southern families across class lines. As historians Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour have observed, for Southern families, "appearances meant everything, and everyone had an investment in it. The family's inner dramas were to remain inside the household, beyond the purview of the neighbors. When neighbors were watching, the family followed established rules of conduct" (1).

Edna Earle, naturally, utilizes her rule-bound unilateral narrative approach to closet and quell any hint of familial drama from exposing itself to outsiders writ large, whether neighbors and townsfolk familiar to the Ponders or interlopers visiting Clay. But she also specifically deploys her conversational control in order to preempt any possibly troublesome counter-narratives taking the form of inquiries involving Uncle Daniel. Because Uncle Daniel has an almost uncanny propensity for creating drama wherever he goes, Edna Earle takes special, protracted pains to portray her erstwhile Uncle in only the most glowing terms, highlighting his prodigious good will (not to mention his coexisting prodigious size and appetites) as well as his seemingly unsullied—and thus morally reputable—innocence. Here, in this long passage, is how she describes him:

You'd know it was Uncle Daniel the minute you saw him. He's unmistakable. He's big and well known. He has the Ponder head—large, of course, and well set, with short white hair over it thick and curly, growing down his forehead round like a little bib. He has Grandma's complexion. And big, forget-me-not blue eyes like mine, and puts on a sweet red bow tie every morning, and carries a large-size Stetson in his hand—always just swept it off to somebody. He dresses fit to kill, you know, in a snow-white suit. But do you know he's up in his fifties now? Don't believe it if you don't want to. And still the sweetest, most unspoiled thing in the world. He has the nicest, politest manners—he's good as gold. (11)

Edna Earle's description is all well and good on a meta-level. However, as she and almost the entire populace of metropolitan Clay is only too aware, it wholly ignores the “real,” unexpurgated, defiantly problematic Uncle Daniel. In fact, Edna Earle's willful ignorance of this reality, combined with her concerted circulation of the “Uncle Daniel myth,” generates significant unease and no small amount of “town talk” outside the safe confines of the Beulah Hotel.

This community disquiet, of course, threatens to undermine Edna Earle's narrative and sociocultural control over the townspeople. But these opaque, gossipy insinuations about Uncle Daniel also have undeniable parallels to the carefully orchestrated smearing backlash to McCarthy's homophobic “lavender scare.” As Andrea Friedman has explained, the “lavender scare” was a far-reaching attack on thousands of suspected homosexuals that were “investigated, interrogated, and dismissed by government officials and private employers” (1105). Friedman continues that even though McCarthy played a central role in both popularizing and carrying out these anti-homosexual purges, he also became a victim of them largely due to coded “(purported) secrets about McCarthy's relationships with men” including, specifically, alleged homosexual lawyer Roy Cohn (1107).

The codes to which Friedman refers consisted almost exclusively of oblique innuendo, titillating questions, and whispered salacious rumors used to devastating effect by journalists and politicians that were appalled by McCarthy's hypocrisy, sanctimoniousness, and hubris. Even though Edna Earle's actions in *The Ponder Heart* do not reach McCarthy-esque levels, she nevertheless amply demonstrates the same hypocritical, hubristic, and sanctimonious attributes. Indeed, it is precisely these attributes that cause the townsfolk's muted (if defiantly pointed) response that, naturally, takes the form of suggestively queering Uncle Daniel.

Welty first tips her hand about Uncle Daniel's "Southern otherness" in the lead-up to the Teacake Magee episode that occurs relatively early in the novella and serves as Uncle Daniel's ostensible entrée into marital heteronormativity. Until this point, Edna Earle has been ruminating over Uncle Daniel's hilarious running conflict with Grandpa Ponder, who acts as *The Ponder Heart's* singular moral compass as well as the ostensible overseer of Uncle Daniel's financial, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Edna Earle declares, "Grandpa worshiped Uncle Daniel. Oh, Grandpa in his panama and his seersucker suit, and Uncle Daniel in his red tie and Stetson and little Sweetheart rose in his lapel! They did set up a pair" (12). What is interesting about this innocuous, if overtly affectionate, homosocial portraiture of the two men is that Edna Earle obviously intends to foreground their sartorial finery as emblemizing their class standing and outward respectability in Clay. In so doing, Edna Earle can reinforce her own personal narrative of being an integral, upstanding member of Clay high society.

Nevertheless, there is something unmistakably queer lurking just below the surface of this description. Edna Earle's declaration that "Grandpa worshiped Uncle

Daniel,” for example, seems to be an apparent—at least from Edna Earle’s point of view—transference of Grandpa Ponder’s adoration for Grandma (who is evidently and conveniently deceased) onto Uncle Daniel. This transference is further reinforced by Edna Earle’s specific notation that Uncle Daniel has “Grandma’s complexion” (11), an observation that arguably feminizes him in the mind of her captive listener. Furthermore, she also adds a series of breathless coded signifiers that connotatively depict Grandpa Ponder and Uncle Daniel as homosexuals (or, more accurately, the repressive Cold War non-sequitur “confirmed bachelors”). Edna Earle, for instance, acknowledges Grandpa Ponder’s natty panama hat and his seersucker suit, but she takes special pains to point out Uncle Daniel’s dandified attire, right down to his red tie and the “little Sweetheart rose in his lapel.”

As Craig Loftin has noted in his study of Cold War homosexual mannerisms, these clothing choices emblemized the “swish,” an iconic (if degrading) stereotypical homosexual. Loftin observes that the swish “walks with short, mincing steps; he talks with a reedish voice in high pitched tones and, usually, with something resembling a lisp. His clothes are stylish, though gaudy (he has a passion for pink shoes, red ties, and mauve undershorts), and much too tight” (579). Although Edna Earle does not mention Uncle Daniel’s shoes or (heaven forbid!) his undershorts, she seems particularly fixated on his “sweet” red tie, which receives two mentions in the space of one page. Indeed, I would argue that what appears to be a curiously selective and trivial bit of sartorial preoccupation could be—in addition to demarcating Uncle Daniel as a “swish”— a coded reference to McCarthy’s near-obsession with Dean Acheson, President Harry Truman’s Secretary of State.

Andrea Friedman has pointed out that part of McCarthy's concerted effort to gain power and influence in Washington included eloquent denunciations of Truman's "imperial brotherhood," the elite members of the State Department whose manliness, sexuality, and national loyalty McCarthy openly questioned. Friedman relates that McCarthy reserved particular bile for Acheson, who he called the "Red Dean of fashion" and a member of the "lace handkerchief crowd" (1109). Edna Earle, in fact, tacitly incorporates the same type of oblique insinuations deployed by McCarthy throughout this scene. For example, she reinforces her underlying suspicions about Uncle Daniel by blithely stating, "He dresses fit to kill, you know, in a snow-white suit" (11), a bifurcated observation that contains both elements of personal pride (reflecting positively on the Ponder family's aristocratic mien) and curiosity about Uncle Daniel's heteronormativity (implying that no *real* man would be that concerned about his personal appearance).

In fact, throughout this episode, Edna Earle continually doubles down on her intimation that both Grandpa Ponder and Uncle Daniel are hardly the exemplary heterosexuals she initially purports them to be. In so doing, she ironically undermines her express intention of foregrounding the Ponder clan as *sine qua non* models of respectability for all the residents of metropolitan Clay. Grandpa Ponder, she wryly observes in retrospect, "might have any fine day waked up to find himself in too pretty a fix to get out of, but he had too much character. And besides, Edna Earle, I used to say to myself, if the worst does come to the worst, Grandpa *is* rich" (8; emphasis in original). Although she does not say exactly in what kind of "pretty fix" Grandpa will find himself enmeshed, Edna Earle nevertheless makes it clear that his "character" will effectively absolve him of any responsibility and will, quite possibly, allay any future scandalous

town talk. Furthermore, Edna Earle's throwaway remark "Grandpa *is* rich" anticipates her comments about the Ponder men's seemingly queer wardrobe choices by reiterating their social status while also raising the specter of scandal that only the Ponder's money, power, and influence can effectively quash or put to rest. This "scandal" is, of course, Uncle Daniel.

Although Welty quietly intimates that Grandpa Ponder is slightly less than "normal," she is certainly not shy about making Uncle Daniel's otherness perfectly queer. Interestingly, she does so by deploying a series of tropes that were commonly associated with Cold War societal methods of dealing with supposed homosexuals, before finally using Grandpa Ponder's death as a catalyst to propel Uncle Daniel out of the closet. In this excerpt, Edna Earle recalls Grandpa Ponder's uneasy reaction to Uncle Daniel's increasingly evident queerness:

Grandpa just wanted to teach Uncle Daniel a lesson. But what he did was threaten him with the asylum. That wasn't the way to do it.

I said, "Grandpa, you're burning your bridges before you get to them, I think."

But Grandpa said, "Miss, I don't want to hear any more about it. I've warned him, now." So he warned him for nine years.

As for Uncle Daniel, he went right ahead, attracting love and friendship with the best will and the lightest heart in the world. He loved being happy! He loved happiness like I love tea. (14)

Edna Earle's notation of the asylum is a clear reference to the commonplace Cold War pathologizing of homosexuals as infantilized, mentally deficient, neurotic, or otherwise psychically damaged. In his article "The Homosexual Conflict" published in 1954, psychiatrist Lionel Ovesey described homosexuality as a "disordered form of interpersonal relations" that manifested itself through a combination of failed masculinity

and quasi-feminine qualities such as overt emotionality and dependency (244). Ovesey's "findings" were part of the larger psychoanalytic discourse surrounding the Cold War "homosexual problem" that could only be eliminated through institutionalization or sometimes barbaric "cures" such as partial lobotomies, emetic aversion "therapies," or electroshock treatments.⁷

Although Edna Earle attempts to humorously downplay Grandpa Ponder's overt threat to institutionalize Uncle Daniel in order to keep the family name unsullied for her listener, she nevertheless notes that his trip to the asylum is not exactly news. She recalls, "To be fair, that wasn't until after Grandpa'd tried praying Uncle Daniel for years and years, and worn out two preachers praying over them both. Only I was praying against Grandpa and preachers and Judge Tip Clanahan to boot, because whatever *you* say about it, I abhor the asylum" (15). Edna Earle's rejoinder here is hilarious and surprisingly prescient because it recognizes the preeminent role faith has and continues to play in the South, especially when dealing with "family troubles" including, of course, evidentiary homosexuality.

In fact, when Edna Earle concedes that Grandpa Ponder is trying to "pray away the gay" in Uncle Daniel, she also presages the naissance of the homosexual reparative therapy movement.⁸ This movement was initiated in large part by Elizabeth Moberly's

⁷ See for instance Martin Duberman's *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey*. For an historical overview of the psychoanalytic approach to treating homosexuals during the 1950s, see Richard Friedman and Jennifer Downey's "Psychoanalysis and the Model of Homosexuality as Psychopathology: A Historical Overview." For an example of experimental pharmaceutical therapy aimed at "re-conditioning" homosexuals toward heterosexuality, see "Treatment of Male Homosexuality Through Conditioning." See also Joel Braslow's *Mental Ills and Bodily Cures: Psychiatric Treatment in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*.

⁸ The notion of homosexual reparative therapy (in practice, if not in actual name) began to flourish in the 1940s and 1950s. According to James Penner, a central component of influential

seminal work *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (1983), which echoed traditional psychoanalytic orthodoxy that homosexuality was not genetically or hormonally-based but was, instead, an infantilizing condition resulting from a problematic parent-child relationship psychiatrist (Grace 557). Unsurprisingly, Moberly herself was heavily influenced by Cold War psychoanalysts Charles Socarides, Irving Bieber and Lionel Ovesey, all of who practiced standard treatment protocols dictating conversion to heterosexuality as the appropriate (and only) goal for most homosexual patients.

Moberly, however, overlaid an Old Testament biblical interpretation on her therapeutic approach, declaring that conversion was necessary because homosexual acts were always to be disdained and condemned. As André Grace explains, reparative therapies such as those deployed by Moberly “not only dismiss the homosexual as a subject with genuine desires, needs, and ways of being in the world, but they also ignore the scientific method. Pseudo-scientific reorientation research always focuses on the saving graces of reparative therapies as a charismatic tour de force that gives the homosexual a way out, a way to Jesus Christ” (573).

Edna Earle, it would appear, seems exasperated by Grandpa Ponder’s reparative strategy toward Uncle Daniel, declaring it “Child-foolishness!” (15). She even admits to praying against the two preachers who, as she takes pleasure in pointing out, prayed over Uncle Daniel *and* Grandpa Ponder, thus reinforcing her non-normative suspicions about both men. However, Edna Earle knows that there is no way she can win this “prayer battle,” especially against two clergy members. Moreover, she is also well aware that if

Cold War psychologist Talcott Parson’s sex role theory was that “homosexuality must be discouraged because it threatens social stability. Therefore, sex role theory specifically legitimizes intervention from psychologists and counselors to ensure that ‘inverts’ will be ‘straightened out’ and normalized” (113). See also Parson and Bales’s “Family Structure and the Socialization of the Child” and Joseph Nicolosi’s *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality*.

this prayer therapy doesn't take hold, then Grandpa Ponder will have no other choice but to put Uncle Daniel away. Although she protests vehemently against the prospect of sending Uncle Daniel to the asylum, I nonetheless read her "I abhor the asylum" comment as utterly fallacious. After all, not only will Uncle Daniel be safely out of the picture, but he will also be "cured" of his queerness, whether through shock therapy or—dare she hope—maybe even a lobotomy. To Edna Earle's thinking, these outcomes far outweigh any possible consequences, since she will have full control over Uncle Daniel and she will finally get to be Clay's true queen.

Naturally, Edna Earle's best-laid plans lead quickly to dismay, as she soon discloses Uncle Daniel's frustratingly brief and disappointingly non-curative tenure at the state insane asylum. She explains, "Oh, of course, from the word Go, Uncle Daniel got more vacations than anybody else down there. In the first place, they couldn't find anything the matter with him, and in the second place, he was so precious that he only had to ask for something" (15). Echoing her prior protestations, she broadly hints that part of her abhorrence with the asylum lies in its doctors' inability to pathologize Uncle Daniel. Edna Earle also voices stern disapproval about how the asylum staff allows Uncle Daniel to work his charms on them, a disapproval that borders on disgust. Her seemingly offhand remark "he was so precious that he only had to ask for something" fairly drips with vexation, condescension, and no small amount of tacit homophobia.

Indeed, Uncle Daniel's effective charming is, for Edna Earle, especially galling given what she sees as his rather obvious queerness that should, for all practical purposes, be reason enough for the staff to keep him firmly under lock and key. Put more simply, Edna Earle cannot understand how asylum personnel regard Uncle Daniel as if he were

an adored houseguest rather than a pitiable queer outcast in dire need of psychosexual modification and correction. To her credit, though, she does manage to catch herself before causing irreparable harm to the Ponder family name. She tells her captive auditor, “It seemed to me he was back home visiting more than he ever was gone between times, and pop full of stories” (15). This foregrounding of Uncle Daniel’s penchant for storytelling provides Edna Earle with a convenient detour away from what could easily be perceived as not-so-subtle character assassination.

Edna Earle here is abundantly aware that bringing up Uncle Daniel’s vaunted storytelling prowess also has the added benefit of piquing her listener’s interest. This rhetorical gambit surreptitiously creates the suggestion of a Stockholm syndrome effect, such that *The Ponder Heart*’s narrative quasi-prisoner appears to form a paradoxical bond with Edna Earle, commiserating with her over the shared “trauma” brought about by Uncle Daniel. Indeed, though Edna Earle’s quarry could hardly be considered an actual hostage, Welty nevertheless makes it clear that escaping from Edna Earle’s narrative clutches would constitute a formidable challenge. Edna Earle herself seems cognizant of this reality, and attempts to recall Uncle Daniel’s legendary charm as a way to put her listener back at ease. She tells her guest:

The sight of a stranger was always meat and drink to him. The stranger didn’t have to open his mouth. Uncle Daniel is ready to do all the talking. That’s understood. I used to dread he might get hold of one of those occasional travelers that wouldn’t come in unless they had to—the kind that would break in on a story with a set of questions, and wind it up with a list of what Uncle Daniel’s faults were: some Yankee. But Uncle Daniel seemed to have a sixth sense and avoid those, and light on somebody from nearer home always. He’d be crazy about you. (17)

As with her previous bifurcated attempts to simultaneously advocate for and inveigh against Uncle Daniel, Edna Earle's observation here is carefully crafted. In the process of touting his narratological expertise, Edna Earle nevertheless slyly adds hints of discomfiting creepiness that erode his seemingly exemplary gentlemanly portraiture. In this way, she gives a tacit nod to overarching Cold War paranoia about covert commies and queers essentially hiding in plain sight by insinuating that Uncle Daniel is not a truly and authentically trustworthy individual.

As Andrea Friedman has observed, Cold War socio-political commentators understood and freely promulgated the prevailing cultural logic that communists and homosexuals possessed similar characteristics "including moral corruption, psychological immaturity, and an ability to 'pass' undetected among ordinary Americans" (1106). Through her apparently loving sketch of Uncle Daniel, Edna Earle in fact enumerates her own suspicions about him: an almost cannibalistic appetite for meeting and captivating strangers, his ability to hone in on like-minded or easily persuadable individuals, his unmanly propensity for gossip and, perhaps most importantly, his innate "sixth sense" of being able to avoid persons that might ask too many uncomfortable questions.

Significantly, Edna Earle includes "some Yankee" in her coterie of persons who might goad Uncle Daniel into revealing too much potentially embarrassing information. This remark superficially references the widespread stereotypical perception by Southerners that all Yankees (Northerners) are loud, overly opinionated, and infuriatingly direct in their assessment of other people.⁹ However, I also interpret this particular

⁹ These Northern stereotypes are typically found comfortably ensconced in discussions of Southern exceptionalism. See thus Numan Bartley's "Social Change and Sectional Identity" and Charles Roland's "The Ever-Vanishing South." Cash Koeniger takes this regional exceptionalism

backhanded slur as another Weltian nod to McCarthy, whose brash, abrasive, and pointedly combative attitude toward individuals or groups he perceived as corrosively othered was well-documented and well-publicized during the Cold War era.

Indeed, Edna Earle regards her suspicions about Uncle Daniel as lagging indicators of his underlying moral corruption, as well as clear signs of his uncontrolled neurotic desires that to her mind signal his profound lack of masculine autonomy. This, on top of her having already established his psychological immaturity and his infuriatingly uncanny ability to be not only accepted but also embraced by the residents of metropolitan Clay, allows Edna Earle to continue piling up her anxieties about Uncle Daniel's queerness. Moreover, she subtly implies through her offhand rejoinder "He'd be crazy about you" that her captive listener might also be one of these self-same others that stealthily infiltrated and corrupted otherwise normative society.

Here, of course, I part ways with several literary critics that have suggested that Edna Earle's guest is female. Prominent among them are J. A. Bryant and Marilyn Arnold. Bryant, for instance, refers to the listener as a "young girl, old enough to drive a car (which has broken down—her reason for being at the Beulah), but not too old to be imposed on with a story the length of a long Mississippi summer 'evening,' or afternoon. We see her only briefly, however, as she sit there on the porch vainly trying to read; and we never learn her name" (33). Arnold is much more vociferous in her insistence on the auditor's gender, first noting her surprise that "at least two reviewers assume the guest to be a traveling salesman" before writing, "she is most certainly young and female, and probably shy and naïve as well" (70).

one step further by providing a fascinating exploration of the role climate played in delineating distinct behavioral differences between Southerners and Northerners.

Arnold bases her supposition on Edna Earle's perfunctory caution to her listener about Uncle Daniel's overt affection toward and inquisitiveness about strangers. After her initial "introduction" about Uncle Daniel, Edna Earle states:

When he sees you sitting in the lobby of the Beulah, he'll take the other end of the sofa and then move closer up to see what you've got to say for yourself; and then he's liable to give you a little hug and start trying to give you something. Don't do you any good to be bashful. He won't let you refuse. All he might do is forget tomorrow what he gave you today, and give it to you all over again. Sweetest disposition in the world. (7)

Arnold problematically surmises that Edna Earle's address here is done "(i)n a manner appropriate only for addressing a younger woman" (70), an observation for which she provides no evidence other than the suggestive mention of Uncle Daniel's "little hug." In fact, even though the Ponder clan is keenly aware of Uncle Daniel's relatively late discovery of adult sexuality, any interest he shows in girls incites severe consternation from Edna Earle and causes Grandpa Ponder's two heart attacks, the second of which proves fatal. As Gerda Seaman and Ellen Walker have argued, "The reader must admit a sense of the perverse in our dim-witted hero's sexuality" (72).

Ultimately, I think it is a mistake for Arnold to pronounce the auditor's gender as unambiguously female precisely because of Uncle Daniel's generous, almost pansexual affectionate nature to which Edna Earle ruefully admits through her opening observation that he "loves society and he gets carried away" (7). Not surprisingly, this remark comes back to haunt her because, following her rather damning catalogue of Uncle Daniel's supposed psychosexual faults, Edna Earle guiltily and abruptly toggles back to the more safe confines of male homosociality that for all practical purposes seems to hang in the very air of the Beulah Hotel. She references this homosociality by reinvigorating her previous discussion about the affectionate relationship between Uncle Daniel and

Grandpa Ponder by pointing out that, in spite of their conflicts, Grandpa Ponder both respected and loved Uncle Daniel for his forthright honesty. According to Edna Earle, “He never told a lie in his life. Grandpa couldn’t get past that, poor Grandpa. That’s why he could never punish him” (17).

I am intrigued by her observation because it manages to imply so much while saying so little. First, Edna Earle’s broadly sketched (and loudly articulated) prior allegations about the two men’s non-normativity lead me to read the “He never told a lie in his life” statement as her giving grudging credence to Uncle Daniel’s obvious “out-ness” in Clay. Second, her odd observation that Grandpa could never punish Uncle Daniel reinforces these allegations by proving, much to her chagrin, that despite Grandpa Ponder’s seemingly perpetual annoyance with Uncle Daniel, love does indeed conquer all.

Uncle Daniel’s visibility obviously flies in the face of prevailing Cold War rhetoric that demanded homosexuals stay essentially invisible, particularly since they symbolized American’s worst fears about a Cold War masculinity crisis. Historian Kyle Cuordileone has observed that McCarthy, America’s self-appointed watchdog cum moral arbiter, seized upon this supposed “crisis” in order to use it as a potent vehicle for deploying sexually charged homophobic invective in his speeches, including one memorable ultimatum given to reporters: “If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker” (521).¹⁰

However, in spite of McCarthy’s repeated violent railings against homosexuals (whether discernible or suspected), homosexuality was nevertheless more visible than

¹⁰ For a full detailing of Senator McCarthy’s statements, see Eric F. Goldman’s *The Crucial Decade—and After: America, 1945-1960* and Thomas C. Reeves’s *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography*.

ever in the Cold War era. Cuordileone and queer historian John D’Emilio have noted that this visibility was due in large part to what could be termed a “nationwide coming-out experience” prompted in large part by soldiers’ same-sex experiences during World War II. In her review of Allan Berube’s seminal book *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, Elaine Tyler May writes that the war created a “situation where intimacy between men was approved, and where homosexual encounters involving heterosexual men were tacitly condoned as the result of long absences without contact with women” (255).

It seems abundantly clear in *The Ponder Heart* that Uncle Daniel (and, for that matter, all the denizens of metropolitan Clay) is far removed from the long shadows cast by World War II. However, as noted in my discussion of Welty’s other notable avuncular wartime hero—*Delta Wedding*’s George Fairchild—Welty not only remained keenly aware of the war’s inbuilt homosexual potentiality but also translated this awareness repeatedly in her work.¹¹ Indeed, almost against her better judgment, Edna Earle continually foregrounds this Weltian awareness of homosexual prevalence in Clay. Following her recapitulated puzzlement over the Uncle Daniel/Grandpa Ponder dyad, she introduces yet another male character to the homosocial mix, the travelling salesman Mr. Springer, who also conveniently happens to be Edna Earle’s last best hope for romantic fulfillment:

I used to say Mr. Springer was the perfect listener. A drug salesman with a wide, wide territory, in seldom enough to forget between times, and knowing us well enough not to try to interrupt. And too tired to object to hearing something over. If anything, he laughed too soon. He used to sit and beg for Uncle Daniel’s favorite tale, the one about the time he turned the tables on Grandpa. (17-18)

¹¹ See Tipton, ““He doesn’t strike me as a family man”: Uncloseting George Fairchild’s Queerness in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding*.”

Minor character though he is, Mr. Springer nonetheless plays an odd (and oddly significant) role in the lives of the Ponder clan. For instance, Edna Earle's wistfully laudatory portraiture points out Mr. Springer's perfect attentiveness and his evident devotion to the Ponders, especially Uncle Daniel. Perhaps more important, however, Edna Earle hints that Mr. Springer's most positive aspect is his willingly passive compliance in the face of the Ponder's forceful personalities.

This passivity has not gone unnoticed by literary critics such as Barbara Harrell Carson, who remarks that Mr. Springer represents for Edna Earle the "frail source of her hope for romance and for a metamorphosis from the routine of her present life. We feel that deep-down Edna Earle knows that her reason has been dulled by the drug salesman who has courted her all these years, but she chooses to hang on anyway to her dream that someday he will propose" (620). Carson's observations here are compelling because, in spite of her shared-reader tacit agreement that Mr. Springer has purportedly been courting Edna Earle "all these years," she nonetheless drops unmistakable clues that there is also, to Edna Earle's chagrin, something queer about him.

Mr. Springer's supposed queerness is, of course, prominently foregrounded in his steadfast recalcitrance about proposing marriage to Edna Earle. For her part, Edna Earle tries to breezily dismiss this inconvenient truth about their relationship as being the fault of his job. After all, as a drug salesman Mr. Springer has no choice but to traverse his "wide, wide territory," thus keeping him at a safe distance from the conventional domestic strictures emblemized by Edna Earle. Moreover, it is important to note that, according to Edna Earle, when Mr. Springer *does* return to Clay, he actively (and consistently) seeks out the company of Uncle Daniel rather than spending quality time

courting her. Uncle Daniel, after all, not only entertains Mr. Springer and makes him laugh uproariously—sometimes to the point where Uncle Daniel has to “beat him on the back to save him” (19). But more importantly, Uncle Daniel also epitomizes to Mr. Springer what Carson calls the unabashed, responsibility-free “Dionysian advocate of spontaneous life” (614).

Uncle Daniel’s spontaneity is a prominently queer attribute that attracts Mr. Springer to him, though it poses a significant conundrum for Edna Earle, who regards it as synonymous with immaturity and tacit effeminacy. Edna Earle even goes so far as to script this spontaneity as a xenophobic cautionary morality tale, noting to her listener, “There’s more than one moral to be drawn there, as I told Mr. Springer at the time, about straying too far from where you’re known and all—having too wide a territory” (20). Edna Earle’s implication, which she allegedly shares first with her ostensible paramour, is that staying too long away from “home” puts you at high risk for not only being exposed to different (read: non-normative) persons, but also potentially engaging in unseemly clandestine encounters. In so doing, she parrots Cold War anxieties about the apparent surge in visible subcultural deviants while trumpeting the prevailing ideologies of “safe” domesticity and normative marriage.

As Welty reaches the Teacake Magee episode proper, she allows Edna Earle to seamlessly meld these two competing mindsets into something that defiantly showcases the full range of extant queerness in metropolitan Clay. As expected, Uncle Daniel features prominently in this episode, which provides Edna Earle the opportunity to once again engage in her preferred bifurcated narrative strategy of simultaneously building him up and tearing him down. She kicks off her meandering recitation with a potent

barrage of barely veiled takedowns: “Uncle Daniel had got clear up to his forties before we ever dreamed that such a thing as love flittered through his mind. He’s so *sweet*. Sometimes I think if we hadn’t showed him that widow!” (20). Her first statement is a clear reference to the Ponder family’s open, marked concern about Uncle Daniel’s long-term bachelor status, a concern that Edna Earle punctuates with the caustically saccharine phrase “He’s so *sweet*.”

In my article on *Delta Wedding*, I point out that Welty utilizes the word “sweet” to devastating effect by employing it as a semantic stand-in for “queer.” Welty pointedly recapitulates this ironic “poisoned honey” strategy in this particular instance, with Edna Earle at once iterating Uncle Daniel’s goodness, chivalry (a point she emphasizes by repeatedly insisting that he is a “perfect gentleman”), and filial loyalty, while also broadly implying that he is far-removed from normative masculinity.¹² Edna Earle then proceeds to double down on this emasculating allegation by musing “Sometimes I think if we hadn’t showed him that widow,” which further cements her suspicion that, without direct female intercession, Uncle Daniel is likely to continue blazing his very queer path.

The widow to whom Edna Earle refers is, of course, Miss Teacake Magee, *née* Sistrunk, who Edna Earle describes as coming from a line of “big Baptists” (21). Edna Earle points this out to cleverly set up a religious class hierarchy with the Ponders, who

¹² There are in fact numerous thematic echoes to *Delta Wedding* embedded in *The Ponder Heart*. Welty’s dualistic use of “sweetness,” for instance, is interspersed throughout *Delta Wedding* in reference to brothers George and Denis Fairchild. Indeed, George and Denis appear to embody the inbuilt contradictions of “sweetness” foregrounded by Welty, who writes, “Sweetness then could be the visible surface of profound depths” (*DW* 46). A second prominent echo to *Delta Wedding* can be seen in Uncle Daniel’s pansexual propensity for affection, or what Edna Earle terms his “love of society.” Ellen, *Delta Wedding*’s predominant matriarchal figure, observes that George Fairchild is afflicted with this same type of all-abiding affection, so much so that he is often accused of “loving people too much” (*DW* 152).

are all “good Presbyterians” (20) that occupy a much higher social, ecclesiastical, and intellectual position than do the more pedestrian Baptists.¹³ Indeed, Edna Earle hints that the only reasons why Miss Teacake Magee would be a suitable match for Uncle Daniel (both socially and sexually) is because her late husband, “Professor” Magee, was “just real smart—smarter than the Sistrunks, anyway” (21). As such, he was evidently capable of conveying his intellectual prowess to his wife, if nothing else but by marital osmosis. According to Edna Earle, moreover, Professor Magee—like Uncle Daniel—also never had to work for a living. This potent combination of intellectual and supposed monetary stability helps Edna Earle overcome any lingering misgivings about Uncle Daniel “marrying down.”

John Edward Hardy has explained that the concept of “marrying down” manifests itself in *The Ponder Heart* through Uncle Daniel’s socially unfortunate marital choices. Hardy writes, “In his more or less adult life, Uncle Daniel twice marries beneath him, each time a step lower on the social scale” (100). Edna Earle is, unsurprisingly, not entirely thrilled with the way in which these marriages (including a farcical “Tom Thumb” wedding in Uncle Daniel’s childhood) have essentially degraded the Ponder family’s standing in Clay. She does, however, finally rationalize that regardless of class distinctions and their attendant social consequences, any marriage for Uncle Daniel is better than no marriage at all. After all, as Hardy points out, marriage is foremost in Edna

¹³ This Protestant “denominational hierarchy” is reflective of church attendee’s political affinities and educational levels, with “high” churches such as the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches generally being viewed as more liberal and having more educated parishioners, while Methodists and especially Baptists were seen as much more conservative and also less educated. See James Shortridge’s “Patterns of Religion in the United States” and Marie Eisenstein’s “Rethinking the Relationship between Religion and Political Tolerance in the U. S.” With regard to Southern religious hierarchies, see especially H. L. Mencken’s essay “Inquisition,” in which he coined the term “Bible Belt” in reference to the South’s overwhelmingly conservative Protestantism.

Earle's arsenal of things on which she can draw to distract attention from Uncle Daniels' "doubtful territory," or what Hardy refers to parenthetically as "the possibility that Uncle Daniel's troubles might stem from a source darker and deeper than either mind or heart" (101). Ultimately, Edna Earle knows that marriage will serve as the most utilitarian way to stave off or allay Uncle Daniel's continual slide into queerness.

Although Edna Earle expresses her relief over the intervention of Miss Teacake Magee in Uncle Daniel's life, she soon gets bored with extolling her virtues and again focalizes her narrative on her favorite two subjects: herself and Uncle Daniel. In so doing, Edna Earle interrupts her marital yarn with a protracted aside that, on its surface, appears to be a catalog of Uncle Daniel's prior female romantic interests. She begins her recollection by talking up her "Best Other Than Named" flower show win at the county fair, but she soon gets distracted by Uncle Daniel's evident interest in Intrepid Elsie Fleming, one of the fair's notable sideshow acts (22).

Given his supposed infatuation with Miss Teacake Magee, Edna Earle appears puzzled by Uncle Daniel's interest in Intrepid Elsie Fleming. Edna Earle describes her thus:

Intrepid Elsie Fleming rode a motorcycle around the Wall of Death—which let her do, if she wants to ride a motorcycle that bad. It was the time she wasn't riding I objected to—when she was out front on the platform warming up her motor. That was nearly the whole time. You could hear her day and night in the remotest parts of this hotel and with the sheet over your head, clear over the sound of the Merry-Go-Round and all. She dressed up in pants. (22)

It seems clear from her description that Uncle Daniel's fascination is because, at least from Edna Earle's viewpoint, Intrepid Elsie Fleming embodies difference. As such, she epitomizes the exact opposite of conservative, humdrum, conformist Miss Teacake

Magee. But Welty isn't content to let Intrepid Elsie Fleming be dismissed as merely "different." Instead, I argue that Welty scripts her as decidedly queer by portraying her as a rebellious embodiment of changing Cold War sexual mores. For starters, Intrepid Elsie Fleming rides a motorcycle, an apparent reference to the growing iconographic popularity of motorcycles in the 1940s and 1950s and the attendant morally and sexually ambiguous outlaw status of their riders.¹⁴

This perception of motorcyclists' sexual ambiguity became realized through biker clubs formed by gay veterans that were traumatized by their experiences in World War II. According to James Joseph Dean, the popularity of these clubs led to the ostensible creation of the gay leather community in the 1950s. These "leathermen" proudly and openly foregrounded "hard masculinity" through overtly eroticizing the male body through leather clothing and practicing a variety of "kink" sexual practices including sadomasochism, bondage, and discipline. Ultimately, as Dean reports, "this community remakes the gay male body into an aggressive instrument" by way of "rough and often public sex and a tough, intimidating dress style" (1493).

I certainly don't mean to imply that Intrepid Elsie Fleming is an ipso facto Weltian "leatherman," with all its attendant louche connotations. Yet I am nevertheless intrigued by Welty's choice to not only include this rather obviously symbolic "butch" character as part of *The Ponder Heart's* coterie, but also to put her in suggestively close proximity to Uncle Daniel. What is more, Welty amplifies Intrepid Elsie Fleming's extant "butch" affinity by casting her in the role of motorcycle daredevil who regularly traverses

¹⁴ See for instance Martin Rubin's impressive study of Cold War biker culture "Make Love Make War," in which he provides an in-depth exploration of the seminal 1954 biker film *The Wild One* and its enduring place in the American cultural landscape. Peter Hennen's *Fairies, Bears, and Leathermen* also provides a comprehensive review of how gay men have created historical subcultures to reflect community perceptions of masculinity.

the “Wall of Death.” This daredevil status transforms what is an already-suggestive masculine aura into something unmistakably performative. For even the most obtuse Welty reader, Intrepid Elsie Fleming’s masculine performativity is hardly a surprise. After all, as Helen Harper has pointed out, “masculinity can be and has been enacted by female characters in a wide range of historical and contemporary texts. Such enactments may or not be simple imitations of conventional or traditional masculinity, or what is often referred to somewhat erroneously as hegemonic masculinity” (510). Thus, through her daredevil antics at the Wall of Death, Intrepid Elsie Fleming easily eludes being caricatured as a “simple imitation of conventional or traditional masculinity” and instead becomes, essentially, more man than any man in Clay could ever be.

For Edna Earle, Intrepid Elsie Fleming’s dazzling gender performativity is puzzling but permissible (hence her snide remark “which let her do, if she wants to ride a motorcycle that bad”), since it tacitly removes the possibility that Uncle Daniel might express an interest in marrying her. However, almost as soon as Intrepid Elsie Fleming’s masculine re-construction seems complete, Edna Earle abruptly pivots back to a nagging worry about her inbuilt femininity. In so doing, she succumbs to what Victoria Flanagan calls, in a nod to Judith Butler’s classic queer theory text *Gender Trouble*, the “artifice of gender constructions” (79). With regard to this gender artificiality, Butler—one of the preeminent voices in the field of queer and gender theory—has observed that:

(T)he substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting an identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (24-25)

Edna Earle's confusion over Intrepid Elsie Fleming's performative "genderfuck" is, of course, perfectly understandable.¹⁵ Edna Earle is, after all, a "real" Southern woman born, raised, and fully inculcated into these "regulatory practices of gender coherence" that, in the Cold War-era South, would have special import. However, to Edna Earle's chagrin, she is wholly unable to adequately situate and regulate Intrepid Elsie Fleming's "true" gender within the confines of these practices. In frustration, Edna Earle pivots again, only this time dismissing Intrepid Elsie Fleming's performativity completely by dehumanizing her through a series of coded, overtly sexually-charged observations connecting (wo)man with machine: "It was the time she wasn't riding I objected to—when she was out front on the platform warming up her motor. That was nearly the whole time" (22). Edna Earle here is well aware that Intrepid Elsie Fleming represents a dangerous queer sexual presence, one that is intent on attracting attention from all persons within hearing distance including, naturally, Uncle Daniel.

This seemingly unabashed sexual display is especially intolerable for Edna Earle, who throughout *The Ponder Heart* continually presses her case for being regarded as metropolitan Clay's *sine qua non* suitable female presence, with all others not needing to apply. Thus, it is not easy to miss the unmistakable frustration in her voice as she tries, to no avail, to (literally) cover up "with the sheet over your head" any evidence of Intrepid Elsie Fleming's threatening, aggressive feminine sexuality. Finally, Edna Earle realizes that the only way she can effectively counteract this noisy onslaught of femininity is to

¹⁵ Definitions of "genderfuck" are generally conflated with "drag," cross-dressing, and androgyny. As Elisa Glick has explained, genderfuck is a politics of dissidence that links the discourse of "pro-sexuality to the identitarian ethos that has defined the new social movements since the 1950s and 1960s" (20). See thus Glick.

craftily recapitulate Intrepid Elsie Fleming's masculine predilection by noting, dismissively, "She dressed up in pants" (22).

Not surprisingly, Edna Earle's cross-dressing condemnation acts as a "robbing Peter to pay Paul" solution, because inasmuch as it solves the possible-marriage-to-a-clearly-unsuitable-female problem, it nevertheless reincarnates the specter of Uncle Daniel's queerness. To her chagrin, in fact, Edna Earle comes to this realization almost immediately. Right after she trots out her "she dressed up in pants" pronouncement, Edna Earle observes, "Uncle Daniel said he had to admire that" (22). Although it is easy to interpret Uncle Daniel's admiration as acknowledgment of Intrepid Elsie Fleming's bravery (on the motorcycle and in facing down the Wall of Death), it also seems clear that at least part of his admiration is with her unblinking, in-your-face individuality, not to mention her obvious "out-ness."

Indeed, as Edna Earle's recollection of Uncle Daniel's escapades at the Fair continues, it becomes increasingly evident that his vocalized esteem for Intrepid Elsie Fleming portends another eruption of queerness. As with his previous queer flare-ups, Edna Earle carefully tries to steer him back to the straight-and-narrow heteronormative path, but even she recognizes that this circumnavigation is ultimately a fool's errand. Following her yarn about Intrepid Elsie Fleming, Edna Earle reveals to her auditor, "I'll never forget when I first realized what fluttered through his mind" (22). Even though she says nothing more about what exactly she "first realized" (and steadfastly refuses to embellish further), the amorphous revelation Edna Earle blurts out is complicated by the peculiar term "fluttered," which I interpret as yet another Weltian nod to Uncle Daniel's effeminacy. Moreover, in spite of Edna Earle's repeated, stubborn stonewalling

throughout *The Ponder Heart* about rumors surrounding Uncle Daniel's preternaturally sweet and affectionate nature, it appears clear here that Edna Earle's realization is Welty's invitation for readers—and Edna Earle's auditor—to speculate freely.

This speculation is heightened even further as Edna Earle delves deeper into her county fair recollection, wherein she provides what appears at first glance to be a marked disavowal of Uncle Daniel's queerness. As is typical of her rhetorical strategy, however, Edna Earle vacillates on making any firm judgments. Immediately after remarking about Uncle Daniel's admiration of Intrepid Elsie Fleming's gender ambiguity, Edna Earle relates that he “belted me into the Ferris Wheel, then vanished, instead of climbing into the next car” (22-23). I interpret this seemingly innocuous act as Uncle Daniel's way of escaping—albeit momentarily—from Edna Earle's suffocating normative presence.

Edna Earle apparently sees it this way too, since she deploys the term “vanished” to express her surprise, dismay, and concern that he has essentially unshackled himself from her judgmental supervision. Yet Edna Earle, in spite of being (literally) untethered from him and flung headlong into the “middle of the air,” nevertheless manages to re-introduce the imprimatur of heterosexuality on Uncle Daniel. She watches with no small amount of relief as Uncle Daniel climbs up on the platform of the Escapades sideshow and begins flirting with the alluring, scantily clad showgirls. As Edna Earle tells it, “There he was—passing down the line of those girls doing their come-on dance out front, and handing them ice cream cones, right while they were shaking their heels to the music, not in very good time. He'd got the cream from the Baptist ladies' tent—banana, and melting fast” (23). Within her seemingly banal observation there is, as usual, a wealth of telling information packed in a remarkably small rhetorical space. Edna Earle, of course,

wants her auditor to imagine (and, more importantly, believe) that Uncle Daniel's "flittering" interest in the hyper-feminine Escapades performers signals his conscious refusal of Intrepid Elsie Fleming's butch queerness.

However, what actually transpires is far less normatively certain. For example, Uncle Daniel appears blithely unfazed by the dancers' "come-on dance" and seems more intent on handing out ice cream cones. But this isn't just any ice cream, as Edna Earle tells her listener. First off, it was procured from the Baptist ladies' tent, a bastion of upright propriety that stands in sharp relief to the burlesque entertainment of the Escapades showgirls. The Baptist ladies' tent also serves as an ephemeral reminder of Miss Teacake Magee's presence in Uncle Daniel's love life. Second, the ice cream proper was banana, an odd, exotic concoction that falls outside "normal" and expected spectrum of ice cream flavors. The banana also has an undeniable phallic connection that, in this instance, becomes an over-determined signifier of Uncle Daniel's apparent heterosexual desire for and tumescent reaction to the performers. Edna Earle quickly dispatches this possibility, though, by adding that the ice cream was "melting fast," indicating that his excitement (in every sense of the word) was conspicuously fading in the face of the dancers' assertive, defiantly unladylike sexuality.

In this short exchange, Edna Earle finds herself wrestling again with how to categorize Uncle Daniel. Although she evinces no small amount of exasperated delight with Uncle Daniel's showing interest in "real" females, as opposed to the queer femininity of Intrepid Elsie Fleming, Edna Earle is nevertheless conflicted by the performers' brazen classlessness and lack of gentility ostensibly exemplified by the Baptist ladies. Even more worrisome to her, though, is Uncle Daniel's personal reaction

to the Escapades showgirls. As was the case with Intrepid Elsie Fleming, Uncle Daniel here appears to be intrigued but not smitten, curious but still cautious, and ultimately, demonstrably unattracted to this mode of femininity.

In fact, after Edna Earle extricates herself from the Ferris Wheel, she races up to Uncle Daniel in an apparent attempt to rescue him from the performers' come-ons. What she finds instead is a decidedly nonplussed Uncle Daniel who, in her words, "stood there and hardly knew me, licking away and beside himself with pride and joy" (23). If we buy Edna Earle's reaction as genuine, then it is possible to interpret Uncle Daniel's "pride and joy" as his successful wrenching away from her so that he could prove once and for all his capability at finding and securing a woman.

This is, of course, exactly what Edna Earle would like her auditor to believe. But to her unceasing chagrin, Uncle Daniel always has other ideas. For instance, ensconced in Edna Earle's declaration that he was "beside himself with pride and joy" are the significantly innocuous observations that he "hardly knew me" and was "licking away" at the ice cream cone. Uncle Daniel's ignorance of Edna Earle here seems to be an in-your-face repudiation of her insistent heterosexual drive to get him settled down and married, ideally to a suitable female. He compounds this repudiation by defiantly licking the banana ice cream cone, which through its overt phallicism serves as a symbolic reminder to Edna Earle of his queerness. In fact, Uncle Daniel's display of "pride and joy" could also easily be interpreted as a fitting climax to this repudiation, becoming a sort of queer declaration of independence from the tyranny of Edna Earle's onerous campaign for compulsory heterosexuality.

Even a week later, the excitement over Uncle Daniel's queer county fair "outing" has barely subsided, although Edna Earle tries her best to normatively mitigate the ensuing fallout. She relates to her auditor:

He kept telling me for a week after, that those dancing girls wore beyond compare the prettiest dresses and feather-pieces he ever saw on ladies' backs in his life, and could dance like fairies. "They everyone smiled at me," he said. "And yet I liked Miss Elsie Fleming very well, too." So the only thing to be thankful for is he didn't try to treat Intrepid Elsie Fleming—she might have bitten him. (23)

Once again, Edna Earle attempts to foreground Uncle Daniel's heterosexual appreciation for the graceful female form and the sartorial finery associated therewith. It seems clear, however, that Edna Earle nevertheless has severe reservations about the performers' allegedly suspect moral character. Indeed, as she serves up her post hoc interpretation of Uncle Daniel's observation, it is nearly impossible to overlook her contemptuous dismissiveness. For example, she refers to the performers as "those dancing girls," a distinction that clearly demarcates the social class differences between burlesque showgirls and the upright Ponder clan. She reinforces this distinction by sneering about their gaudy and pretentious outfits, replete with ostentatious "feather-pieces" and scandalous open backs, which no respectable woman in Clay would be caught dead wearing.

Yet what Edna Earle utterly fails to take into account throughout her evisceration of the Escapades performers is that her explicit critique is taken, almost verbatim, from Uncle Daniel's unmistakably queer recollection. After all, "real" heterosexual men would hardly (if ever) fixate on the sartorial details of these exotic, alluring dancers and, more to the point, "real" heterosexual men would never further emphasize the dancers' femininity by pointing out that they "dance like fairies." This last observation, though ostensibly

reflective of Uncle Daniel's innocently childlike persona, contains within it a cleverly sly reference to Cold War homosexuality that most Welty readers would immediately recognize.

From a linguistic standpoint, the word "fairies" has historically been one of many insulting slurs leveled at "non-manly," effeminate men who were suspected of being homosexual.¹⁶ During the Cold War era, though, these exemplary homophobic slurs became an indelible part of American rhetoric and culture due in large part to the almost constant anxiety about homosexuals originating from the overarching masculinity crisis. As Kyle Cuordileone explains, during the Cold War period the prevailing sociocultural belief, promoted in no small measure by mid-century psychoanalysts, was that "male homosexuality was an adaptational response to the burdens of manhood and thus a flight from masculinity" (530).

This imagistic "flight from masculinity" can be seen clearly in both Edna Earle's prior comment about Uncle Daniel's "flittering" as well as in his own "dance like fairies" statement. But unlike Edna Earle, whose "flittering" remark is tinged with what I term "benign homophobia," Uncle Daniel manages to strip away any possible offensive or harmful implications from his "fairies" reference. He does so by first consciously humanizing these "fairies," noting that "They everyone smiled at me" (22). In so doing,

¹⁶ The use of "fairy" as slang for "effeminate male homosexual" was first recorded in 1895, and had become common euphemistic parlance during the time in which Welty composed this letter to Robinson. See for example Jonathon Green (ed.), *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* and Paul Jackson's *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military During World War II*. Don Kulick's "Gay and Lesbian Language" also provides an impressive and comprehensive historical overview of queer vernacular.

Uncle Daniel provides a pointed (if gentle) rejoinder to popular Cold War conceptions of homosexuals as predatory, sexually rapacious monsters.¹⁷

Second, he continues his defense of “fairies” by reiterating—to Edna Earle’s surprise—his admiration for Intrepid Elsie Fleming, though he does so with a curious elision. Rather than referring to her by the gender-neutral title “Intrepid,” Uncle Daniel instead acknowledges her heretofore-unmarked femininity, calling her “Miss Elsie Fleming.” It could of course be argued that this gendered re-inscription is another way in which Uncle Daniel humanizes queerness, in that he softens Elsie Fleming’s hard masculine persona in an attempt to remind Edna Earle that, ultimately, the daredevil motorcyclist is a female just like her and is therefore not someone of whom to be afraid.

Edna Earle, though, evinces a curiously defensive bifurcated reaction to Uncle Daniel’s deceptively innocuous statement. It seems clear that she hears his gendered marking, because she immediately responds by reinvigorating the name “Intrepid Elsie Fleming,” thereby throwing the motorcyclist’s gender and sexuality once again into question. Then, she effectively puts a hermetic seal on Intrepid Elsie Fleming’s identity by noting that if Uncle Daniel had tried to “treat” her, “she might have bitten him.” It appears that Edna Earle’s intention here is to use the threat of Elsie Fleming’s biting as another signifier for her uncivilized, unladylike behavior that would, of course, render her a totally unsuitable match (whether as a passing acquaintance or, worst case scenario, as a paramour) for Uncle Daniel. However, if we recall that Uncle Daniel’s “treat” was a

¹⁷ Rob Latham has pointed out that during the Cold War period there was rampant “otherizing” of “domestic enemies” such as Communists and queers, and that this “otherizing” was displayed prominently in 1950s alien invasion movies and “weirdie teenpics” that cinematically showcased anxieties over queer subversion and wayward youth. See Latham and also Harry Benshoff’s magisterial book *Monsters in the Closet*, which discusses the “monster queer” in British and American films from the 1930s to the 1990s.

banana ice cream cone, then Edna Earle's "biting" implication could be interpreted as a castration fantasy whereby Elsie Fleming, rather than passively accepting his phallic stand-in would, instead, bite it off.

This interpretation in fact fits neatly within the overarching Cold War masculinity crisis rhetoric that scripted men as weak, victimized by parasitic women, emasculated, and sexually distorted.¹⁸ But I would extend my interpretation further by speculating that Edna Earle wholly concocts Elsie Fleming's aggression as a way to deflect attention away from the salient fact that Uncle Daniel not only had every intention of offering himself up phallically to someone who was decidedly, openly queer, but also that this offering would have very likely been happily received and just as happily reciprocated. Through this act, Uncle Daniel overtly effeminizes himself and effectively becomes, in popular gay slang, a receptive "true bottom."

Faced with the embarrassing realization that Uncle Daniel has tacitly embraced a more feminized subject position among the town's denizens, Edna Earle sets about to rehabilitate his latent heteronormativity. In so doing, however, she executes a series of egregious missteps mostly involving Grandpa Ponder. Her first error is one of conscious omission. She relates, "As for Grandpa, I didn't tell him about the twelve banana ice cream cones or where they went, but he heard—he played dominoes with Judge Tip—and as soon as he got home from the Clanahans' he took a spell with his heart. The Ponder heart!" (23-24). Oddly enough, it seems here that Edna Earle not only opts to embrace the silent approach about Uncle Daniel's exploits at the County Fair (which would entail abdicating her rhetorical singularity), but she also accedes to the wholly

¹⁸ See Cuordileone. See also Philip Wylie's influential Cold War jeremiad *Generation of Vipers*, as well as Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s 1958 article "The Crisis of American Masculinity."

misguided belief that town talk about these same queer shenanigans will not filter back to Grandpa Ponder.

It could be, of course, that she is once again employing a “save-face” strategy for the ostensible benefit of her auditor. This strategy, though, is quickly put to the test with her strange mention of the twelve banana ice cream cones and “where they went.” Since Edna Earle has depended almost entirely on promoting the perception that Grandpa Ponder’s qualms about Uncle Daniel are firmly and ultimately centered on issues of profligacy, it seems evident that her mention of the twelve ice cream cones is yet another extravagant straw that will metaphorically break Grandpa Ponder’s back. But even so, there is still the matter of her conscious addition of “where they went.” It would appear that Edna Earle’s concern goes beyond mere economics, since she implies that the real reason why Grandpa Ponder “took a spell with his heart” wasn’t Uncle Daniel’s monetary wastefulness but was, instead, his “free love” offering to a group of de facto licentious “fairies.”

Not surprisingly, Grandpa Ponder’s “spell with his heart” reaction to Uncle Daniel’s apparent dissolute behavior is predictably dramatic because it provides the novella’s first direct example of the consequences associated with queerness. Edna Earle, in fact, clearly intends her auditor to make this connection, which also happens to coincide neatly with prevailing Cold War familial reactions to “out” declarations of homosexuality. Arlene Stein has reported that in the 1950s there existed a “functionalist view of the family” that structured the nuclear family as “ideally suited to keeping the wayward desires of individuals (particularly men) in check” (610). These “wayward desires” of course included any and all expressions of homosexuality, which represented

a profound problem in Cold War America. Indeed, as Cold War-era psychologist Talcott Parsons, who wrote extensively about homosexuality, has explained, “homosexuality’s nearly universal prohibition is a direct consequence of the ‘geometry’ of family structure” (103-104).

Throughout *The Ponder Heart*, however, this neat “geometry of family structure” is placed under severe duress, especially with regard to the novella’s eponymous clan. After all, Grandma Ponder—the most ostensibly “normal” genetic female—gets killed off in remarkably short order. Edna Earle, as I argued earlier, not so subtly implies that Grandpa Ponder isn’t entirely heterosexual and seems to be a tad too invested (both financially and emotionally) with protecting queer Uncle Daniel. And Edna Earle herself... well, bless her heart, but Edna Earle sees her life as a constant struggle to keep up proper appearances, to maintain a fading and increasingly obsolete business, and to try and snag an irritatingly uncooperative man before her biological clock winds down.

Interestingly enough, though, Welty executes in Grandpa Ponder a clever (if sardonically so) conversion scene following his initial “spell.” Here is what transpires, according to Edna Earle:

One morning when I carried Grandpa his early coffee, which he wasn’t supposed to have, he said to me, “Edna Earle, I’ve been debating, and I’ve just come to a conclusion.”

“What now, Grandpa?” I said. “Tell me real slow.”

Well, he did, and to make a long story short, he had his way; and after that he never had another spell in his life till the one that killed him—when Uncle Daniel had *his* way. The heart’s a remarkable thing, if you ask me. “I’m fixing to be strict for the first time with the boy,” was Grandpa’s conclusion. “I’m going to fork up a good wife for him. And you put your mind on who.” (24).

It appears that Welty enacts Grandpa's "conversion" from equivocal non-normativity to becoming a "born again" advocate for heteronormative marriage because she recognizes and tries to alleviate the Ponder clan's structural family distress. In so doing, the Ponder clan could be effectively reincorporated into the national Cold War containment narrative that was keen to promote the institution of marriage as a buttress against the immoral incursions of homosexuality. Historian James Gilbert has argued, in fact, that even though marriage was singled out as the most important, prevailing ideology in the 1950s, it was almost always perceived as being under attack. Gilbert writes, "given the huge government investment in the consumption-based domesticity that was situated physically in middle-class suburbs, and the equally significant psychological investment in marriage and a corporate economy with its bureaucratic work styles, homosexuality could plausibly seem to be a potent disruption to the stability of heterosexual marriage" (30).

Clay, Mississippi, is of course far removed from being considered a typical middle-class suburb (or, for that matter, a suburb at all), and the Ponders themselves could hardly be seen as operating under the onus of corporatized bureaucracy (in actuality, Edna Earle's oversight of the Beulah Hotel is far more benignly dictatorial). Nevertheless, it could be argued that the Ponders' "lifestyle"—especially with regard to Uncle Daniel's profligacy—could certainly be viewed as "consumption-based domesticity," albeit a domesticity that is peculiarly Southern. Moreover, Grandpa Ponder's forceful decision to "fork up a good wife" for Uncle Daniel dovetails neatly into

the overarching national psychological investment in marriage noted by Gilbert and other Cold War cultural historians.¹⁹

What better way, then, would it be for the Ponders to reenter the American mainstream than by having Grandpa Ponder at once repudiate any hints of his own allegedly queer affinity, while also creating in him a newfound compulsion to de-queer Uncle Daniel through heterosexual marriage? On surface, this seems to be exactly what happens, especially given Grandpa Ponder's pronouncement that he is "fixing to be strict for the first time" with Uncle Daniel. Not surprisingly, though, Welty allows that there is much more ambiguity in both this declaration than initially meets the eye. First, according to Edna Earle, Grandpa Ponder said that he had "been debating" and had "just come to a conclusion." Edna Earle, of course, devoutly wishes for Grandpa Ponder to be more resolute in his convictions—whether about his rediscovered heteronormativity or about converting Uncle Daniel to heterosexuality once and for all.

But by his own admission, Grandpa Ponder has some serious doubts about his decision to "fork up a good wife for him," an important equivocation that Edna Earle recognizes almost instantly and, just as quickly, ruefully acknowledges through her seemingly throwaway remark, "The Ponder heart!" Although this simple statement occurs in close proximity (and could thus be read as a specific reference) to Grandpa Ponder's "spell of the heart," I argue that she instead intends it to symbolize his emotional rumination over whether or not to forcefully re-direct Uncle Daniel's queer desires toward heteronormativity.

¹⁹ See for instance Robert J. Corber's *Homosexuality in Cold War America* and Steven Cohan's *Masked Men*.

That this rumination comes on the heels of Grandpa Ponder discovering that Uncle Daniel has apparently taken his “outness” one step too far is complicated further by the way in which this unpleasant news is disclosed. Grandpa Ponder, after all, does not learn the news of Uncle Daniel’s decidedly worrying action through Edna Earle, who would gloss over it appropriately while also providing rhetorical damage control for the family throughout the town’s populace. Rather, respected local magistrate Tip Clanahan—whose grandson DeYancey later serves as Uncle Daniel’s lawyer in the novella’s climactic murder trial—discloses this information.

Judge Tip’s knowledge of these misdeeds indicates to Grandpa Ponder that Uncle Daniel has not only tested the boundaries of tolerance in metropolitan Clay, but he has also dealt the family’s good name a potentially mortal blow. This twofold violation leads Grandpa Ponder to conclude that the only way of mitigating the inevitable social fallout is to force Uncle Daniel to marry quickly to someone that will provide appropriate normative “cover.” Grandpa Ponder’s “decisive” course of action is of course somewhat surprising, but it is hardly unexpected. After all, Grandpa Ponder understands too well that once these margins are crossed, there are likely to be fraught consequences, public censure, and possible retaliation as a result.

Along these same lines, Grandpa Ponder’s “final solution” for Uncle Daniel could also be interpreted as another Weltian comment on how the nation’s Cold War containment ethos was imposed on the South. As I have reiterated throughout this chapter, Southerners evinced a bifurcated ambivalence about othered individuals, provided that they hew to certain societal expectations and standards of acceptability. Pete Daniel, for instance, has observed that while Southerners displayed a “seemingly

pervasive Puritanism regarding deviance from heterosexual behavior,” they nevertheless enjoyed exhibiting “ribaldry and appreciation for at least mildly transgressive rituals” (157-158).

The emphasis here is, of course, on actions and activities that are merely mildly transgressive. But by making Uncle Daniel’s queerness essentially unambiguous, Welty solidifies his position as *The Ponder Heart*’s metonymic signifier for overarching American Cold War anxieties about an otherness that is unfettered and uncontained. Therefore, Grandpa Ponder has no choice but to enact a forceful normative intercession on Clay’s ostensible favorite son specifically in order to re-establish hegemonic control.

The type of hegemonic policing that Grandpa Ponder threatens, but ultimately fails to enact, is in fact mirrored in overarching Cold War fealty to the concretization of a singular American national identity that actively punished any dissension, be it regional or personal. Eric Keenaghan has remarked, “during the Cold War in the United States, it was *imperative* that modern subjects identify through the rubric of nation in spite of what it cost citizens or their senses of their primary identities” (62, emphasis in original). Although Grandpa Ponder makes it apparent that he is clearly conflicted and “debating” about inflicting an ideologically constricting heteronormative imperative on Uncle Daniel, he nevertheless realizes that the sociocultural stability of metropolitan Clay depends on his so doing. In this way, Welty transforms Grandpa Ponder from an ambivalent, quasi-permissive Southerner into an (albeit wholly unwitting) arbiter of American Cold War containment who believes that societal stability trumps familial variability.

Even though Welty attempts to humorously downplay this transformation, the importance of Grandpa Ponder's attitudinal makeover here cannot be overstated. As historian Jane Sherron de Hart has stated, Cold War culture and society depended heavily on these arbiters to produce "strenuous, systematic efforts to maintain traditional gender and sexual boundaries, ideologically as well as behaviorally, through cultural imperatives and social policy" (130). Indeed, Grandpa Ponder appears to vocalize his commitment to maintaining normative cultural imperatives and social policies through his resolute pronouncement to "be strict for the first time with the boy" by "fork[ing] up a good wife for him." However, Welty is also mindful that Grandpa Ponder's determination will always be tempered, if not compromised entirely, by his steadfast loyalty to the South.

As numerous scholars have noted, this regional loyalty included an inbuilt suspicion of what could be called "exemplary Americanism." For instance, geographer David Jansson, whose academic work primarily focuses on showcasing the South as a preeminent example of "internal Orientalism," writes that in the United States, "the most prominent regional other is the South," an ideological position that allowed it to serve as a "receptacle for the country's shadow" (a collection of vices that are considered to be uniquely Southern) (352). Leigh Anne Duck has also remarked that, in the eyes of most Americans, "the South constituted a site of profound cultural alterity" (9). It is precisely the South's position as the country's "receptacle" for various and sundry vices and exemplary alterity that, especially during the Cold War period, made it crucial to be contained under an American mainstream ethos.

The only problem with this strategy, however, was that this same ethos was under constant duress due to struggles with inconsistencies in what Alan Nadel has referred to

as the “logic of containment” (3). Nadel argues that throughout the long Cold War, the United States repeatedly wrestled with “self-reflexive examinations of containment’s blindness, its contradictions, and its duplicities,” thereby constantly and consciously disrupting and contesting the “necessity of boundaries cordoning off individuals, communities, nations” (Kennaghan 61). These contradictions can be easily detected in Grandpa Ponder’s active struggle with his ostensible “civic duty” to upbraid and contain Uncle Daniel, who represents the novella’s exemplary vice receptacle. In fact, Grandpa Ponder seems so decidedly ambivalent about his role as normative arbiter that he quickly passes over the responsibility for “forking up a wife” for Uncle Daniel to Edna Earle, who he instructs to “put your mind on who” (24).

Predictably, Edna Earle sees this abdication coming, or at least this is what is intuited to her auditor. Edna Earle declare proudly, through a temporally disruptive preceding observation that, as a result of Grandpa Ponder’s problematic “fixing to be strict for the first time” conclusion, “he had his way; and after that he never had another spell in his life till the one that killed him—when Uncle Daniel had *his way*” (24). Inasmuch as Grandpa Ponder appears cautiously resolute in his decision, Edna Earle knows that the responsibility for executing his “conclusion” lies with her. Thus, when Grandpa Ponder provides to her this fortuitous opening, she seizes the opportunity to essentially normalize Uncle Daniel by any means necessary, even though she curiously (if defiantly) acknowledges that this project will ultimately fail.

Given Edna Earle’s preeminent role in the Ponder household, Grandpa Ponder’s placing on her the onus of finding Uncle Daniel a suitable wife isn’t entirely unexpected. What is interesting, though, is that Grandpa Ponder’s action flies in the face of

overarching Cold War concerns about women's roles within the family system. Women were, after all, called upon to embrace the domestic sphere as part of their loyal service to the nation. Marriage was of course central to this almost compulsory domesticity, so much so that as May has observed, in the Cold War era, "writers of the prescriptive literature began to advocate early marriage as the prerequisite for a healthy family and sexual life" (*Homeward Bound* 88). But rather than hewing to these traditional societal mores, Grandpa Ponder instead effectively transforms Edna Earle into Uncle Daniel's matchmaker so that she can support him in finding potential marital partners.

As per usual with Edna Earle, she evinces decided ambivalence about her matchmaker role for Uncle Daniel. At first, of course, Edna Earle puts on a stoic demeanor so her listener can understand that helping Uncle Daniel escape from various scrapes and indiscretions is something she is habituated to doing. However, her stoicism quickly fades as she realizes the utter folly of Grandpa Ponder's pronouncement. She tells Grandpa Ponder, for instance, that suitable marital options for Uncle Daniel are, at best, limited:

"I'll do my best, Grandpa," I said. "But remember we haven't got the whole wide world to choose from any more. Mamie Clanahan's already engaged to the man that came to put the dial telephones in Clay. Suppose we cross the street to the Baptist Church the first Sunday you're out of danger." (24-25)

Edna Earle's response here implies here that there is only one person in the entire Clay metropolitan area that would be appropriate for Uncle Daniel: Mamie Clanahan who, though not provided an in-depth character sketch, is nevertheless evidently kin to both Judge Tip and, significantly, attorney DeYancey. As such, the message Edna Earle

intends to convey here is that Mamie Clanahan would be a perfect companion for Uncle Daniel due to her position as member of one of Clay's upper-crust families.

However, almost as soon as Edna Earle proposes this possibility to Grandpa Ponder, she walks it back by noting that Mamie Clanahan is already engaged to—*horribile dictu*—an unnamed journeyman telephone installer. This engagement indicates two things for Edna Earle. First, Mamie Clanahan is “marrying down,” hitching herself to what Edna Earle implies is a common laborer, and is thereby abdicating her previously vaunted social position. Second, Edna Earle gives the impression that the telephone installer came in from out of town and was only in Clay for a short while. Thus, Mamie is also likely to leave Clay and resettle with her intended in some faraway locale, a concept that Edna Earle finds inconceivable and more than a little bit frightening in light of her own tenuous relationship with traveling salesman Mr. Springer.

As well, Edna Earle's skepticism and attendant anxiety about Mamie Clanahan's supposed impending departure is also representative of larger Southern attitudes about societal and technological changes that were becoming increasingly evident during the Cold War years. Historian Susan Hartmann has observed that while “conflicting elements in Cold War thought not only helped sustain cultural conservatism,” it also “promoted gender role changes” (86). To Edna Earle, Mamie Clanahan appears to epitomize these conflicting Cold War thought processes. After all, although Mamie is engaged to an itinerant laborer, this same workman also happens to be in charge of installing new technology (dial telephones!) in Clay. Furthermore, for Mamie Clanahan this engagement means mobility, an escape from the stifling confines of Clay, and an enhanced opportunity to “see the world” (or at least the world outside metropolitan Clay).

Complicating matters even further, there are hints that Edna Earle also believes there is something going on between Uncle Daniel and another Clanahan: DeYancey. As I argued earlier, Edna Earle has, by this point in *The Ponder Heart*, already expressed anxious suspicions about Uncle Daniel and Mr. Springer's affectionate friendship. These suspicions are heightened further by the abrupt ascendancy of DeYancey Clanahan's presence in Uncle Daniel's life, a presence that becomes increasingly intimate as the novella progresses.

Southern blogger Hunter Murphy has in fact introduced the intriguing possibility that, like Uncle Daniel and Mr. Springer, DeYancey Clanahan and Uncle Daniel shared what could be termed a Weltian "bromance," a portmanteau term derived from "brother" and "romance" and often used coterminous with "homosocial," albeit without the attendant phobic freight attached to the prefix "homo." Murphy buttresses his claim by pointing out that DeYancey obviously loves Uncle Daniel and vice versa, so much so that they considered themselves affectionate best friends throughout the novella.

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter for a protracted discussion of Uncle Daniel and DeYancey's close relationship, it is certainly something to consider given Edna Earle's abrupt dismissal of Mamie Clanahan. In fact, Edna Earle's foreknowledge-in-hindsight of this "bromance" appears to be her calculated attempt to distance Uncle Daniel from the *entire* Clanahan family, regardless of their illustrious social standing in Clay. Edna Earle quickly realizes, however, that this tactic will also necessitate both widening her search and lowering her standards, which includes crossing a heretofore-anathematized literal and figurative social line by having to "wife shop" for Uncle Daniel at the Baptist Church.

Fortunately for Edna Earle, this wife-shopping soiree is made mercifully short through what seems to be the “divine intervention” of Miss Teacake Magee, whose heavenly voice immediately entrances Uncle Daniel. As Edna Earle recalls in this long excerpt:

So up rose Miss Teacake Magee from the choir—her solo always came during collection, to cover up people rattling change and dropping money on the floor—and when I told Uncle Daniel to just listen to that, it didn’t throw such a shadow over his countenance as you might have thought.

“Miss Teacake’s got more breath in her than those at the Fair, that’s what she’s got,” he whispers back to me. And before I could stop his hand, he’d dropped three silver dollars, his whole month’s allowance, in the collection plate, with a clatter that echoed all over that church. Grandpa fished the dollar out when the plate came by him, and sent me a frown, but he didn’t catch on. Uncle Daniel sat there with his mouth in an O clear through the rest of the solo. It seems to me it was “Work, for the Night is Coming.” But I was saying to myself, Well, Edna Earle, she’s a Sistrunk. And a widow well taken care of. And she makes and sells those gorgeous cakes that melt in your mouth—she’s an artist. Forget about her singing. So going out of church, I says, “Eureka, Grandpa. I’ve found her.” And whispers in his ear.

“Go ahead, then, girl,” says he. (25)

Go on, girl, indeed. Although this scene appears on first reading to be a straightforward retelling of Edna Earle’s success in securing a potential mate for Uncle Daniel, Welty embeds within it a surprising number of rhetorical oddities. The first oddity is Edna Earle’s amazingly intimate knowledge of Baptist liturgical structure, including knowing the exact moment in which Miss Teacake Magee performs her solo. For someone that proudly (and loudly) proclaims herself to be a staunch Presbyterian who openly scorns Baptists, Edna Earle’s detailed description of both Miss Teacake Magee’s musical position within the church service and its intended, through probably never actually articulated, purpose comes as quite a surprise.

Furthermore, Edna Earle also indicates that she has been acquainted firsthand with Miss Teacake Magee's singing prowess. Her disclosure, another rhetorical oddity, is both curious and disquieting because it implies that Edna Earle has been preemptively casing out Miss Teacake Magee in order to validate her attributes for Uncle Daniel's (and Grandpa Ponder's) benefit. This careful, close observation is of course necessary because Edna Earle knows too well that she will need to marshal all of Miss Teacake Magee's positive qualities, along with deploying an expansive variety of shifting tactical maneuvers, to win over Uncle Daniel and effectively convert him to heteronormativity.

It is thus no real surprise that the fruits of Edna Earle's surveillance are borne out in the church. After all, Edna Earle is keenly aware that all the females about whom Uncle Daniel has previously expressed a queer kinship have been portrayed as "bad girls" from bad places. Edna Earle thus believes that by "churching" Uncle Daniel, therefore, she can impress on him the demonstrative advantages of courting—and hopefully marrying—an ostensibly virtuous woman.

To Edna Earle's amazement, Uncle Daniel initially seems to grudgingly accept this normalizing marital endeavor, and he seems plainly enthralled by Miss Teacake Magee's vocal pyrotechnics. Welty makes it abundantly clear, however, that there is little attraction to Miss Teacake Magee from Uncle Daniel beyond her singing. Indeed, Welty elides any extended physical description of the church soloist, instead relying on Uncle Daniel's curious observation, "Miss Teacake's got more breath in her than those at the Fair, that's what she's got." I interpret this remark as Uncle Daniel's rhetorically sly comment about Miss Teacake Magee's "full" figure, especially given that he juxtaposes it with a subtle reference to the willowy "fairies" cavorting at the Fair. Moreover, Edna

Earle herself appears to reinforce the perception of Miss Teacake Magee's voluptuous physiognomy by noting that "she makes and sells those gorgeous cakes that melt in your mouth" and, later, asking her for recipes "enough times" (27).

In fact, remarkably little time elapses before Uncle Daniel begins to evince impatience and displeasure with Edna Earle's "arranged marriage" choice for him. Even though he evidently enjoys Miss Teacake Magee's singing throughout this scene, Uncle Daniel nevertheless makes a concerted show of loudly dropping three silver dollars into the collection plate, causing such clatter that it overwhelms even the most earnest (and loud) notes emanating from the soloist. Grandpa Ponder, whose concerns about Uncle Daniel in this episode focus primarily on finances, is predictably annoyed by his show of extravagance.

I argue, however, that Welty metaphorically deploys the three silver dollars as a twofold symbol. The first symbolic usage is that of betrayal, alluding to the obvious Biblical thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas for turning over Jesus to the Roman authorities (Mt. 27:3). During the Cold War, this same monetary betrayal iconography was also frequently evinced throughout the McCarthy/HUAC hearings, in which friends turned against friends, selling each other out to avoid being tarred by McCarthy's commies and queers brush.²⁰

The second symbolic monetary reference Welty embeds is to that of prostitution, such that Uncle Daniel's three silver dollars represent his price paid for Miss Teacake Magee. Grandpa Ponder, it seems, immediately intuits the inbuilt metaphoric meanings

²⁰ Perhaps the most obvious and direct connection between this betrayal iconography and McCarthy is Howard Fast's 1954 play *Thirty Pieces of Silver*. The play centers on what Fast has called the McCarthy witch-hunt in America and its effect on one man, a minor Washington functionary who signs an untrue declaration denouncing his friend, who is suspected by the FBI of being a traitor.

behind Uncle Daniel's offertory, and he attempts to do damage control by first retrieving the coins and then shooting a pronounced frown at Edna Earle, who seems (at least by her own interpretation) to be calculatingly oblivious to both Uncle Daniel's sense of betrayal and his de facto purchasing of Miss Teacake Magee.

Even so, Edna Earle drops her guard by noting that in the instant "before I could stop his hand," she had already essentially read Uncle Daniel's mind and knew what would be his reaction to her matchmaking machinations. Nevertheless, Edna Earle smoothly elides her blunder and pivots back to Grandpa Ponder. She tacitly reminds him through her observation "he didn't catch on" that the whole "wife-shopping" enterprise was ultimately his idea and that, faced with the dearth of suitable females in Clay, Miss Teacake Magee has to be their first and best choice for Uncle Daniel, regardless of her physical or spiritual shortcomings.

This is not to say, however, that Edna Earle completely abdicates her role in essentially "pimping" out Miss Teacake Magee to Uncle Daniel. In fact, she follows up this ecclesiastical exchange with Grandpa Ponder by once again seizing the matrimonial momentum, although she does so by relaying to her auditor a long and curious explication of Grandpa Ponder's long history of marital ambivalence. According to Edna Earle:

Grandpa would be a lot more willing to stalk up on a wedding and stop it, than to encourage one to go on. Anybody's—yours, mine, or the Queen of Sheba's. He regarded getting married as a show of weakness of character in nearly every case but his own, because he was smart enough to pick a wife very nearly as smart as he was. But he was willing to try anything once for Uncle Daniel, and Miss Teacake got by simply because Grandpa knew who she was—and a little bit because of her hair as black as tar—something she gets from Silver City and puts on herself in front of the mirror. (26)

As usual, Welty ensconces a great deal of information in the space of a few sentences. For instance, Edna Earle's seemingly offhanded mention of the Queen of Sheba's nuptials is in fact a shrewd comment not only on Grandpa Ponder's marriage, but also on the proposed union between Uncle Daniel and Miss Teacake Magee. As historian C. H. Toy observes, the Queen of Sheba became and is still "a name for all that is magnificent and intellectually curious" (207), albeit one who is also chaste. Indeed, biblical verses that specifically mention the Queen of Sheba's relationship with the notoriously philandering King Solomon contain no hints of sexual attraction and instead refer to the two monarchs as engaging solely in intellectually stimulating activities (I Ki. 10:1-13).

It appears evident in Edna Earle's observation that Grandpa Ponder sees his marriage to Grandma as similar to that of Sheba and Solomon, even down to both marital models foregrounding intellectualism over sexuality or procreation. But by the same token, Grandpa Ponder's sexless marriage can also be interpreted as another hint to his queerness, a lineage he is only too happy to pass down to Uncle Daniel. Accordingly, when Grandpa Ponder does in fact accede to letting Uncle Daniel marry Miss Teacake Magee, then it stands to reason that he would logically forecast a similar queer marital outcome. For Edna Earle, though, this non-procreative logic flies in the face of reason because it effectively spells the end of the Ponder family. More importantly, however, it also represents a conscious flouting of Cold War domestic ideology that mandated sustainable normative nuclear families.

As the Teacake Magee episode draws to a close, Edna Earle tries valiantly to salvage some semblance of normativity by foregrounding herself in the matrimonial arena. She does so by concocting a romantic relationship with Mr. Springer, even going

so far as to imagine what it would be like being married to him. She states, “I used to think if I ever did step off with, say, Mr. Springer, Uncle Daniel wouldn’t mind; he always could make Mr. Springer laugh. And I could name the oldest child after Grandpa and win him over quick before he knew it. Grandpa adored compliments, though he tried to hide it. Ponder Springer—that sounds perfectly plausible to me, or did at one time” (26-27). Predictably for Edna Earle, hindsight is always 20/20 because, as she discloses to her listener, the carefully planned (if utterly fantasized) romance with Mr. Springer—literally and figuratively—never bore fruit. Edna Earle is of course careful not to blame anyone for this failed relationship, though she does hint that it sputtered and ultimately fizzled because of Uncle Daniel’s queer eye for Mr. Springer.

Oddly enough, though, this intimation comes with a significantly queer caveat, since Edna Earle *herself* admits that any relationship between her and Mr. Springer will necessarily be a threesome triangulated by Uncle Daniel. She states, for example, what is apparently common knowledge among the denizens of metropolitan Clay, “Of course, I’m intended to look after Uncle Daniel and everybody knows it, but in plenty of marriages there’s three—three all your life. Because nearly everybody’s got somebody” (26). Edna Earle’s statement naturally references her assumptive role as Uncle Daniel’s caretaker, but I would not be amiss in suggesting that Welty also uses it as an allusion to her own fading relationship with John Robinson. As Suzanne Marrs, Harriet Pollack, and others have noted, coincident with *The Ponder Heart*’s publication in 1954, Welty was also watching her paramour John Robinson deepen his own homosexual romance with Enzo Rocchigiani, leaving her as the quasi-“odd man out.”

So too, apparently, is Edna Earle. As we learn later in the novella, Mr. Springer fails to become Edna Earle's fulltime man because, as she reveals, Mr. Springer was profoundly disloyal not only to her, but also to Uncle Daniel. For Uncle Daniel's part, his union with Miss Teacake Magee predictably crumbles, as does his disastrously ill-fated marriage to white trash parvenu Bonnie Dee Peacock. But even though Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel both suffer and survive many slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, by novella's end Edna Earle remains a proud and unbowed spinster whose eye remains open to finding the proper mate for her eccentric, if always beloved, queer uncle.

CHAPTER TWO
QUEER BE DRAGONS:
HOMOEROTIC IDENTITY AND COLD WAR POETICS IN
ROBERT PENN WARREN'S
"THE BALLAD OF BILLIE POTTS" AND *BROTHER TO DRAGONS*¹

With the publication of *Delta Wedding* in 1945 and *The Ponder Heart* in 1954, Welty was in fact enjoying a particularly successful episode in her writerly life. However, for Welty's ostensible literary mentor, Robert Penn Warren, this same period represented a wrenching creative watershed. As Richard G. Law has noted, "early Warren is best remembered for his prose, especially *All the King's Men*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1946, a handful of short stories collected and republished in 1948, and three or four critical essays, the best of which appeared before 1951" ("Fact of Violence" 560). During this time frame, Warren admitted in a 1956 interview with Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter that he "quit writing poems for several years; that is, I'd start them, get a lot down, then feel that I wasn't connecting somehow. I didn't finish one for several years, they felt false" (36). Later, in a 1970 interview with Richard B. Sale, Warren expanded on his feeling of frustration during the interregnum between the appearance of *All the King's Men* and the publication of *Brother to Dragons* in 1953. Warren recalled that during this almost decade-long period, "Not one [poem] panned out. I threw them all away, and some of them were going OK. I couldn't finish them; they died on me. For ten years, every one of them died" (341).

This false feeling, of course, ended abruptly with *Brother to Dragons* (1953), Warren's self-defined "tale in verse and voices." Warren described this work as emblematic of a "hybrid genre" (11) that, according to Law, consisted of "free-flowing

¹ A shortened version of this chapter appeared in the Spring 2002 issue of *Mississippi Quarterly*. I thank managing editor Laura West and the staff at *MQ* for allowing me to reprint that essay here.

dialogue which combines the qualities of both prose and verse, lyric and drama” and in which Warren could reflect and reassess his personal relationship to both art and life (“Fact of Violence” 561). In *Brother to Dragons* this reassessment produced a complex thematic array that is haunted by what Frederick McDowell calls an overarching “anguished sense of the disparity in man between recurrent beatific vision and the ubiquitous evil which blights it” (46). However, it also revealed what I argue is Warren’s dirty little secret: a deeply closeted curiosity about queer miscegenation. This curiosity found its first poetic expression in the eerie frontier tale “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943) but later deepened and flourished in *Brother to Dragons* as a result of Warren’s increasingly malleable opinions especially about race, but also about homosexuality, during the Cold War period.

Warren critic Lucy Ferriss has warned readers and critics who might conflate autobiography with authorial intent, “Warren’s characters should not be made to answer for Warren, their creator” (2). However, particularly in the years leading up to and extending through his college life at Vanderbilt University, Warren was no stranger to what gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called “male homosocial desire” (*Epistemology* 186). Sedgwick explained that this desire consisted of “compulsory relationships [such] as male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination, and heterosexual rivalry all involve forms of investment that force men into the arbitrarily mapped, self-contradictory, and anathema-riddled quicksands of the middle distance of male homosocial desire” (186).

In 1922, as a young poet at Vanderbilt, Warren himself first traversed this “treacherous distance” by befriending another poet, Allen Tate. The two aspiring poets

quickly formed a close bond and soon began sharing rooms, with the slightly older Tate acting as mentor, critic, and most importantly, quasi-older brother to Warren. During his stay at Vanderbilt, Warren's feelings for Tate grew increasingly stronger. As Warren biographer Joseph Blotner noted, the intensity of Warren's feeling for Tate became clearly evident in his letters, so much so that it surpassed "mere" homosocial friendship and, instead, came to resemble homosexual desire. Blotner adds that, while Warren would routinely close letters to his other Vanderbilt friends "Affectionately," to Tate he would sign "with love." Blotner further relates a 1924 episode in which Warren petulantly chided Tate for delaying his visit to Warren's Guthrie, Kentucky, home. Warren told Tate, "If you don't come on now I shall never forgive," and only after Tate arrived did Warren appear "full and contented" (50).

On viewing these examples of Warren's rather obvious homosocial attraction to Allen Tate, Blotner queries rhetorically, "Was there a homosexual element in his feeling for the dapper, charming, and assiduous ladies' man?" before concluding (albeit circumspectly), "If there was, it was most probably latent rather than overt or pathological, and the heterosexual feelings . . . would reappear powerfully after he left Vanderbilt, the place where he psychological stresses were greatest in this, his late adolescence" (50). Although Blotner attributes Warren's homosexual desire ultimately to adolescent anxiety about his masculinity, given the highly charged sexuality coursing through *Brother To Dragons*, it is very plausible that Warren drew upon and exploited these feelings of same-sex desire in the writing of the poem.

In this chapter I illustrate how Warren's conscious insertion of his persona in his wartime works—specifically "The Ballad of Billie Potts"—and the Cold War epic

Brother to Dragons, which included the amanuensis R.P.W. in its dramatis personae, allowed him to personally wrestle with violently contentious Cold War issues such as race and homosexuality. In so doing, I offer a queer expansion on John Burt's assertion that Warren's Cold War compositions are ultimately concerned with how "sexual and political fallenness illuminate each other" and show how the characters in these two pieces "always treat politics as the tenor and sex as the vehicle" for foregrounding this illumination ("Purity, Panic" 147).

Indeed, while Warren seemed to struggle with notions of othered sexuality throughout his life (and especially during the turbulence of the 1940s and 1950s), his progressive transition in terms of race and racial politics during this time period is certainly not news. Southern studies scholar Richard King, for example, has observed that Warren carved a textual trail from his openly racist essay "The Briar Patch" (1930) to far more even-handed (if still deeply problematic) treatments of the state of Cold War Southern race relations in *Brother to Dragons* and in the brief study *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956). Yet while King finds in these two works evidence of Warren's personal conversion *cum* cultural awakening with regard to race, he nevertheless also views them as full of questionable earnest moralizing arising from Warren's own internal conflicts with the era's changing psychological, social, and sexual landscapes.

In fact, King questions whether these internal conflicts become realized as a sort of identity crisis that evinces itself through the theme of moral and psychological self-division pervading Warren's Cold War oeuvre. He, however, judiciously avoids psychoanalyzing Warren in favor of remarking on the conformist fallaciousness of his

moral arbiter position, “But much of Warren’s moralizing seems to be a cover for something else, a fundamental fear of appearing moral or committed to a cause beyond the individual” (286).

While I agree with King that this “cover for something else” perfectly illustrates Warren’s personal conflict with the changing landscape of American race relations, I am especially intrigued by it in light of Warren’s predominately negative opinion about homosexuality. As late as 1970, in an interview with Marshall Walker, Warren was opining about homosexuality being contrary to nature. Warren aired this view in the context of his novel *At Heaven’s Gate* (1943), noting that in spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—its contemporary urban setting, it was heavily influenced by Dante’s *Inferno* and was consciously populated with easily recognizable examples of “various crimes against nature” such as the “usurer, the great banker, and Sarrett, the homosexual,” who were all “straight out of the Circle” (236). Warren stated that he included these particular damned individuals to illustrate a “society where nature is being violated one way or another, and all the characters are somehow *denying* nature” (236, emphasis in original). This is Warren at his moralizing best, yet it is difficult to ignore the sneaking suspicion that lurking behind Warren’s lofty authorial position is, as King puts it, “a fundamental fear,” not just of appearing to be an (albeit morally upstanding) prig or a self-involved, self-obsessed pedant, but also of being thought of as protesting too much.²

² Michael Kreyling is not nearly as charitable as is King with respect to Warren’s racial and sexual paradigm shifts. As Kreyling states, “In my view, Warren did not exactly fear the ‘appearance’ of being moral, but rather the actual and psychological dues for ‘being’ moral” (271). By this, I take Kreyling to mean that while Warren was more than happy delivering moralistic pronouncements thus establishing himself as a figurative voice of reason and intellect, he nonetheless elided many (if not all) of the associated implications undergirding those same

On this point, I want to turn to a later article by Richard Law in which he provides a lively and lengthy discussion of *At Heaven's Gate*. Law observes that in this novel, Warren ironically put his own notions into the mouths of his least sympathetic characters. Law focuses specifically on this practice by noting its overt presence in Slim Sarrett, the novel's aforementioned homosexual, and states that in spite of being a "pathological liar, poseur, and murderer," Warren nevertheless casts him as a "New Critic, thus making him both a spokesman for the aesthetic concepts underlying the composition of the novel and the subverter of those same concepts" ("Fires of Irony" 93-94). Sarrett's position as an ostensible "New Critic" is further solidified by his status as a graduate student and poet, which establishes a surprisingly strong resemblance to Warren himself and thus heightens the perception of Sarrett as another in a long string of authorial stand-ins. Moreover, Sarrett continually harps on the theme of self-discovery, which would become a constant in Warren's works, while also critiquing what Law sees as the self-same "failure of the individual to discover the terms on which he must live" ("Fires of Irony" 94).

If indeed Warren designed Sarrett to be his ostensible mouthpiece in *At Heaven's Gate*, then it would not be too far a stretch to argue that Warren also shared with his character no small amount of sexual otherness. In fact, what I find especially intriguing about Sarrett's almost constant foregrounding of self-discovery is that he does so through explicitly queer terms. Here, for example, is how Sarrett scripts self-discovery to Sue Murdock, in what reads suspiciously like a coming-out narrative:

morals. In other words, particularly during the 1950s, Warren portrayed himself as a Cold War pioneer bravely addressing a changing real world, yet all the while he was blithely ignoring or cautiously avoiding the often messy realities and revelations directly associated with these changes. See thus Kreyling, "Robert Penn Warren: The Real Southerner and the Hypothetical Negro."

The world has provided you with a vast number of stereotyped responses in which you are schooled from infancy. The son who discovers his mother to be a whore must be overcome by shame. The person who wants to live—actually *live*, actually *identify* himself—must struggle against the stereotyped. The traditional discipline for struggling against the stereotype is art. But at that time I was younger, and more uncertain. I admit that, at that first moment, I did experience shame. But even as I stood there and looked down the bright street, the shame left me. I felt completely at peace. (167)

Sarrett's declaration of self-affirmation is both surprising and surprisingly poignant and progressive, especially considering the time of the novel's publication. However, this progressivism has definite limits, and Warren takes protracted pains to remind his readers to be cautious and remember Sarrett's numerous pathological shortcomings. He does so by highlighting Sarrett's various and increasingly disturbing actions throughout the novel, actions that culminate in the murder of Sue Murdock, Sarrett's alleged heteronormative love interest, after she mocks and ultimately rejects him after discovering evidence of his homosexuality.

Not coincidentally, Sarrett's exploits are infused with tropes of mental instability, misogyny, lack of control, and profound amorality common to wartime and Cold War perceptions about homosexuals, and of which Warren was undoubtedly aware. Indeed, as historian Kirstin Gay Esterberg has observed, by the end of World War II, views of medical and psychiatric professionals about homosexuals were pervasive in the public consciousness. These views included, but were certainly not limited to, perceptions of homosexuals as suffering from "arrested development and family pathology," while homosexuality itself was seen as an "illness that should be cured" (65). Thus, I argue that Sarrett appears to be a convenient vehicle for Warren to explore queerness under the guises of self-discovery and identity bifurcation (another theme consistent in Warren's

oeuvre), even if this exploration is constantly halted or derailed because of extant societal and moral proscriptions against visible—or, Warren’s case, rhetorical—queerness during this time period.

Interestingly enough, in spite of these prohibitions, Warren continued developing his themes of sexual otherness and identity bifurcation in the long poem “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943), which appeared almost immediately after *At Heaven’s Gate*, and which numerous critics have argued was the progenitor for *Brother to Dragons*. Vincent King, for instance, points out that “The Ballad of Billie Potts” is the “first example of Warren’s juxtaposition of narrative with passages which self-reflexively focus on the author” (63). On its surface, the poem takes the form of a folktale set in frontier Kentucky. The eponymous Billie is initially described as a “clabber-headed bastard with snot in his nose/And big red wrists hanging out of his clothes/And a whicker when he laughed where his father had a beller” (81). This initial description portrays Billie in stark contrast to his father, Big Billie Potts, who is “big and stout,” with wide shoulders and a powerful voice that “Made the bob-cat shiver and the black-jack leaves shake” (81). Little Billie, on the other hand, is shown as weak, dissipated, quite possibly effeminate, and a mere shadow of his father. In fact, Warren heightens the perception of Little Billie’s effeminacy by including an endearing, if odd, phrase that concludes his character introduction, “He was their darling” (81).

What’s more, there is also a sly connection to Warren himself in the poem’s line “And big red wrists hanging out of his clothes.” Warren’s nickname throughout his life was “Red,” a reference to his trademark red hair. Blotner observes that the family took great pride in Warren’s physical appearance, and was especially proud of his striking

hair. Blotner notes that during Warren's early years, Ruth Penn Warren, his mother, delighted in showing off her progeny:

She could not restrain her pride in this precocious child, her blue-eyed boy. One neighbor recalled meeting them on their slow promenade. She and her friends stopped as she bent down to greet the toddler. Ruth Warren bent down too. "Rob Penn," she said, "tell 'em what color your hair is." He looked up. "Pret-ty red," he said. When he was big enough to play outdoors, neighbors would hear Ruth Warren calling, "Rob' Penn! Rob' Penn!" (9).

Of course in spite of this physical similarity, the character of Little Billie Potts seems to be otherwise far removed from his poetic creator. Yet as Vincent King has stated, Warren nevertheless chose "The Ballad of Billie Potts" as his first foray into direct authorial intrusion. This intrusive voice takes the form of a disembodied commentator who wrenches Billie's tale into the present-day in order to illustrate changes over time while also foregrounding the unnerving continuity of human experience.

Using a parenthetical device similar to the italics deployed by William Faulkner in his 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury* to denote time shifts, Warren's unnamed voice states:

(It is not hard to see the land, what it was.
Low hills and oak. The fetid bottoms where
The slough uncoiled and in the tangled cane,
Where no sun comes, the muskrat's astute face
Was lifted to the yammering jay; then dropped.
Some cabin where the shag-bark stood and the
Magnificent tulip-tree; both now are gone.
But the land is there, and as you top a rise,
Beyond you all the landscape steams and simmers
—The hills, now gutted, red, cane-brake and black-jack yet.
The oak leaf steams under the powerful sun.
"Mister, is this the right road to Paducah?"
The red face, seamed and gutted like a hill,
Slow under time, and with the innocent savagery
Of time, the bleared eyes rolling, answers from
Your dream: "They names hit so, but I ain't bin.") (81-82)

According to the present-day commentator, the Kentucky landscape here has not changed drastically since the time of Billie Potts, and it carries within it the same presences of dread and foreboding as it did for Little Billie. For example, the seemingly placid low hills and oak are quickly supplanted by “fetid bottoms where/The slough uncoiled.” Interestingly, this atmosphere of decay is supplanted by an underlying sexual component—the fetid bottoms are where the slough uncoils and the cane entraps the voyager like overdetermined phalluses.

This sexuality becomes more pronounced as the ballad progresses, coterminous with the commentator’s own personal connection to Little Billie first highlighted by the repeated appearances of the color red, whether in “The hills, now gutted, red” or “The red face, seamed and gutted like a hill.” The first explicit link between sexuality and personal association appears not long after Warren’s first authorial insertion. Returning to the frontier time period, Warren relates Little Billie’s first attempt at carrying on the family’s legacy of supplanting their income by robbing and then murdering unsuspecting and unwary frontier travelers. Warren first establishes Little Billie’s evident confidence in being able to a robbery-homicide by noting, “Little Billie was full of piss and vinegar/And full of sap as the maple tree/And full of tricks as a lop-eared pup” (83). This confidence is, not surprisingly, coupled with depictions of Billie’s youthful phallic virility, something Big Billie is quick to notice and admire in his son. In other words, Big Billie intuits that Little Billie is finally (and literally) endowed with the balls to perform the violent and deadly act and thus earn his rightful place in the Potts family lineage.

Indeed, by highlighting Big Billie’s foregrounding of his son’s incipient manhood, Warren employs a clever historical hat-trick by at once referencing the

bifurcated angst and pride typically seen in depictions of Southern masculinity from colonial times to post-Reconstruction, while also showcasing the American masculinity crisis that gripped the nation during the Cold War era. With regard to antebellum modes of masculinity, Historian Craig Thompson Friend has observed that during this time period Southern men viewed themselves in direction opposition to what they described as “urban, industrial, liberal, corrupt, effeminate men of the North” (x). This opposition led to the creation of strictly constructed and just as strictly policed gendered images. Friend continues, “While not all men had subscribed to the ideals of honor and mastery, all shared a sense of a very public nature of their private characters” (x) which, in turn, required regular public performances.

This public performance is evident in Big Billie’s pride not only in his son’s demonstrated “piss and vinegar” demeanor—a reference to Little Billie’s boisterousness and high level of energy—but also to the youth’s being “full of sap as a maple tree,” which connotes his alleged (if never actually seen) sexual prowess. Taken together, these two attributes seem to be proof enough that Little Billie can be entrusted to pull his first “trick” of waylaying, robbing, and killing a traveler. But just as quickly, this confidence is undermined by Warren’s notation that Little Billie is not quite man enough for the task at hand. Immediately after Big Billie’s salutary remarks, here is what Warren writes:

Little Billie had something in his clabber-head
In addition to snot, and he reckoned he knew
How to skin a cat or add two and two.
So long before the sky got red
Over the land between the rivers,
He hobbled his horse back in the swamp
And squatted on his hams in the morning dew and damp
And scratched his stomach and grinned to think
How his Pap would be proud and his Mammy glad
To know what a thriving boy they had

In the section between the rivers.
He always was a good boy to his darling Mammy. (83)

Even though Big Billie has seen the potential for manhood in Little Billie, it seems clear here that the younger Potts is still an inexperienced, callow youth or, to put on a finer point, a “mama’s boy.” In this way, Little Billie becomes a poetic exemplar for what Cold War writer Philip Wylie, in his popular sociological treatise *Generation of Vipers* (1942), termed “Momism.” Wylie’s notion of “Momism” scripted American males as weak and effeminate because of their preternaturally close ties to what Wylie viewed as parasitic women and/or overbearing, dominating mothers, a connection reinforced in “Ballad” through the concluding stanza line, “He was always a good boy to his darling Mammy.”

Indeed, this derogatory perception of Little Billie appears to be the first of many ways in which Warren specifically focalized on the protracted masculine crisis of confidence during the wartime and Cold War years. This crisis reflected a political culture that, according to Kyle Cuordileone, “put a premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft and feminine and, as such, a real or potential threat to the security of the nation” (516). This cultural ideology, in turn, led almost immediately to the creation of Cold War narratives that focused intensely on the home as both a symbol of democratic liberty and domestic containment.

Yet as Deborah Nelson has noted in her incisive study of notions of privacy in Cold War poetry, these narratives were complicated by what she calls the “metaphor of intrusion” (xviii). These intrusions had an especially profound effect on Cold War males who saw privacy violations as both challenges to their masculine self-sovereignty and autonomy, as well as literal violations of their personal spaces. Nelson writes, “The

power and mobility of this metaphor of containment were equal only to the power and elasticity of the metaphor of intrusion—the enemy within—which conveyed the uncanny experience of finding one’s borders already violated” (xviii).

In fact, this “border violation” is illustrated vividly in “Ballad” when Little Billie attempts to waylay his intended victim. He first greets the stranger, “the one Pap said was fit to pluck” (84), and then proceeds to engage the “trick” of supposedly delivering to the stranger a mislaid item that, according to Little Billie, he “knowed you’d be missen” (84). This “trick,” however, fails miserably, and Little Billie ends up getting shot. Warren relates:

“Boom!” Billie’s gun said, and the derring, “Bang!”
“Oh, I’m shot!” Billie howled and grabbed his shoulder.
“Not bad,” said the stranger, “for you’re born to hang,
But I’ll save some rope ‘fore you’re a minute older
If you don’t high-tail it to your honest Pap
In the section between the rivers.”
Oh, Billie didn’t tarry and Billie didn’t linger,
For Billie didn’t trust the stranger’s finger
And didn’t admire the stranger’s face
And didn’t like the climate of the place,
So he turned and high-tailed up the trace,
With blood on his shirt and snot in his nose
And pee in his pants for he’d wet his clothes,
And the stranger just sits and admires how he goes,
And says, “Why, that boy would do right well back on the Bardstown
track!” (84-85)

The melee counterpoises Little Billie’s weakness and youthful inexperience resulting from his close maternal connection with the stranger’s cool, mature, and almost gentlemanly manhood. But there is also no small amount of homoeroticism intruding on this scene. For instance, the scene’s exchange of gunfire is scripted in explicitly sexual terms, with both men’s weapons being personified through voices that exclaim together as they mutually “go off.” Little Billie then howls, “Oh, I’m shot!” which further extends

the scene's seemingly orgasmic atmosphere. This prompts the stranger to reply, "Not bad, for you're born to hang,/But I'll save some rope 'fore you're a minute older." The stranger's statement appears to predict Little Billie's fate as inevitably hanging from a noose as punishment for his now-and-future crimes. However, in keeping with the multiple sexual innuendoes suffusing the text, I interpret the stranger's observation that Little Billie is "born to hang," along with the remark that he will "save some rope 'fore you're a minute older," as barely coded poetic allusions both to the size of their respective phalluses and to Little Billie's sexual virility referenced earlier in the "full of sap as the maple tree" descriptor.

Warren concludes the scene by cataloging Little Billie's various bodily viscera, including being covered in blood, snot, and pee. If in fact this was Little Billie's first time turning a trick, it is thus conceivable to interpret his secretions as signifying the detritus of a rough sexual encounter, something in which he likely to continue engaging because of the financial rewards it promises. Indeed, the stranger's observation concluding the stanza, "Why, that boy would do right well back on the Bardstown track!" furthers the speculation that, despite this initial messy encounter, Little Billie is destined for a life of male prostitution. As Warren points out in the introduction to the poem, "The name of Bardstown in the present account refers to Bardstown, Kentucky, where the first race track west of the mountains was laid out in the Eighteenth Century" (81).

Even though the ostensible primary occupation for persons attending this track was betting, there has been a long historical association between gambling and prostitution. As historian T. C. Esselstyn has observed, "Closely linked to prostitution in popular imagery were the sale of liquor, gambling, drugs and the operation of dance halls

and disorderly premises. These were the greater social threats” (124-125). Since the Bardstown track already offered the illicit thrill of pari-mutuel wagering to frontier Kentuckians, it is likely that prostitution would be present as well. Thus, according to the stranger’s prognostication, Little Billie will in fact find his appropriate niche within the Bardstown track’s extant atmosphere of vice and reprobation.

Despite Little Billie’s frontier origins approximately two centuries before the actual wartime-era composition of “Ballad,” my perception of Little Billie as a male prostitute is further supported by what I see as curious poetic echoes to Cold War anxieties over homosexuals. In 1955, for example, the city of Boise, Idaho, was rocked by a newspaper exposé alleging that there was an organized underworld ring of male homosexual prostitutes whose clientele including many prominent Boise residents. Joseph Bensman reported that by the time the panic had run its course, “no heterosexual crime was discovered; but hundreds of alleged homosexuals were investigated” (284).

While the Boise scandal took place a decade after the appearance of “Ballad,” investigations, pursuits, arrests, and prosecutions of alleged homosexuals were commonplace and widely publicized during the Cold War era, and would no doubt have caught Warren’s attention. It is therefore plausible that Warren could have transposed these uniformly negative accounts of seemingly predatory, rapacious homosexuals into his depiction of Little Billie as a pitiable undesirable queer.

In fact, as the tale of “Ballad” progresses, Warren appears to continue inserting numerous additional hints at Little Billie’s queerness. Following his trick, Little Billie returns home and is almost immediately confronted by his father, while his mother sets about nursing his injuries. Big Billie seems to be enraged and embarrassed by Little

Billie's failure to (literally) execute the trick, as well as by his unmanly wounds which are, as Warren points out, "Round the little hole in her darling's hide" (85). In order to allay any further damage to both the Potts family name generally and to Big Billie's masculine legacy specifically, Little Billie is quickly sent packing. Warren writes:

He didn't ask Little how he felt,
But said, "Two hundred in gold's in my money belt,
And take your roan and the brand-new saddle
And stop yore blubberen and skedaddle,
And the next time you try and pull a trick
For God's sake don't talk but do hit quick."
So Little Billie took his leave
And left his Mammy there to grieve
And left his Pappy in Old Kaintuck
And headed West to try his luck
And left the land between the rivers,
For it was Roll, Missouri,
It was Roll, roll, Missouri. (85)

Big Billie's abrupt decision to throw Little Billie out of the house shares intriguing similarities with contemporary parental reactions to youthful homosexual coming-out declarations. Especially during the Cold War period, it was not uncommon for homosexual youths to be disowned from their families. Social scientists Ritch Savin-Williams and Eric Dubé, for example, have observed that parents typically processed these revelations with shock, anger, and rejection, and noted that "reactions of parents [were] more severe if the child [was] not an adult" (11).

In "Ballad," Big Billie appears to mirror these same emotional reactions but, in so doing, he quickly translates these feelings into a plan in which Little Billie can reclaim his apparently lost or compromised heteronormative masculinity. After all, even though he both rejects and ejects Little Billie from the Potts household, Big Billie also gives him

“two hundred in gold,” along with a horse and a “brand-new saddle,” and directs him to head west.

Big Billie’s westward directive is significant because of its association with what Warren scholar William Bedford Clark has called “the world of experience in which man is compelled to act and interact with other men” (157). I interpret this compulsion to “act and interact with other men” as tacitly reinforcing Little Billie’s alleged homosexuality, allowing him to—in Clark’s words—participate in an “endless series of new beginnings and fresh identities” (157) that I argue underscores Little Billie’s coming-out. Not surprisingly for Clark, of course, the myriad possibilities for otherness offered through these “fresh identities” are frightening and fraught with consequences.

Indeed, even though it appears that Little Billie successfully reinvents himself by coming-out in the West, Warren is nevertheless aware that Cold War moral and societal strictures will not allow him to script for his “hero” a happy homosexual ending. After ten years, Little Billie returns—a literal changed man—to his parents’ homestead in the land between the rivers. Significantly, however, he does not reveal himself immediately to them, preferring instead to assume yet another identity as a jovial stranger in need of shelter and food. Warren writes:

He joked them, and he teased them and he had his fun
And they never guessed that he was the one
Had been Mammy’ darling and Pappy’s joy
When he was a great big whickering boy
In the land between the rivers,
And he jingled his pockets and he took his sop
And patted his belly which was full nigh to pop
And wiped the buttermilk out of his beard
And took his belch and up and reared
Back from the table and cocked his chair
And said: “Old man, ain’t you got any fresh drinken water, this here ain’t
fresher ‘n a hoss puddle?”

And the old woman said: "Pappy, why don't you take the young gentleman down to the spring so he kin git hit good and fresh?"
And the old woman gave the old man a straight look.
She gave him the bucket but it was not empty but it was not water. (88)

Here, Warren cleverly connects Little Billie's initial unsuccessful encounter with the gentlemanly stranger with his soon-to-be deadly parental "trick." Warren, though, adds without comment an ironic twist to the scene by ceding the idea for the "trick" instigation to Little Billie's mother. She first gives Big Billie a significantly "straight look" and, in so doing, covertly telegraphs her desire that the "young gentleman" be dispatched.

However, I contend that contained within her "straight look" are hints that Mammy Potts suspects that their intended victim is queer, thus precipitating in her a sense of homosexual panic. As Bruce Burgett has observed, this type of panicked response is occasioned when it "compromises the moral and bodily sanctity of the normative citizen-subject by allowing knowledge about the 'messiness and variety of sex' either to contaminate official policy publics or to escape legally sanctioned zones of privacy" (67).³ Carrying this proposition further, I propose that Mammy Potts's panic could be rooted in her lingering anxiety and guilt over Little Billie's initial encounter ten years prior with a similar stranger that arguably turned him queer.

Furthermore, it is also conceivable that Little Billie's mother intuits that the young gentleman occupying her table and partaking of her hospitality is perhaps the same stranger that corrupted her son and led to his westward exile. After all, it is likely that in the intervening ten years since her son's banishment she had no doubt heard Big Billie

³ Burgett draws much of the background for this observation from Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*. Like Burgett, Warner situates "sex panic" in a more globalized setting, with panics occurring in response to public perceptions of seemingly established or fixed ideological positions being disrupted, thereby prompting widespread feelings of what Warner calls "matter out of place." (18). See thus Warner.

describe the black-clad, gentlemanly stranger as the one who managed to turn his own trick, humiliate Little Billie, and bring shame on the Potts family name. Taken together, this familial shame, along with her own queer suspicions and a keen awareness of the apparent financial windfall that would accompany completion of the present-day trick, seem to provide more than enough motivation for Mammy Potts to direct her husband to execute the stranger.

Warren in fact points out that Little Billie resurfaces in the Kentucky wilderness dressed in attire that is unmistakably similar to that of the queer stranger, “With a big black hat above his big red face/And a long black coat that swings so fine” (86). Warren then turns to Little Billie’s unmistakable wealth and concomitant, distinct self-confidence, writing, “With a big black beard growing down to his guts/And silver mountings on his pistol-butts/And a belt as broad as a saddle-girth/And a look in his eyes like he owned the earth” (86). Warren offers Little Billie’s long beard and capacious stomach as overt signs of his good health and prodigious appetite, attributes typically associated in both frontier and Cold War time periods with wealthier individuals,⁴ while the silver mountings and broad belt are obvious displays of his conspicuous (and conspicuously displayed) consumption.

In spite of this apparently positive portrayal, Warren nevertheless undercuts Little Billie’s new identity by highlighting his concomitant egoism and foolish unwariness. In so doing, Little Billie becomes transformed into an exemplar of what could conceivably

⁴ See for instance Jesse Berrett’s “Feeding the Organization Man.” In this essay, Berrett observes, “Few today might associate thinness, especially male thinness, with the 1950s. Given the popularity of cookbooks that extolled dinners prepared by can-opener, the pastel creativity of suburban cuisine, and the almost institutionalized three-martini lunch and cocktail hour, middle-class American males, at least, spent more time filling their stomachs than worrying about what they ate” (805).

happen to homosexuals writ large that make their queerness visible. The consequences of Little Billie's "outness" are in fact swift and deadly. Following the request for fresh water, Little Billie follows his father out to a nearby spring where he "gets down on his knees/And props his hands in the same old place/To sup the water at his ease" (89). It is at this moment that Big Billie strikes, burying a hatchet in his son's head, and successfully (and literally) executing his own "trick."

Unlike Little Billie's first attempted trick, there are no obvious sexual undercurrents embedded in this scene. I suggest, however, that Warren surreptitiously intends Little Billie's sudden, bloody demise in "Ballad" to serve as a cautionary warning about the possible consequences of coming-out in the Cold War era. Moreover, Warren's pointed inclusion of Big Billie's (albeit ultimately unwitting) murder of his son also seems to function as Warren's expressed moralizing over visible displays of homosexuality. In short, through Little Billie's death Warren was able to take the moral high ground by demonstrating to his readers the likely inevitable outcome of Cold War homosexuals who make their otherness perfectly queer. However, by the time Warren completed *Brother to Dragons*, a work that is in many thematic ways quite similar to "Ballad," this seemingly solid moral fortitude had undergone many profound and meaningful shifts.

In his seminal study of Warren's poetic oeuvre, Victor Strandberg has noted, "Among the diverse characters depicted—biblical, classical, legendary, or historical; and those drawn from personal reminiscence or imagination—the two types most important to Warren's identity-psychology are what we may call the Clean and the Dirty" (122). Given Warren's demonstrated and vocal predilection for moral arbitrating, it is thus not

surprising that he would want his readers to endorse and admire the “Clean” characters as paragons of upstanding goodness, while simultaneously viewing “Dirty” characters with equal measures of suspicion and pity leading, inexorably, to their ultimate condemnation.

Yet as his writing career progressed and the writing itself became increasingly intertwined with his personal life, Warren’s inclinations appeared to lean heavily in favor of “the Dirty.” In attempting to explain Warren’s odd and seemingly antithetical partiality, Strandberg observes, “Warren’s preference for the Dirty is not purely ironic or perverse. Like Hawthorne, Warren feels that in the fallen world some merit attaches even to sin, vice, and guilt. Whereas righteousness separates, guilt unifies the human community. To feel guilty towards someone is to have a genuine, if unhappy, relationship with the injured party; and to commit sin is to share a humiliation—an erosion of the ideal self-image—that exempts very few” (128). In other words, it is much easier for readers of Warren’s poetry (including Warren himself) to vicariously identify with the various adverse actions performed by “Dirty” characters because, at its core, dirtiness is central to the human condition.

Indeed, Warren’s “Dirty” characters become an increasingly visible presence in his fiction and poetry up to and including the previously mentioned novel *At Heaven’s Gate* and the epic tale “The Ballad of Billie Potts.” Warren, though, pushed his fascination with “the Dirty” in new and unexpected directions by consciously and conspicuously inserting himself—under the guise of the poetic persona “R.P.W.”—into his 1953 prose-poem hybrid *Brother to Dragons*. Warren never fully explained his rationale for explicitly comingling the personal and the poetic, but in the foreword to the 1979 “New Version” of *Brother to Dragons* he acknowledged, “Historical sense and

poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake” (xiii). This positing of history not as bedrock fact but rather as a constantly fluid narrative thus allowed Warren to question what is “real” history, while also exploring whether or not he (or we) can actually change our own history.

Warren’s questions had particular relevance when *Brother to Dragons* appeared in 1953, at the height of the Cold War when most if not all Americans were seeing their personal histories closely scrutinized by intrusive governmental entities. In fact, during the Cold War, American history itself seemed to be undergoing constant reexamination and reappraisal. For instance, despite experiencing frequently violent public responses, African Americans began questioning and protesting longstanding segregationist laws and practices. Homosexuals also became increasingly discernible even in the face of harassment, career-ending threats, and governmental purges. Ultimately, then, I suggest that the sudden visibility of these two previously marginalized segments of American Cold War society provided the thematic undergirding for Warren’s historical reevaluation in *Brother to Dragons*.

Warren’s origin story of *Brother to Dragons* began in 1943, the same year in which both *At Heaven’s Gate* and “The Ballad of Billie Potts” appeared. Warren had uncovered a journal that contained a strange tale of what he described to Katherine Anne Porter as a “perverse, violent, and hideous situation, out west in Kentucky” (Blotner 214). Himself a native of rural western Kentucky, Warren had grown up hearing bastardized versions of this tale. But as Blotner has related, Warren found out that this “situation” specifically involved the brutal murder of a Negro slave by Lilburn and Isham Lewis, the

two sons of Thomas Jefferson's sister Lucy. With these situational specifics in mind, Warren was thus able to reflect upon these events and retrace them through his own life (Blotner 287), beginning a ten-year process that ultimately resulted in the first version of his "tale of verse and voices."

Interestingly, in spite of Warren's insistent foregrounding of transhistoricism in *Brother to Dragons*, most criticism of the work has generally fallen into two distinct categories: the "Jeffersonian," which treats the poem strictly as history that needs no contemporary thematic embellishment, and the "Freudian," in which are typically included discussions of original sin (another of Warren's recurring themes) or incest. Only recently have critics—most notably Aaron Shaheen—branched out from this Freudian snare to explore larger themes of othered sexuality. Moreover, there has been no criticism bridging the Jeffersonian/contemporary gap and interpreting *Brother to Dragons* within its Cold War context, and neither does any criticism exist to my knowledge that specifically focuses on how the poem negotiates the various permutations of Cold War sexuality.

Shaheen has explained this critical absence by noting, "Yet perhaps because of the 'tranquilized *Fifties*' (as Robert Lowell called them) when *Brother to Dragons* originally hit the bookstores, there was little focus on the overt and subtle references to human sexuality in Warren's long poem" (74; emphasis in original). Yet as I argued previously, contrary to what Robert Lowell might have thought, the 1950s were hardly a tranquil or tranquilized decade, especially in terms of sexuality. Cuordileone, for instance, has observed, "From the debates of the publication of *Lolita* and Christine Jorgensen's sex-change operation to the proliferation of sex and marriage manuals and

the greater willingness to discuss female sexual needs, sexual impotence, and homosexuality more frankly, midcentury sexual discourse raised previously buried, unmentionable, or unfronted issues and phantoms for men” (531).

Cuordileone’s mention of Alfred Kinsey’s pathbreaking and highly controversial study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) raises an important cultural point, in that the appearance of this study shocked many Cold War Americans (especially males) by reporting that large percentages of these selfsame, purportedly heterosexual men, had participated in at least one homosexual act resulting in orgasm at sometime in their lives. *Sexual Behavior* also heightened Cold War anxieties over what Miriam Reumann calls a “new brand of masculinity” that would “encourage dangerous heterosexual promiscuity, homosexuality, and an oversexualized social ethic, leading to national decline” (84). But what was perhaps the most disturbing finding in Kinsey’s report was the revelation of Cold War America’s dirty little secret that, beneath the placid, conformist façade, Americans could and did freely indulge in a seemingly infinite variety of non-normative or queer sexual practices.

These sexual expressions, which Cuordileone succinctly refers to as “previously buried, unmentionable, or unfronted issues and phantoms” are in fact plentiful in *Brother to Dragons*. Within the poem’s 230 pages are numerous depictions of anal rape, fellatio, homoerotic miscegenation, and homosexual incest, all of which are either witnessed by or commented on by Warren’s amanuensis R.P.W., thus making the poem long overdue for a queer reappraisal. By way of definition, Sedgwick has observed in her book *Tendencies* that “‘Queer’ seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a

person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (9).

Warren, in fact, seems to enact exactly this type of performativity by placing a proxy of "himself" squarely in the midst of *Brother to Dragons*. In so doing, Warren could indulge fully in "experimental self-perception and filiation" (by way of real-time personal reflection and self-appraisal) and performance (as an actor/commentator who, like the poem's other characters, occupy "no time" and "any place"). Ultimately, then, Warren's intrusive poetic persona appears to manifest as what Timothy Gould has termed a "performative utterance [that] is to be characterized as a kind of verbal performance or artifact and, hence it is to be assessed by its effectiveness with an audience (whether real or implicit or constructed)" (24).

Pace Victor Strandberg's formulation noted earlier, Warren would of course like for his readers to conceptualize R.P.W.'s performative role throughout *Brother to Dragons* as altogether "Clean." In order to reinforce and accomplish this interpretive certitude, he attempts to imbue in his R.P.W. persona an ahistorical detachment so that he can comment on the poem's action while leaving its history essentially undisturbed. In so doing, his performative distancing neatly correlates with Timothy Gould's further assertion that the performative utterance is "essentially 'nonreferential,' where nonreferential is taken to mean 'not related to facts or previously existing situations'" (24-25).

It seems clear, however, that R.P.W. is neither completely "Clean," nor can he be an ahistorical presence because, as Vincent King has noted, ultimately "*Brother to Dragons* is more R.P.W.'s story than Jefferson's for it is R.P.W. who has given 'life' to

Jefferson, Lilburne, and Clark, and it is R.P.W. who feels compelled to come to terms with the moral naïveté of the American Dream” (67). This compulsion is rooted firmly in Warren’s personally intimate knowledge of and close identification with the tale’s “perverse, violent, and hideous situation,” which is useful to R.P.W. (the persona) not only as an actual, documented part of Kentucky’s historical record, but it is also useful to Warren (the poet) as a convenient metaphor on which he could build his consideration and critique of Cold War American society. Moreover, as an active participant in the poem’s “situation,” R.P.W. becomes tarred with the same perversity and violence he tries (and fails) to avoid and, as a result, his cleanness becomes tainted with and by the “Dirty.”

It is difficult to overlook the specific rhetorical terms “perverse, violent, and hideous” Warren uses to summarize the historical events undergirding *Brother to Dragons*. In the Cold War period in which he was crafting the poem, these same terms were commonly deployed in reference to the feared troika of Communists, blacks, and homosexuals, who were seen as agents bent on undermining and destroying America domestically, socially, and morally. That being said, Warren was curiously silent with respect to the supposed “Reds under the beds” Communist threat that ostensibly started the Cold War. In his review of Warren’s *Selected Letters* written between 1943 and 1952, John Burt states that Warren seemed depressed about the collapse in 1945 of the wartime alliance between the United States and Russia, and expressed to Katherine Anne Porter that instead of pursuing a policy of nuclear saber-rattling, the United States should instead try to pursue a more friendly strategy with the Soviet Union (Burt, “Review” 483).

These communiqués aside, Burt observes that Warren generally appeared to show little interest in American politics during the Cold War years, and that he also judiciously eschewed overt political involvement.⁵ This is not to say, though, that Warren showed complete ignorance of Cold War domestic politics. For example, he was clearly angered by what he viewed as a smear campaign waged in 1951 by McCarthy and HUAC against W. T. Couch, an editor at the University of Chicago Press, who was fired for protesting their refusal to publish a book about the wartime internment of Japanese Americans (Burt, “Review” 484). In a November 12, 1951 letter to Allen Tate, Warren denounced Couch’s firing as a lynching and surreptitiously criticized McCarthy for having any interest in this “affair” (Hendricks and Perkins 3: 418). Later, Warren referenced the Couch episode in a letter dated April 30, 1954 to Charlie Foster—one of his former graduate assistants at the University of Iowa—by calling McCarthy a “son-of-a-bitch” and wondering, rhetorically, “why can’t a few guys against him be nervy and clean-handed” (Hendricks and Perkins 4: 54).

Aside from these isolated letters, Warren’s overall engagement with Cold War political issues was remarkably low. He was, however, certainly not shy about examining socially contentious issues such as race and sexuality, both of which intersect and collide tragically in *Brother to Dragons*. But even though race comprises a crucial thematic element, Warren curiously relegates it to a quasi-second tier position while appearing to deliberately foreground sexuality, particularly depictions of non-normative or queer sexuality, in the poem.

⁵ Burt does note, though, that Warren did turn down a faculty appointment from the University of California in 1950 because they required him to sign a loyalty oath, which he refused to do.

In fact, despite the numerous occurrences of homosexual pursuits, arrests, trials, and employment purges that pockmarked the 1950s proximate to the publication of *Brother to Dragons*, the atmosphere of the poem's original, 1953 version is far queerer than that of the "new" and revised version published in 1979. In the 1953 version, R.P.W. displays an obvious queer fascination with Lilburn Lewis, even though he strives to establish for himself a distinct, and thus objective, poetic distance. This distancing tactic became far more pronounced in the 1979 edition, in which Warren revised the poem and drastically reduced Lilburn's role. This later excision seems hardly surprising given Lilburn's apparently irredeemable status in the original *Brother to Dragons* in which R.P.W., despite his macabre captivation, nevertheless sought to portray Lilburn as a black-hearted monster that epitomized the "Dirty" detritus of human fallenness.

Throughout the tale, though, Lilburn continually flouts this monstrous characterization and in so doing essentially forces R.P.W. to acknowledge that even supposedly pitiless individuals can indeed be shaded with complexities. I suggest that in Lilburn, this complexity is expressed through a perceptible queer desire that lurks just below his callous and heartless façade, and that this desire gives to Lilburn some small measure of humanity through which he can express empathy, compassion, and even love. But because the objects of Lilburn's love are both male, both Warren (the poet) and R.P.W. (the persona) know that his queer desire must be forcibly repressed and contained.

This rhetoric of queer containment and repression, of course, provides a clear example of what I see as Warren's intentional transhistorical linearity from pre-Manifest Destiny-era Kentucky to the Cold War time period in which he was crafting the poem. As

I observed previously, expressions of queer desire in Cold War America were relentlessly policed and ruthlessly squelched, especially in the South. For instance, in his review of historian James Sears' *Lonely Hunters*, Robert Corber has pointed out that in the 1950s and 1960s a campaign of terror was waged by the Florida legislature against lesbian and gay students and faculty at the state's public universities.

Corber observes that this legislative witch-hunt closely followed methods originated by McCarthy and HUAC, whereby suspected homosexuals were questioned about their sexual activities and pressured to name names. Regardless of their compliance, students were then summarily expelled and faculty fired, even if they had tenure (Corber, "Queer Regionalism" 398-399). This suppression extended to almost all forms of Cold War rhetoric and acted as a powerful silencer for expressions of non-normative sexuality. In his essay on Cold War masculinity and Tennessee Williams's unabashedly queer play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Richard Hornby has remarked that homophobia was so prevalent and pervasive in the 1950s that the very word "homosexual" could not be uttered on the stage (111).

It would seem, then, that Warren was well aware of the contemporary sociocultural barriers he would have to negotiate so that Lilburn could ultimately express his queer desire. Warren undertakes this treacherous poetic journey by embedding R.P.W. in the poem's wilderness landscape, which is sketched initially as unmistakably heterosexual territory ripe and ready to be (literally) plowed by frontier male explorers. Warren relates, for instance, that the terrain is like "any jolly trollop/Or bouncing girl back in the bushes after/The preaching or the husking bee" (16). What is interesting about this first view of the frontier is that—in spite of its predominating heterosexuality—there

is a strong implication that this is hardly “virgin” territory in which settlers could create and sustain lives of quiet, normative domesticity.

Instead, R.P.W. imagines the landscape as decidedly non-normative sexually, depicting it as either a buxom whore who services as many men as possible or a “Dirty” girl who flouts both the moral respectability of the religious revival tent and the social respectability offered by the husking bee. In so doing, R.P.W. transforms what should be an Eden-like, pre-lapsarian natural space into something that is perceptibly queer.

Not surprisingly, the conversion of supposedly virginal frontier Kentucky into a rapacious and dissolute terrain signals the beginning of a series of unnatural events heralding the eventual appearance of Lilburn Lewis, the poem’s singularly queer presence. First, R.P.W. wrenches himself out of history so that he can provide to his audience a contemporary context for *Brother to Dragons*. From his Cold War vantage point in July 1946, R.P.W. journeys to Smithland, Kentucky, a once bustling town now famous—or, more properly, infamous—for being the home of Thomas Jefferson’s sister, Lucy Lewis. R.P.W. notes wryly that even though Lucy displayed “good taste/In dying in Kentucky,” her “chiefest fame” was that she “gave suck to two black-hearted murderers” (*BD* 21) who killed an innocent slave, George.

After arriving in Smithland with his father, R.P.W. doggedly seeks out and locates the Lewis plantation, home of the “two black-hearted murderers” Lilburn and Isham Lewis, which is now “the huddled stones of ruin,/Just the foundation and the tumbled chimneys” (32). As R.P.W. surveys what remains of the homestead, he is surprised by the appearance of a gigantic black snake, to which he refers by its scientific name *Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta*. In a fit of melodramatic poetic pique, R.P.W. first describes the

serpentine presence as a “scaled belly of abomination” and an “ictus of horror” (33) before emphatically insisting to himself and the reader that the “manifestation was only natural” (34).

This conviction, however, does not hold for long, and R.P.W. quickly relapses into a fearful catalogue of what the snake’s appearance could symbolize:

No, none of these, nor more modestly in Kentucky
The quintessential evil of that ruin,
Nor spirit of the nigger boy named George
Whose anguish spangled midnight once like stars,
Nor symbol of that black lust all men fear and long for
Rising from earth to shake the summer sky.
No, none of these, no spirit, symbol, god,
Or Freudian principle, but just a snake” (34).

Even though R.P.W. concludes his recitation by disavowing all possible symbolic readings including, specifically, any likely Freudian interpretations, the snake’s blackness nevertheless triggers in him an obviously visceral racial and sexual reaction. Indeed, notwithstanding his Freudian protestations, R.P.W. is forced to acknowledge that the snake is not “just a snake” but is, in fact, a convenient metaphor connecting the “black-hearted murderers” with the “spirit of the nigger boy named George” by way of “that black lust all men fear and long for.”

The “black lust” to which R.P.W. refers could be interpreted as another outburst of Warren’s moral hectoring. I contend, however, that it is instead the poem’s first overt reference to Lilburn’s queer desire for George. Embedded within this phrase is of course the specter of the stereotypical “black male beast,” something which Warren, as a Southerner, would have doubtless been familiar. Peter Stoneley has explained in his essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that, for Southern writers in particular:

(t)o write about blackness, then, was to write about desire. But to write about blackness was also to avoid desire altogether, for the black figure represents both sexual desire and childish innocence. There is the same contradiction as that between ‘dumb beasts’ and ‘the Beast,’ between the helpless and the wicked. The African in particular was thought to be governed more by passion than by the intellect. The black body, perceived to be more sexual, was thought to elicit the treacherous carnality that the white man tried to subjugate and of which the white woman was scarcely aware. (56)

This “treacherous carnality” is, indeed, precisely what both attracts and repels R.P.W., though not because of its causal heterosexual association with white women but, rather, because of its obvious queer connection to Lilburn.

Throughout *Brother to Dragons*, then, R.P.W. is forced to continually wrestle with how to trans-historically portray, negotiate, and ultimately adjudicate Lilburn’s “black lust.” He does so by first broadly hinting at Lilburn’s sexual degeneracy through a telling exchange between himself and Lilburn’s wife Laetitia:

R.P.W.: You don’t ask much. Yet you ask everything,
And maybe just the one thing God can’t give.
Or anybody. Merely the last thing,
The thing you’re stuck with, to figure out for yourself.
All you demand is definition, too,
Just like poor Lilburn. Do you hate him less
To think that he, like you—

LAETITIA: Oh, I don’t hate him!

R.P.W. As I was saying, do you hate him less
To think that he, like you, like you at the last,
Was only trying to know what the good thing was,
and when
He couldn’t know the good, then did the worst,
Whatever the worst thing was, he did to you?

LAETITIA: I tell you, I don’t know what the worst thing was,
And whether he really did whatever it was
Or it just sort of happened to him, too,
Like it happened to me. Oh, he could be so sweet,
So sweet and gentle too. (68-69)

R.P.W.'s rhetorical goading of Laetitia appears to be an obvious attempt to get her to label Lilburn's desire as queer. He surprisingly forgets, however that in speaking from her 18th-century "place," she lacks this definitional vocabulary.

I suggest, though, that this interchange—including especially Laetitia's apparently genuine evasion—could also represent Warren's imaginative trans-historical insertion of a McCarthy-esque interrogation with a homosexual sympathizer. Although I noted previously that Warren had little to say about McCarthy, R.P.W.'s persistent "line of questioning" has clear parallels to the leading, frequently intimidating tone of the HUAC hearings. In fact, Laetitia consistently refuses to rise to R.P.W.'s baiting, and only begins to reveal tentative details about Lilburn's non-normativity after some gentle prompting from Lucy. Here, Laetitia relates her first sexual encounter with Lilburn:

Then he said, "Ah," in the dark, like a sigh. Said: "Ah."
Then he did it.
And it was an awful thing
I didn't even know the name of, or heard tell —
Or if I had heard tell, I'd plain forgot,
It was so awful that folks could do so awful. (75)

Even though it appears that Laetitia is inexperienced sexually, she is nevertheless clearly aware that Lilburn's desires here appear to be unnatural. But according to Laetitia, even though their sexual act—which I interpret as anal sex—is perceptibly unnatural, it is Lilburn's post-coital verbal badgering and its tacit recapitulation of "black lust" that transforms these same desires into something unmistakably queer.

This badgering begins haltingly, almost apologetically, with Lilburn at first attempting to cajole Laetitia into discussing the events of the previous night. She, however, demurs out of embarrassment, confusion, and simple propriety: "But my words wouldn't come, and my poor chest was/a bigness/That hurt but was not words, and

suddenly I said:/'I can't, I just can't tell you'" (77). Lilburn predictably views her refusal as a sign that she has intuited his queerness, and this prompts in him an angry rejoinder:

And his voice said: "— but now I see when angels
Come down to earth, they step in dung, like us,
And like it."
And then he laughed right loud and long,
Then he was gone. (80)

Lilburn's sneering accusatory remark operates on both the symbolic and real registers by at once portraying her as a formerly "Clean" angel who has since fallen from grace and become "Dirty," while also implying that she was literally stained by Lilburn's anal penetration.

At this juncture in the poem, Lilburn's queerness becomes increasingly apparent coterminous with his evident "black lust." Returning again to the *Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta* scene and R.P.W.'s specious non-interpretation of its symbolism, I suggest the snake has an obvious phallic association and that Warren is certainly not shy about showcasing its visibility—whether literally or symbolically—throughout *Brother to Dragons*. This being the case, it is not difficult to interpret Lilburn's penis being connotatively signified here as a black snake due to his anal violation of Laetitia. Warren, furthermore, extends this phallic signification through Laetitia's later, more detailed reiteration of the episode, in which she deliberately invokes the specter of George, Lilburn's true "black lust" object:

But, oh dear God, I swear I love him still.
I've got to try to love him, just to be.
But Lilburn rose up high, his face swung dark,
I thought the house would split and night flood in.
Said what he said, how angels step in dung,
And like it, too. Then gone, and me alone.
And gone three days, drunk in the settlement,
And beat the boy that Mother Lewis sent
To fetch him home—the nigger boy named George. (81-82)

Laetitia's implication here is that Lilburn's shameful actions appear to have triggered in him an eruption of homosexual self-loathing that follows closely with a violent display of homosexual panic toward the ostensible, if untenable, object of his affection. The two concepts of homosexual self-loathing and panic would not have been entirely unfamiliar to either Warren or his Cold War readers, but what I find especially intriguing is the uncanny accuracy of Laetitia's 18th-century supposition. For instance, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick has noted that the notion of homosexual panic emerged out of a new, "secular and psychologized homophobia" that surfaced in the eighteenth century (185), the same century in which the majority of the poem's action occurs.

I would also suggest, though, that Warren uses this same spectral panic as a moralizing contemporary commentary on the plight of Cold War homosexuals. As Douglas Arrell has pointed out in his article on Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which premiered a short two years after the publication of *Brother to Dragons*, Cold War popular culture had a long imaginative checklist of homosexual signifiers drawn primarily from the popular psychoanalytic repertoire of the period. According to this checklist, homosexuals were seen to be indifferent or violent averse to women, distant from their fathers and abnormally close to their mothers, possessing an extraordinary

beauty that suggested narcissism, and displaying self-destructive behaviors such as alcoholism.

Laetitia, in her recapitulation of the “awful” bedroom events, seems to check every single one of these signifying boxes. However, she remains significantly silent on the motivations behind Lilburn’s apparent panicked attack on George, as does Warren, who himself seems stymied for an explanation of Lilburn’s panic. He, via R.P.W., even goes so far as to preemptively dismiss George’s beating as essentially meaningless: “Well, nothing did change./Lilburn was Lilburn, and the year drove on” (94). But almost immediately after this unsatisfying “conclusion,” Warren introduces Lilburn’s little brother Isham, whose presence appears to re-invigorate Lilburn’s queerness. Here is how R.P.W. illustrates Isham’s poetic debut:

“Isham,” says Lilburn, “shove me that God-damned jug.”
And Isham shoves the jug, and Lilburn drinks.
The candle-flame now steadies on the wick.
They are alone. Laetitia lies upstairs.
Lies in the big bed and rarely leaves it now.
The slaves are in their quarters, snug as varmints,
Save George, who drowns by the kitchen fire,
Waiting to help his master up to bed. (96-97)

Although R.P.W. initially reiterates the checklist of homosexual signifiers here, he also imbues the scene with a curiously palpable sexual tension between the two brothers and the slave boy George. In so doing, R.P.W. forecloses the possibility of a homoerotic *ménage à trois*, something that would definitively shatter numerous trans-historical sexual taboos. But by incorporating the presence of George, however, R.P.W. adds

another problematic to the already fraught sexual atmosphere: the specter of miscegenation.⁶

Numerous Southern writers—including Warren—have grappled with what Ben Railton has called the “ubiquity of miscegenation” in Southern history and culture, though this same ubiquity is almost always sketched along heterosexual (if not necessarily heteronormative) lines. For instance, in his discussion of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Railton explains how the novel’s various miscegenations tread the line between “heterosexual” and “heteronormative.” As Railton remarks, “For it is when Sutpen finally relents and admits to his son Henry that [the elder Charles Bon] is part black that Henry knows he cannot let Charles marry his sister Judith. Charles, knowing the Sutpens and the South as well as he does, sees the difference immediately, confronting Henry with, ‘So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, that you can’t bear.’ And then, in the novel’s one perfectly simple and understandable moment, when Henry initially refuses to kill Charles, saying ‘You are my brother,’ Charles responds brutally, ‘No I’m not. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister’” (49-50).

Indeed, miscegenation was for most Southerners historically regarded with a sense of plausible deniability loosely translated as “yes, we know it exists, but we don’t necessarily have to acknowledge its existence.” Yet the nascent Civil Rights movement, coupled with Cold War anxieties over desegregation and societal integration, raised racial

⁶ Interestingly enough, the concept of miscegenation has an intriguing historical association with queerness. Siobhan Somerville has noted in her study *Queering the Color Line* that late 19th-century eugenicists were concerned about “nativist fears about a perceived decline in reproduction among white Americans” (30), and that these same eugenicists used antimiscegenation rhetoric to pathologize homosexuals and homosexuality. Somerville states further that through and as a direct result of this rhetoric, “Both legalized and de facto racial segregation served not only to demand constant adherence to the fictions of racial identity but also to police sexual mobility” (35). See thus Somerville.

tensions and concomitant fears of wholesale “race-mixing” to a fever pitch.⁷ Even more grotesque, especially for Southerners, were suggestions that homosexuals might also be indulging in miscegenation. After all, it was difficult enough to admit that heterosexual miscegenation took place, but conceding the reality of homosexual miscegenation was truly beyond the pale. In Chapter 3, I provide a much fuller exploration of male-male miscegenation in Tennessee Williams’s gruesome short story, “Desire and the Black Masseur,” a work in which I see many parallels to this particularly queer section of *Brother to Dragons*.

In fact, as the poem continues, R.P.W. seems to accentuate the erotic triangle of Lilburn, Isham, and George and, in so doing, he supplies a queer re-working of Faulkner’s miscegenation-incest dyad. After tormenting and dismissing George from the cabin, Lilburn blurts out an apparent confession of his sexual confusion, though Isham is the one who does the actual relating of this admission:

ISHAM: Yeah, yeah, he turned to me!
Me sitting there, and said: “I don’t know why,
I just can’t stand that slinking nigger bastard.
Looks like he just does something to me now,
Something I can’t stand.” So takes a drink.
And me, I don’t say nothing.

R.P.W.: What’s there to say? (114)

⁷ It is important to note that these hyperbolic racist fears about integration frequently and directly conflicted with American Cold War rhetoric that trumpeted freedom and democracy. As historian Renee Romano has noted, “As the United States became involved in ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union where it purported to be the leader of the ‘free world,’ domestic racism and state-sponsored segregation became a serious problem for the federal government. Legal segregation and the blatant discrimination against African Americans undercut the nation’s ideological rhetoric about freedom and democracy, and became a major weapon in Soviet and Chinese propaganda campaigns against the United States” (35).

What, indeed, is there to say? Isham's remarks allude subtextually to the possibility that Lilburn and George have participated in a homosexual act. According to Isham, however, Lilburn's halting coming out announcement also served to repudiate his "black lust" while simultaneously declaring an incestuous love for his little brother.

It is difficult, though, to take Isham's word as gospel truth, and R.P.W. soon voices his own suspicions. He tells Isham: "George gets the roughest, Lilburn can't stand George./That's what he says. Yet George is his body-servant./George tries the woods, comes back, gets beat again" (117). Although R.P.W.'s use of the term "body-servant," along with his noting that George "gets the roughest" and resolutely "comes back [and] gets beat again," appears to be pro forma evidence of Lilburn's racial brutality, I believe that on some level it also connotes a far deeper, almost sadomasochistic relationship exists between the two men.

Indeed, the complex interplay between Lilburn and George has a close to resemblance to what Kaja Silverman has termed "moral masochism." In her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* Silverman describes this type of behavior as an "endless postponement of libidinal gratification and the perpetual state of anxiety and apprehension which is the result of that renunciation and of the super-ego's relentless surveillance" (200). In other words, the masochist derives pleasure not from the end product (being punished) but instead from the unpredictability leading up to the punishment (what can I do/not do to ensure that I will/will not be punished). As Lilburn's body-servant, then, George exists in and appears to perversely enjoy precisely this anxious atmosphere of threatened—but never actually guaranteed—castigation.

Isham, not surprisingly, resolutely rejects this miscegenation insinuation through a desperate show of incestuous solidarity with Lilburn: “You know how ‘tis when you’re still just a sprig—/And asked the Lord to make me big like my brother,/And make him love me, like I loved him then” (118). R.P.W. knows, though, that Isham’s incest fantasy is just that—a fantasy. And what is more, this fantasy is also rooted in Isham’s own masochistic jealousy of George. R.P.W. reminds him:

Well, that was perfect preparation, sure,
For the dolorous sequel when the years drew on,
And you were there, bound hand and foot, for Lilburn
To quarrel with, abuse, humiliate,
But never too much, always the right degree,
So you could be restored to your brother,
And always all, each act, in the name of love.
He would not alienate you, not completely.
It’s cat-and-mouse. He saves you for some inescapable
Truth-dazzled hour when the heart shall burst
In gouts of glory—hallelujah!—like a flower. (118)

R.P.W.’s insinuation here is disturbing because it effectively sets in motion Isham’s own queer coming-out process. Like Lilburn, Isham’s coming-out process is a path of self-destructive discovery that ends tragically, but R.P.W. nevertheless wants him to disclose all, to bare his truest feelings and affections for Lilburn, in an apparent attempt to mitigate the odious unspeakable effects of miscegenation with the acceptable unspeakability of incest.

Isham, however, cannot accept this mitigation because it fails to eradicate the shame bound up in Lilburn’s original sin of loving a black man. After some further prompting from R.P.W., the guilt and jealousy soon boil out of Isham:

Now things get queer. I never hated George.
Before, I mean. Him just another nigger.
But now to see him standing there so weak,
And frail to fall, and how his eyes were rolling

Like one more nigger sick and nigh to gone,
It looked to me there wasn't a thing but hate
Inside me, and to hate that nigger George
For being so God-damn mean-weak was nothing
But sweet joy. (125)

Things do indeed “get queer” as Isham heaps scorn on his black slave rival. Warren, in fact, compounds his use of the term “queer” by displaying on George stereotypically homosexual attributes of rolling eyes and frailness and, in a final damning statement, overtly effeminizes George by referring to him as “so God-damn mean-weak.”

Interestingly, Isham's seemingly homophobic taunts constitute the final motivating excuse necessary for Lilburn to literally rid himself of the miscegenation taint. Following a shabby frame-up in which George is accused of stealing Lucy Lewis's water pitcher, Lilburn ties George to a block of wood and chops off his hands and feet. In short, R.P.W. concludes that George should be rightfully punished for indulging in homosexual miscegenation while Lilburn, because of his hegemonic position as a white man, can escape with nary a physical scratch.

However, R.P.W. is only too quick to point out that Lilburn does and will continue to suffer psychically for killing the one he truly loved in the name of the more questionably acceptable brotherly incest. Consequently, while Isham endeavors to assuage Lilburn's supposed lingering agony, he himself sinks deeper into a personal slough of despond. But what Isham does not recognize is that Lilburn has already made his peace, knowing that he should and must die in order to be reunited with George. R.P.W. poignantly relates the moment in which Lilburn's queer self-awareness finally, inexorably surfaces:

So Lilburn waits. He waits in confidence.
He trembles on the threshold. Joy stirs.
Joy flickers, shy, in the heart's cold fatigue.
Yes, he is tired. But joy is energy.
There is one source of joy, and only one.
There is one germ for joy. Its name is vision.
The scales are loosed on his eyes. Its name is vision.
While vision grows, he sits with his younger brother,
By the cold hearth, and the April night grows big,
And darkness peers in through the open door,
And the annual fragrance now, like memory, swells
In darkness to seduce the heavy sense,
And the peepers, far away, prick the night
With their insidious silver monotone,
And from some forest enclave spied by stars,
Some star-stung dingle where the deep woods hush,
The whippoorwill offers his heartbroken comment. (162-163)

Despite Isham's lingering presence, everything in this scene seems to remind Lilburn of his love for George. Warren even makes this connection plain through his signifying on the "darkness" which first peers in through the open door and then proceeds to act in tandem with the heady April fragrance as a powerful seductive force.

Isham, however, remains deep in the throes of his own incestuous desire, and is steadfastly convinced that through George's death he has dispatched two psychical dragons: Isham's dark rival and Lilburn's "black lust." He thus willingly accepts the perverse logic of Lilburn's willfully self-destructive murder/suicide plot, in which both men would aim and fire pistols at each other, which would ensure and enshrine forever their incestuous love. R.P.W. though, knows Lilburn's heart and is aware that Isham's incestuous impulses are doomed. R.P.W. first accuses Lilburn of enacting a Judas-like betrayal that is indelibly based on a repudiation of incest: "And don't you see how, as a corollary,/Because you loved him he betrayed you, too?/He betrayed you when he made you murder him,/He withheld the slug that would have set you free" (172). Isham,

though, cannot accept what he sees as a slanderous historical re-vision, and he rebuffs R.P.W. In a deeply poignant and telling argument Isham, much to the amazed disgust of R.P.W., reveals his committed love to and for Lilburn:

ISHAM.: But that—but that’s not why.
To live or die, by then I didn’t care.
I knew they’d name me guilty anyhow.
But not like that, I didn’t want folks saying
‘Twas me killed Lilburn when he was my brother.
I couldn’t tell ‘em how it was, how sudden
It came, and how —oh, folks don’t ever know
How things can happen, and they come so sly—
My gun went off. That’s it. I didn’t hate him.
It’s just the gun went off. The slug went in.

I see the place, how blood came out so slow,
And Lilburn looking at me strong and strange.
And he just stands there steady like forever,
And I just hear that son-of-a-bitch of a bird,
In the woods, far off, and he just won’t stop singing,
And Lilburn stares, and maybe if I listen
To that son-of-a-bitch of a bird just hard enough,
Then nothing happened, nothing, and Lil won’t fall,
And everything will be just like it’s not.
But Lil falls down. He just falls down. It’s awful
To kill your brother like you hated him —

R.P.W.: Well, why not now admit you hated him?
Why not? He’d brought you to the bitter pass.
Why not? (173-174)

Isham does not and cannot answer because he is well aware that R.P.W. knows the only real answer. Whether in the Jeffersonian “economy of pain” or in the midst of Cold War conformity, punishment for queerness must be exacted.

This interpretation, however, is far too simplistic because Isham also sees the evident passion behind Lilburn’s dueling desire. Isham’s only recourse, seemingly, is to fire his gun and let fate decide where the bullet will lodge. But something in his subconscious makes him aim carefully and too well, and as a result Lilburn is mortally

wounded. Yet in the intervening seconds between the bullet's arrival and Lilburn's deathly fall, R.P.W. watches as the two men openly—albeit silently—declare the truth depth of their brotherly love. Ultimately, Isham accepts Lilburn's queer “black lust” and, with a figurative parting shot, provides for him the means of reuniting with George, his truest love.

In the next chapter, I continue delving deeper into the motivations and deadly Cold War complications of queer “black lust” through an exploration of Tennessee Williams's perversely erotic, yet deeply religious, short story “Desire and the Black Masseur.”

CHAPTER THREE
WHAT'S EATING ANTHONY BURNS?:
DISMEMBERING THE BODIES THAT MATTER IN
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S "DESIRE AND THE BLACK MASSEUR"¹

Tennessee Williams may be forgiven if his short fiction never lived up to, or even approached, the phenomenal success of his dramatic works. While his plays explore unseemly subjects such as rape, psychosis, repressed homosexuality, or barely sublimated incest, they are almost always viewed through a theatrically translucent, if thinly veiled, scrim of allegorical existentialism. More often than not, however, this veil is lifted in Williams's short stories, laying bare renderings of miscegenation, violent brutalization, and barely sublimated homosexual desire. Although by applying a sense of "unreal reality" Williams attempts to move his fiction into the realm of atmospheric theatricality, the stories nevertheless retain too much of a "hyper-real" quality that, paradoxically, prevents any lasting imposition of fantasy. As Dennis Vannatta notes, Williams was "the most autobiographical of writers," full of "contradictions and clashing passions" (4), and he easily transmutes these reality-based passions into his short stories, concatenating them together with bursts of sound and fury, signifying everything.

That said, it is difficult to imagine what passion could have inspired the notorious short story "Desire and the Black Masseur," written in 1946 but not widely published until 1954, in the midst of Cold War paranoia that presaged the nascent civil rights and homosexual movements. While "Desire" is rife with tropes of loneliness, pain, violence, and death common in Williams's work, the transformation of these themes into explicit representations of sadomasochism and cannibalism is both surprising and disturbing. The titular Black Masseur's devouring of Anthony Burns is, of course, disturbing, but I would

¹ A version of this chapter was published in the Fall 2010 issue of *Southern Literary Journal*. I thank the editors and staff at *SLJ* for their kind permission to reprint this essay here.

assert that the story's more sinister subject position lies in the undercurrent of explicitly racial violence both accompanying, and as a consequence of, the interracial homosexual desire shared between Burns and the Black Masseur. This violence, I argue, manifests itself in "Desire and the Black Masseur" as an allegorically rendered lynching narrative in which no perverse deed goes unpunished.

Considering the somewhat-undisputed fact that Anthony Burns is ultimately cannibalized by the Black Masseur, my consideration of "Desire and the Black Masseur" as a lynching narrative may seem surprising given the historical antecedents of lynching. James W. Clarke, for instance, points out that the predominating view of lynching has its origins with white supremacists who "used terror, making lynching a public spectacle, to exert absolute power over the [South's] black population. Lynching replaced whipping after emancipation as the public exhibition of raw primordial power of white over black" (274).² On its surface, "Desire and the Black Masseur" contains no white supremacists, no public spectacles, and no outright displays of "raw primordial power of white over black." As well, Williams's portrayal of the passions navigated between Anthony Burns and the Black Masseur seem to be, at first glance, rather straightforward. Nevertheless, as a Southern writer, Williams would have been keenly aware of the angst-ridden Cold War dynamics surrounding interracial desire, as well as the penalties exacted for violations of this strictly delineated racial and sexual divide.

Southern historian Victoria Bynum states that there was a palpable hypocrisy associated with American's World War II position as a "defender of democracy abroad

² Trudier Harris and others have noted that, pre-Civil War, lynching was a component of frontier justice that operated in lieu of a legally sanctioned trial. Moreover, during this time period lynching typically constituted a variety of punishments (most often whippings) but significantly did not incorporate a "death sentence." After the Civil War, however, lynching became reserved almost exclusively for black "offenders."

while tolerating racial discrimination at home” (249), particularly in the South where the contours of racial discrimination extended deep into the terrains of normative sexual mores. After all, Southern society had long been obsessed with the myth of the “black beast rapist” who would, given the opportunity, willingly ravage the pure, virginal, and (of course) white paragons of Southern womanhood.³ Even the merest suggestion that a Black man would, in effect, “cross over” into the White world would set off a cascading chain of dangerous events, as Trudier Harris comments:

To violate the inviolable, as any Black would who touched a white woman or became mayor of a town, is taboo. It upsets the white world view or reception of the universe. Therefore, in order to exorcise the evil and restore the topsy-turvy world to its rightful position, the violator must be symbolically punished” (11-12).

In “Desire and the Black Masseur,” Williams complicates these matters of inviolability by adding the onus of homosexuality, amplifying the already extant “evil” of miscegenation with a pathological perversity. Displays of this behavior would be seen by larger society as open defiance of unspoken, though commonly legislated, codes of conduct.

Gail Williams O’Brien, in her study of the 1946 race riot in Columbia, Tennessee, describes these code violations and how they often precipitated violent social reaction, writing, “In the Black Belt, where mob violence was most pervasive and enduring, alleged murder most often prompted lynching. The affairs were usually orderly, ‘blatantly public,’ and often involved ‘the open complicity of local officials.’ [T]he causes of mob murders were [often] alleged sexual assaults or, second most often,

³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown sketches the history of lynching, including its origins as a public shaming practice called “charivari,” in his *Honor and Violence in the Old South*. James W. Messerschmidt extends Wyatt-Brown’s overview by focusing on the figure of the virginal Southern white woman in his essay “We Must Protect Our Southern Women: On Whiteness, Masculinities, and Lynching.” See thus Wyatt-Brown and Messerschmidt.

‘overstepping the boundaries of acceptable conduct’” (124-125). Though these boundaries of “acceptable conduct” were broadly defined to encompass even the smallest infractions (for instance, looking at a white person the “wrong way”), perceptual expressions of non-normative behavior such as homosexuality would have clearly fallen under this rubric and been punished accordingly. Moreover, the explicit enfolding of homosexuality within the already-fraught matrix of interracial desire would further intensify the retributive punishment tied to wanton—albeit heretofore heterosexual—violations of long-established and explicitly codified racial and sexual conventions.

Yet, given the topsy-turvy racial signifiers that Williams chooses to permeate the story, readers might well ask who is really being punished? After all, while being ostensibly scripted as masochistic punishment “with the idea of thereby clearing one’s self of his guilt” (85), Anthony Burns’s repeated surrendering himself to the Black Masseur’s violent beating is nevertheless an act mediated and controlled solely by Burns. Indeed, throughout the story Burns retains his white man’s prerogative, a prerogative that assumes dominance over, and brutal marginalization and subordination of, blacks (especially black males).

John S. Bak has remarked that in spite of Tennessee Williams’s attempt to surreptitiously subvert Cold War power binaries of white/black *qua* self/other, “Williams proves unable to escape his own racial othering and thus inadvertently reinscribes in ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’ ...that white national bugbear which Toni Morrison describes as ‘the potent and ego-reinforcing presence of an Africanist population’” (124). This type of interpretation, Christopher Cutrone complains, is rife with sexual politics that reduce the dynamics of interracial desire to the “poverty of black self-hatred and

white exploitation of social disparity” (249), and it is precisely because of this extant exploitative white-black dialectic that the desire performed between Burns and the Black Masseur is never negotiated. Rather than portraying, as Annette Saddik calls it, “the mutually satisfying sadomasochistic relationship between two men” (348), a relationship built on the presumption of sexual and racial equality, it is, in fact, a one-sided, objectifying “personal and psychological triumph” accomplished by Burns through the calculated pursuit, capture, exploitation, and execution of the Black Masseur.

Burns’s “death drive” pursuit of the Black Masseur begins, *pace* Harris, in topsyturvy fashion, with Williams endowing the Black Masseur with allegedly predominating power over Anthony Burns, who is described as uniformly childlike and the “timidest kind of a person ... always scuttling from one kind of protection to another but none of them ever being durable enough to suit him” (84). Burns is, however, always already white and is therefore, by virtue of this positionality of pigmentation, necessarily empowered. The Black Masseur is, on the other hand, always denied agency, remaining unnamed and virtually indescribable except for being a “giant” who, according to the manager of the Turkish Baths and Massage, is only a short step up from the savage “jungle” from which he sprang forth.

Williams, though, does not seem to be troubled by the masseur’s lack of de facto selfhood, because he allows Burns to intuit that the black giant is durable enough to unlock his desires and make him complete, even if this completeness means sacrificing himself by being literally devoured. This display of cannibalism, which could be considered an *echt* desiring quid pro quo, neatly deflects the troublesome imprimatur of Burns’s whiteness by instead foregrounding the homosexuality implicit in their bodily

“exchange,” thereby avoiding the otherwise necessary re-imposition of extant Southern sexual and racial hierarchies.

Nevertheless, Williams’s complex network of homoerotic desire is not so easily reducible to being seen as a revolutionary upending of Cold War racial and sexual mores. After all, Williams himself was famously circumspect and contradictory about his own sexuality, notoriously treading the neutral ground between assertions that he “never tried to disguise [his] homosexuality” and that he “never found it necessary to deal with [homosexuality] in [his] work.”⁴ As David Savran has documented, throughout Williams’s career these conflicting assertions—the “screens and covers”—were “constantly redefined and repositioned as a result of both changes in the public profile of the gay writer and the different visibilities accorded the different media (i.e. plays, short stories, or poetry) he used” (83).

Moreover, in his position as a Cold War Southern writer, Williams would have no doubt also been particularly aware of the upheaval caused by black soldiers who, returning from relative equanimity encountered in wartime service on European soil, nevertheless faced a still rigidly segregated society back home in the United States. Despite their heroic efforts abroad, black soldiers (regardless of their sexuality), like their domestic counterparts, were always expected to remember their “place” on American soil and in American society, and especially so in the Jim Crow South. Disregarding this strictly delineated and sedimented racial structure meant facing quick and decisive retribution.

⁴ George Whitmore captures some of Williams’s “warring” declarations regarding his sexuality in his essay “George Whitmore Interviews Tennessee Williams.”

Speaking to the discordant space occupied by black males during the time period in which Williams's story appeared, Robyn Wiegman observes that the black male occupied both an "empowered 'masculine' and disempowered 'racial' positioning" (12). In spite of this black masculine empowerment, in the patriarchal culture dominated and adjudicated by white males, black males were systematically denigrated, humiliated, and sexually objectified. Furthermore, Weigman states, "dominant discourses routinely neutralized black male images, exchanging potential claims for patriarchal inclusion for a structurally passive or literally castrated realm" (14). That Williams spawned "Desire and the Black Masseur" in this conflicted atmosphere highlighted with both expectations of racial equality and the harsh realities of racial segregation provides partial background for how the story transforms itself from a re-envisioning of race and homosexual relations into a lynching narrative.

Richard Dyer remarks that this enforced passivity of black men by white men "permits the fantasy of power over [black men] to be exercised...justif[ying] their subordination ideologically" (116). In the libidinal economy of "Desire and the Black Masseur" the eponymous masseur, in spite of his force, resolution, and authority, constantly defers his (albeit stereotypical) gigantic masculinity to the always power-full (and appropriately named) Anthony Burns. There is no equitable exchange here, but rather an inequitable power play in which Burns commands full control, repeatedly subordinating the Black Masseur through the pervasive force of his masochistic desire. Furthermore, while the central components of Burns's desire, the excessive beatings and cannibalism, are scripted as demonstrations of the Black Masseur's empowerment, they quickly become transmogrified into wanton violations of fixed moral and racial

boundaries. In “Desire,” the social horror and sanction over these violations is voiced by the massage parlor’s manager who, late in the story, happens upon the depraved scene of Anthony Burns vomiting after a particularly brutal beating:

Christ, said the manager, what’s been going on here?

The black giant shrugged.

He asked me to hit him harder.

The manager looked over Burns and discovered his many bruises.

What do you think this is? A jungle? he asked the masseur.

Again the black giant shrugged.

Get the hell out of my place! the manager shouted. Take this perverted little monster with you, and neither of you had better show up here again!
(91-92)

Though the manager refers to Burns as a “perverted little monster,” he is clearly unsympathetic toward the Black Masseur. The manager considers the Black Masseur as the epitome of perversity because of his race, a characterization reinforced by the “jungle” reference, a tropic reminder of the inbuilt uncivilized savagery that most whites of the Cold War period popularly believed all blacks possessed.

This racist perception becomes even more pronounced in the face of Anthony Burns’s own perversity that, in spite of numerous obvious signifiers, is never explicitly portrayed as homosexuality. Burns’s whiteness successfully masks homosexuality as a mere “desire” that, although viewed as curious and even repugnant, is ultimately unspeakable and thus unarticulated. The Black Masseur, on the other hand, is always foregrounded because of his race and the attendant historical racial “baggage” of erroneous stereotypes and violent misperceptions.

Indeed, given the tense and often violent racial environment of Cold War America, the fact that the instrument of Burns's desire is a nameless giant Negro is hardly surprising. Brian Peters comments, "Embracing racial stereotype, Williams mates his small, meek white protagonist with a gigantic man of color" and that "Certainly, Anthony's yearnings for potency prescribe his choice of erotic partner—and the cannibalistic ritual at the conclusion of 'Desire' is permeated with racist imagery" (9). Thus, according to prevailing societal conventions, while Burns may have been the instigator of and willing participant in these contraventions of social norms, through being cannibalistically devoured he ultimately becomes the Black Masseur's victim. For his part as purposeful vehicle for the savage beating and macabre death of a white man, the Black Masseur must be punished through the rope and faggot of lynching.

Williams is, of course, far too cagey to allow this interpretation to be seen directly, but yet he litters the story with clues to the "real" fate of the Black Masseur. Williams begins by sketching Burns's character initially as someone who exists in a cocoon-like fog of timidity and torpidity. However, within this cocoon lurks a disturbing alternate identity that slowly emerges as Burns, "without intention or effort," unconsciously locates his unspeakable desire, a desire that is "so much too big for him" (85). For Burns, this desiring discovery occurs coincident with an accompanying sense of trepidation and guilt, as Williams adds, "For the sins of the world are really only its partialities, its completions, and these are what sufferings must atone for" (85), all of which begs the question: what *is* Anthony Burns's basic, all-consuming desire? To this, Williams provides an enigmatic but frightening answer: violence, specifically "violence such as a war, between two men or among a number of nations" wherein is found the

“principle of atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one’s self of his guilt” (85). Williams alludes here to the just-ended hostilities of World War II and its effects on the nation’s social, racial, and sexual psyche, but there is also an underlying—though not explicitly stated—reference to Burns’s propensity for violence that is rooted in the treacherous terrain of same-sex attraction and, specifically, to his craving for masochistic intimacy (“Queer Semiotics” 9).

This masochistic impulse is manifested under the rubric of what Kaja Silverman describes as “Christian masochism,” in that the exemplary Christian masochist “seeks to remake him(self) according to the model of the suffering Christ, the very picture of earthly divestiture and loss... installed in a suffering and castrated position” (198). Because of Burns’s repeated desire for ultimate atonement “for the sins of the world,” his masochism is expressed as a Christ-like paroxysm of suffering, loss of innocence, and attendant expiation of guilt. The Black Masseur, on the other hand, is placed in the role of “tempter” who proximately causes Burns’s fall from grace and must also, therefore, experience equal amounts of punishment and loss for precipitating this masochistic eruption. Put another way, Anthony Burns’s suffering and sacrifice allows him to become spiritually transcendent, while the Black Masseur’s willing participation in Burns’s death marks him as cursed, an almost-Satanic figure to be cast out, castrated, and consigned to the flames of perdition.

Both Brian M. Peters and John S. Bak have offered variations on this interpretation of Anthony Burns as Christ-figure, but I suggest that there is also something far more sinister lurking within him: a virulent racist and homophobic impulse that exists alongside his suppressed masochistic and homosexual desire. Burns begins his

desiring pursuit by visiting a Turkish bath and massage parlor, where he goes to relieve a “vague sort of ache near the base of his spine” (86). Williams describes Burns’s feelings as he enters the massage establishment as a mixture of desire living “constantly with fear, and no partition between them” and that, because Burns knows that he must conquer his fear, “desire must become very tricky; it has to become as sly as the adversary” (86). Even before he meets the eponymous Black Masseur, the ostensible object of his desire, Burns has already constructed his desiring relationship as a war between two adversaries that manifests itself through what could be described as a three-stage process of homosexual self-loathing: first, acting on; second, subsequently recoiling from; and third, seeking sadistic repudiation for, homosexual desire. Thus, when the Black Masseur emerges, Burns intuitively almost immediately that the end result of their encounters will be brutality culminating in violent death.

The immediate problem with this process is that it raises the specter of homosexual panic, a legalistic bogeyman that has been deployed, albeit in spectacularly unsuccessful fashion, in such high-profile murder cases such as that of Matthew Shepard, the 21-year-old Wyoming college student savagely beaten in 1998 by two male assailants, tied to a fence, and left to die. Homosexual panic has been usefully described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others as a virulent, often psychotic reaction to insinuations of same-sex desire between males that often occur in situations involving enforced intimacy. According to Sedgwick, homosexual panic arises when intense male social bonds (i.e., strong friendships) become difficult to distinguish from the “most reprobated bonds” of homosexuality. Because these two bonds are ostensibly similar, though one is socially mandated while the other is socially prohibited, causes confusion

and fear that one's close friend, or perhaps even oneself, might be a homosexual. The ensuing fear and confusion leads almost invariably to violence against those persons perceived to be homosexual threats (185-186).

In the ideologically conflicted Cold War America of "Desire and the Black Masseur," this panic was a growing phenomenon, emerging alongside the increasingly visible (if still predominately furtive) homosexual subculture.⁵ Indeed, immediately following Anthony Burns's unconscious musings on unfulfilled desire and a palpable sense of incompleteness, Williams allows him to consciously process the matrix of self-loathing, ensuing homosexual panic, and violent response through the terrifyingly short declaration, "Now at the age of thirty he was about to discover the instrument of his atonement. Like all other happenings in his life, it came about without intention or effort" (85). Burns knows, almost instinctively, that he must find, seduce, succumb, be sacrificed to, and ultimately destroy, the person who unleashes his suppressed homosexual desire.

This violent impulse is symbolically reinforced as Burns wanders through the labyrinthine corridors of the Turkish bath, where he passes partition after partition of opaque doors and chambers with "milky globes over lights." Everything here is white and designed to obstruct and conceal. But most telling are the white bodies "divested of their clothing" and "swathed in billowing tent-like sheets of white fabric...white and noiseless as ghosts except for their breathing" (86-87). Absent the presence of a burning cross, the

⁵ There have been several recent explorations of the "sex crime panic" that swept the United States during the Cold War era but reached its zenith in the early 1950s. Stephen Robertson, for example, provides a broad overview of this "panic" in his essay "Separating the Men from the Boys: Masculinity, Psychosexual Development, and Sex Crime in the United States, 1930s-1960s." John Gerassi focuses on a particular outbreak that occurred in the mid-1950s in Boise, Idaho, in his *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City*. Finally, Neil Miller has explored a similar explosion of panic and its ensuing social hysteria in Cold War-era Sioux City, Iowa, in his *Sex Crime Panic: A Journey Into the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s*.

imagery here is suggestive of a Ku Klux Klan gathering, with its cabal of white men bedecked in white sheets, ghostly figures of a brutal, none-too-distant past rife with untrammelled racial violence, murder, and often homoerotically-inflected lynchings.⁶ Williams attempts to empower the Negro masseurs with “force and resolution” who “alone seemed to have an authority here” (87), yet it is clear that the white men are ultimately the ones in control. The masseurs are, after all, there merely to service the white patrons, and Burns is more than happy to avail himself of these ministrations, as they signal for him the inexorable progress of his violent desires.

Indeed, the inclusion of barely clothed Negroes into this scene adds a further disquieting note of highly sexualized racial tension, calling to mind myriad repugnant images of eviscerated black men who were, as part of a lynching spectacle, stripped naked and castrated before being hung from a tree or burned alive. Although in “Desire and the Black Masseur” Anthony Burns is ultimately cannibalized by the giant Negro, Burns’s premeditated murder is merely a precursor for the Negro’s own violent and gruesome demise. In concord with Burns’s fatalistic impulse, the Negro seems to intuit that Burns will become both an object of desire and the proximate cause of his death. This intuition occurs early in “Desire” as Burns, after stripping himself naked in one of the establishment’s canvas-draped cubicles, turns to face the Black Masseur. Williams observes, “the black giant’s eyes appeared not to see him at all and yet they had a glitter not present before, a liquid brightness suggesting bits of wet coal” (88). The

⁶ Robyn Weigman provides an incisive exploration of the conflation between homoeroticism and lynching in her book chapter, “The Anatomy of Lynching.” Gary Richards, in his *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961*, also supplies an elegant reading of how racial violence was commonly yoked with open expressions of queerness in post-Southern Renaissance literature. Richards’s reading, however, does not deal exclusively with lynching. See also Tipton.

seeing/unseeing dichotomy here is interesting given the power surrounding what is popularly known as the “male gaze.”

This gaze has, as Susan Bordo puts it, the power to objectify the male body, eroticizing it by heightening male sensuousness and male potency, yet it also calls into question men’s own heterosexuality, particularly from those men who are actively gazing rather than being gazed at (183).⁷ Despite the fact that the Black Masseur seems to have both physical and visual power in this scene, Williams undercuts his empowering gaze through a figurative blinding. Furthermore, the Black Masseur tacitly accords Burns the position of empowered racial superiority by holding out to him “a white sheet.” Like the other white patrons in the establishment whose identities are cloaked by white sheets, Anthony Burns here becomes part of a whites-only secret society, a new brother joining the Klan.

As the story progresses, the racial and sexual tensions between the two men escalate, as does their mutual abjectification. Burns, however, remains continually in control despite his ostensible surrender to the Black Masseur’s abuses, thus foregrounding what John K. Noyes regards as an essential conflict of masochism:

The masochist’s body...could do one of two things, depending upon how it was regarded, how it was used, or where it was positioned. It could reduce socially nonproductive aggressivity to an individual pathology, or it could transform social control into sexual pleasure. The one use of the masochist’s body supports the project of socially sanctioned aggression

⁷ The “male gaze” has proven fertile ground for both cinema and literary scholars alike, beginning with Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema.” Since Mulvey’s pathbreaking essay, other scholars and critics have explored the gaze as it relates to concepts and constructs of masculinities. Michael Kimmel takes up the question of the male gaze and how it tacitly creates homophobia in his “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity.” Brian Pronger has also considered the male gaze as it is deployed in the field of sports in his *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, while Beth A. Eck has explored the male gaze through the lens of art in her “Men Are Much Harder: Gender Viewing of Male Images.”

and the various stereotypes society has developed in order to invest cultural identity with aggressivity. The other use of the masochist's body subverts this project, initiating an unsettling process whereby cultural identity is parodied, masqueraded, and appropriated in the name of pleasure (9-10).

As such, Burns's subject position as masochist effectively rescripts both men's identities in terms of their participation in what Noyes calls "technologies of control" (10), and it is precisely his retention of control that has the strange effect of emotionally bifurcating the Black Masseur's identity along strictly-delineated racial lines. Williams describes the almost inexorable process of bifurcation by noting that the Black Masseur

hated white-skinned bodies because they abused his pride. He loved to have their white skin prone beneath him, to bring his fist or the palm of his hand down hard on its passive surface. He had barely been able to hold this love in restraint, to control the wish that he felt to pound more fiercely and use the full of his power. But now at long last the suitable person had entered his orbit of passion. In the white-collar clerk he had located all that he longed for. (90)

Here the Black Masseur evinces a love/hate dialectic toward white bodies. He loves them when they are pliable, passive, and submissive to his ministrations. However, he knows all too well that in spite of their submissiveness, they will always exert some measure of control over him simply because of their racial superiority. The fact that they "abuse his pride," furthermore, reinforces the Black Masseur's frustration with his racial position not only through its clear connection to Jim Crow-era white racist practices that actively and violently suppressed black persons, but also because he interprets white passivity as an affront to his black masculinity.

This yoking of passivity to femininity, reflected in an earlier description of Anthony Burns as a little man with "small-boned, womanish feet" (88), is a reference to Burns's effeminacy and implicit homosexuality, as well as to the stereotyped pure white

woman who holds powerful historical sway over Southern race relations. Taken together, these images serve to perpetuate the Black Masseur's continued racial and sexual subordination. Moreover, while Burns's masochistic desire allows the Black Masseur to expend his pent-up racial animus, there is nevertheless a lingering, always-present reminder located in Burns's pallor and with his "white-collar" employment that the Black Masseur's aggression, and indeed his entire identity, has been appropriated entirely for a white man's pleasure. By deploying these technologies of control— either through his masochism or his whiteness—Burns will always retain racial superiority over, and thus effectively dominate, the Black Masseur.

Unsurprisingly, concurrent with the bifurcation of the Black Masseur's emotions toward Anthony Burns, it is at this juncture in the story that the lynching tropes slowly come into sharper focus. Williams begins by placing a series of gustatory objects that, like Burns, are swallowed up like particles of food dissolving in the Black Masseur's big hot mouth. Williams writes that:

Those times when the black giant relaxed, when he sat at the rear of the baths and smoked cigarettes or devoured a bar of candy, the image of Burns would loom before his mind, a nude white body with angry red marks on it. The bar of chocolate would stop just short of his lips and the lips would slacken into a dreamy smile. (90)

These images are, of course, overdetermined precursors of Burns's cannibalized fate, but they are also obviously phallic. While it is clear that the Black Masseur receives oral satisfaction from them, the smoldering cigarette and the devoured bar of chocolate are also hints at the black giant's impending castration and burning as punishment for Burns's imminent murder. Furthermore, the image of the bar of chocolate stopping "just short of his lips and the lips [slackening] into a dreamy smile" connotes the barbaric

practice by lynchers of force-feeding male lynching victims their cut-off penises.⁸ But perhaps most disturbing of all in the Black Masseur's ruminations is the culminating emotional revelation, "The giant loved Burns, and Burns adored the giant" (90). It is here that Williams seals the Black Masseur's fate, purposefully shattering the interracial desiring divide that has heretofore separated him and Burns.

However, it is also important to note the semantic difference Williams incorporates within this desiring declaration: even though the Black Masseur "loved" Anthony Burns, Burns merely "adored the giant." Each man shares an emotionally resonant bond with the other, but the degrees of their feelings are markedly different and unequal. Through this exchange, the passions that bring the two men together also rend them asunder, placing the Black Masseur in a subordinate, vulnerable subject position, again reiterating Burns's superiority and, I would argue, foregrounding his homosexual panic.

According to Cold War taxonomies of sexuality, open declarations of affection between two men—and especially between a white and black man—would have been widely considered beyond the social pale and, as a result, widely condemned and ruthlessly punished. This condemnation, as discussed earlier, comes to the fore when the massage parlor's manager finds the pair *in flagrante delicto*. Yet given the Black

⁸ There has been a long history of the explicit horrors surrounding the lynching ritual and the lynching practice. Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, for instance, provide detailed historical statistics, lynching "geographies," and textual examples of the social effects of lynching in their *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. W. Fitzhugh Brundage builds on Tolnay and Beck's work in his *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*. Philip Dray provides a stunning exploration of lynching and its direct effects (both historical and contemporary) on African Americans and African American psyches in his *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. But perhaps the most poignant and terrifying photographic evidence of lynching can be found in James Allen, John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, and Hilton Als's *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.

Masseur's avowal of love for Burns—which I read as an unmistakable homosexual “coming out”—coupled with Burns's semantically-panicked demurral, it appears that the only one being truly condemned is the Black Masseur. Part of this condemnation for social, sexual, and racial violations entails an exile, in which Burns and the Black Masseur are evicted from the premises and relocated to a room “in the town's Negro section” (92). Here, Burns's masochistic brutalization under the guise of seeking atonement continues to grow and intensify, as does the Black Masseur's homosexual love for Burns.

While understandable in light of their blatant contraventions of white societal norms, I nevertheless find Williams's decision to remove the two men to the “Negro section” curious because of the historically fraught relationship between African Americans and homosexuality. For many African Americans, and particularly African American males, homosexuality has been and continues to be widely considered an affront to masculinity, inextricably tied to femininity, passivity, weakness and, significantly, whiteness. These attitudes stem in large part from the pulpits of Black churches, whose preachers routinely rely on strict and literal interpretations of the Bible that roundly condemn homosexuality.

Williams, in fact, deploys a typical “fire and brimstone” scene immediately following his relocation of Burns and the Black Masseur directly across from a church “whose open windows spilled out the mounting exhortations of a preacher” (92). Though the rhetoric of the preacher is not openly condemnatory of homosexuality, his remarks nevertheless carry with them a message implicitly directed at the two men: “Suffer, suffer, suffer! the preacher shouted” (92). As I have suggested, however, only one man—

the Black Masseur—will ultimately suffer, because he has performed the unspeakable act of declaring his love for a white man.

Even before the preacher's statement is uttered, Williams appends a disquieting note by noting that the homily is a "fiery poem of death on the cross" (92). Williams is careful to specify that both the sermon and Burns's sacrificial suffering occur "toward the end of the Lenten season," thus underscoring the Christological connection between Burns's death and Christ's crucifixion. However, the conflation of the cross and the fire here is also unmistakably suggestive of the Ku Klux Klan imagery Williams has embedded in the story, while the specific mention of death implicitly signals the Black Masseur's impending lynching.

Furthermore, given the signifiers Williams deploys here, there is a possibility that the poem the preacher intones is "The Black Christ" by Countee Cullen. Although it is at best unclear whether or not Williams read Cullen's poetry, it is nevertheless plausible given Williams's longstanding predilection for poetry. Furthermore, as a gay man, Williams would have likely been familiar with Cullen's early attempts at bringing legitimization of homosexual desire to African American contexts ("Gay Voices" 155). First published in 1929, "The Black Christ" is a religious allegory surrounding the lynching of Cullen's brother Jim as a Christ-like figure whose death becomes, for Cullen, representative of Christ's own crucifixion. It is also, according to James H. Smylie, Cullen's last and longest attempt to deal with the "tension of atonement" (165), a theme that would have undoubtedly resonated with Williams.

Significantly, "The Black Christ" features as its frontispiece the prominent image of a nude black man hanging from a tree limb juxtaposed with that of a white man whose

bowed head is adorned with a crown of thorns, an image symbolizing what Qiana Whitted calls “the corporal text of terror against black Americans [that] should be read alongside the crucifixion of a ‘white’ Jesus of Nazareth” (379). This “text of terror” soon becomes a horrifying reality for both Burns and the Black Masseur, as Williams slowly unveils the bloody process of Burns’s dismemberment at the hands of the black giant.

This corporeal dismemberment, however, begins by Williams focusing first on various manifestations of self-imposed stigmata inflicted by the church parishioners in response to the preacher’s thunderous proclamations. Williams relates, “a woman stood up to expose a wound in her breast. Another had slashed an artery at her wrist,” while the preacher relates, with almost sadistic glee:

Our Lord was nailed on a cross for the sins of the world! They led him above the town to the place of the skull, they moistened his lips with vinegar on a sponge, they drove nails through his body, and He was The Rose of the World as He bled on the cross! (92)

The tortured path of Jesus’s suffering and crucifixion is generally familiar to both Christians and non-Christians alike, but by connecting it with “Desire’s” overarching lynching imagery and the literal devouring of Anthony Burns by the Black Masseur, Williams gives the Biblical pre-Easter story a decidedly macabre twist. As Jesus suffers humiliation and death on the cross, the church members themselves begin to exercise their own blood-letting, and the Black Masseur begins systematically cannibalizing the “splintered bones” of Anthony Burns, exposing wounds, opening arteries, and spilling blood throughout the small confines of the death-chamber. It is here, in this heated atmosphere of unrestrained religious fervor and religious suffering, that Burns finds his final atonement.

For the Black Masseur, however, Burns's sacrificial completion acts as a precursor for an even more brutal death in which Burns is entirely complicit. As the black giant begins a literal Eucharist ritual, Burns whispers to him, "You know what you have to do now?" (93). Although throughout "Desire" Burns has maintained complete control over the Black Masseur, only now does he relinquish control and becomes, suddenly and surprisingly, "the victim" (93). Burns's startling role reversal from willing instigator of self-imposed brutality to victim is especially significant at this juncture because it signifies the culmination of Burns's homosexual panic. By systematically victimizing himself, Burns is able to accomplish "killing two birds with one stone," achieving his desire for self-sacrificial atonement while also transforming this atonement into murder—specifically, the murder of a closeted gay white man by an openly homosexual black man. According to predominating social codes, this potent amalgamation of race and sex crime violations becomes, for the Black Masseur, a lethal combination that must be remediated swiftly through the summary "justice" of lynching.

Indeed, coincident with Burns's ritualistic atonement-cum-murder, a lynching ritual begins outside their room. Trudier Harris explains that lynching and burning rituals reflected a belief on the part of whites that Blacks were threatening the social order and that, specifically, the belief that the mythical suprahuman black male sexuality poses a constant threat to whites. This suprahuman sexuality, Harris adds, lends a "magical quality" to the events in which Blacks are lynched (199, nt. 18). In "Desire," this ethereal, magical quality surrounding the impending lynching of the Black Masseur can be seen easily in the huge conflagration that explodes in close proximity to Burns's "death chamber":

The curtains blew out like thirsty white tongues to lick at the street which seemed to reek with an overpowering honey. A house had caught fire on the block in back of the church. The walls collapsed and the cinders floated about in the gold atmosphere. The scarlet engines, the ladders and powerful hoses were useless against the purity of the flame. (93)

Like the sheets of the massage parlor, the room's curtains symbolize white men who thirst for, and stoke the fires of, racial revenge. The reek of "overpowering honey" that accompanies the lynchers' imminent arrival is a clever and complicated twofold Christological reference, the first in Luke 24:42 where Jesus, post-Resurrection, appears before his Disciples and, after asking for food, is given broiled fish and a honeycomb. The second reference is a Pauline declaration in 2 Corinthians 2: 14-16, in which the Apostle Paul states, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?" Because Burns's dismemberment and cannibalization is always scripted as the culmination of "atonement," it necessarily carries with it the "aroma of Christ," but for the Black Masseur, this aroma is transmogrified into the "sweet smell of death," becoming yet another precursor of the violent fate that awaits him.

Surprisingly, given Williams's symbolically dire prognostications about the Black Masseur's final outcome, the lynching narrative ends not with a bang, but a whimper. It seems clear, however, after the clamor resulting from Burns's murder and subsequent ingestion subsides, that the quiet "air of completion" hovering over the Black Masseur is profoundly funereal. Williams reports:

Those bare white bones, left over from Burns's atonement, were placed in a sack and borne to the end of a car-line. . . .

Then in the sack, in which he had carried the bones, he dropped his belongings, a neat blue suit to conceal his dangerous body, some buttons of pearl and a picture of Anthony Burns as a child of seven.

He moved to another city, obtained employment once more as an expert masseur. And there in a white curtained place, serenely conscious of fate bringing toward him another, to suffer atonement as it had been suffered by Burns, he stood impassively waiting inside a milky white door for the next to arrive. (94)

This "morning after" scene mirrors other lynching spectacles, as the purifying fire has been extinguished, leaving only ashes and bones. These bones and other ephemera are then collected as souvenirs of the event, a common practice performed by bystanders who gathered to watch the lynching take place. As Trudier Harris explains, "The climactic release began with the crackling of fire against flesh, with the gathering of souvenirs, and with the cries of the victim; it concluded in the yells of the crowd when they knew the victim was dead, yells which gave way to the silence of complete (sexual) purgation, the ultimate release from all tension" (23). Although in "Desire" Williams masks the victimized cries of both Burns and the Black Masseur with both shouts from the preacher and his frenzied congregants and the din of the scarlet fire engines whose phallic hoses—symbolizing the Black Masseur's castrated penis—were "useless against the purity of the flame" (93), the final outcome of the Black Masseur is assured, and the lynching ritual reaches its grisly conclusion.

All that remains of the Black Masseur after the fire subsides are seemingly random items (the blue suit, pearl buttons, and picture of a young Anthony Burns) that, despite their surface innocuousness, are nevertheless additional markers denoting the Black Masseur's racial contraventions. Because of its express purpose of concealing his

“dangerous body,” the blue suit signifies the Black Masseur’s failed attempts to “pass” as something other than a primitive savage in normative white society. The pearl buttons and Anthony Burns’s picture, while ostensibly more literal objects carrying specific, ornamental purposes, nonetheless carry with them the denotative whiteness signifying the racial and sexual conventions that, having been violated, proximately precipitated the Black Masseur’s death.

Williams’s denouement to the story effectively encapsulates and reiterates the horror bound up in the lynching spectacle, and its attendant narrative, by offering a sly but poignant critique of Cold War social norms:

And meantime, slowly, with barely a thought of doing, the earth’s whole population twisted and writhed beneath the manipulation of night’s black fingers and the white ones of day with skeletons splintered and flesh reduced to pulp, as out of this unlikely problem, the answer, perfection, was slowly evolved through torture (94).

Within this grim imagery, Williams offers a glimmer of hope that society will see past the hypocrisy of rigid mores that only exacerbate already tense-to-the-breaking-point racial and sexual relations. Williams further suggests that in order for society to progress and become truly civilized, it must seek perfection by uniting blacks and whites together, regardless of their sexuality. This unity, of course, must come about through the repudiation of performative racial violence that reaches its zenith with lynching.

Williams scripts this repudiation throughout “Desire and the Black Masseur” by asserting that the rope and faggot of lynching as punishment for supposed violations of these outmoded social mores (what Williams calls “this unlikely problem”) is nothing more than pure, unadulterated torture built on senseless fears. These fears, according to Trudier Harris, must be exorcised from racial memory in order to obtain true racial,

sexual, and moral equality. Finally, by interpreting “Desire and the Black Masseur” as a lynching narrative, I am able to engage Tennessee Williams as a willing—if surreptitiously enthusiastic—participant in what Harris terms a “contest for manhood and civil rights which [binds him] to history and to literature” (195) and which makes “Desire and the Black Masseur” both an eloquent artistic creation and a potent Southern cultural document.

CHAPTER FOUR
OTHERS FROM A SOUTHERN MOTHER:
SOUTHERNING THE QUEER IN
PATRICIA HIGHSMITH'S *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*

While it is easy to locate within Williams's perversely poignant depiction of tragic queer desire a plethora of Southern signifiers, the same can certainly not be said of Patricia Highsmith's mid-century oeuvre. Indeed, Highsmith's fiction, with its noir-esque, region-neutral landscapes and icy, frequently psychopathic characters, appears to be far removed from even the darkest Southern locales. Moreover, given that she relentlessly styled herself as an aloof, rootless wanderer *cum* "citizen of the world," my consideration of Highsmith as an identifiably Southern writer may itself seem somewhat surprising.

Throughout her almost 50-year writing life, Highsmith penned a wide array of notable crime suspense classics including *Strangers on a Train* (1950), *The Blunderer* (1952) and the five-volume "Ripleyad" beginning with *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) and culminating nearly four decades later with *Ripley Under Water* (1991). Within and through these works, Highsmith concentrated primarily on exploring themes of exurban existentialism, commodity fetishism, identity dualism, and a defiantly Arendtian banality of evil. Yet in her fiction crafted and published during the nascent Cold War era, Highsmith also offered up a dark and disturbing view of American queerness tinged with discernibly Southern elements.

As Victoria Hesford has observed, Highsmith's somewhat ghoulish, if perversely intriguing, works arrived in the early to mid-1950s coincident with a "*mise en scène* for postwar anxieties about economic reorganization and the worldwide military and political expansion of American power" that created the Cold War containment culture (216).

These anxieties were exacerbated by the panicked “lavender scare” notion that degenerate queers were living in close proximity to, and were thus likely to infiltrate, otherwise “normal” American households.¹ Highsmith, herself an admitted, unapologetic lesbian, suffered no apparent consequences of this “lavender scare” regardless of her locale, although she appeared to be well aware of the South’s propensity for outright racism and homophobia. In this long excerpt from Marijane Meaker’s memoir, Highsmith briefly discusses with Meaker the commonalities shared between Southern blacks and queers:

“I wasn’t reading the paper for my reviews,” said Pat. “I was trying to catch up with the news here. What’s going on with the nigras?”

“You mean the Negroes?”

“You’re not doing them any favor pronouncing it *Negro*. They call themselves niggers. I’ve heard them.”

“Well, if you have it’s different. We can call ourselves queers but when someone else does it, it’s derogatory.”

“I don’t know anyone who calls herself queer,” Pat Said. “And there are plenty of restaurants that don’t want us. We don’t stage a sit-in. We just find someplace else to eat.”

“Okay,” I gave up. I didn’t want to spoil the evening.

“You don’t know the South,” Pat said.

“I went to boarding school with all Southern girls.”

“Virginians aren’t really Southern.”

“Are Texans?”

“Where the colored are concerned, we are.” (71-72)

¹ For a brilliant exploration of the Cold War “lavender scare” as exemplified in the whole-scale purge of gay and lesbian government employees, see David Johnson’s *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*.

Leaving aside Highsmith's erroneous declaration that Virginians are not Southerners, it seems evident here that Highsmith understood too well the vicissitudes of prejudice, whether they were aimed at queers or blacks. At the same time, she also consciously downplayed the import of these prejudicial society attitudes on her personally, rejecting them with the pronouncement she frequently repeated to Meaker, "I don't care for acceptance" (24). Yet in spite of this haughty, above-the-fray dismissal, Highsmith's intimate familiarity with Cold War social anxieties surrounding "others" writ large also allowed her to parlay these fears in and through many of the characters in her fictional oeuvre.²

In this chapter I focus primarily on the characters of Charles Anthony Bruno and Guy Haines in Highsmith's earliest novel, *Strangers on a Train*. Through an exploration of Bruno and Guy, I show how Highsmith both foregrounded and compounded these Cold War anxieties by imbuing in these characters a discernible Southernness, manifested variously through Southern grotesquerie or historical conceptions of Southern manhood and honor, which acts in concert with their extant or latent queerness. In so doing, I essentially flip my paradigm established in earlier chapters of uncloseting queer sexuality in the South and instead concentrate on teasing out the South in Highsmith's queers. This paradigm shift also riffs on the "coming out" narrative, such that when Highsmith's characters "come out" as Southern, they create a deadly combination (both literally and figuratively speaking) of sexuality and regional identity that allows Highsmith to construct a distinct, powerfully disconcerting un-American counter-narrative to the prevailing, nearly omnipresent Cold War containment ideology.

² Meaker, who had a torrid relationship with Highsmith in the 1950s, extensively details her unabashedly open lesbianism during the Cold War era. See thus Meaker's *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s*.

In his incisive study of queer sexuality in Southern fiction, Gary Richards observes that because most (if not all) white mid-twentieth-century Southern writers—including but certainly not limited to Highsmith contemporaries Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Penn Warren, and Eudora Welty—"all contributed to the deviancy of this era's Southern literature" (26-27). Richards points out further that precisely because of this regional deviancy, non-Southerners could effectively breathe a sigh of relief, assured as they were of their own "relative normality" (22). Because Cold War American societal mores dictated conformity to domesticated heteronormativity, any expression of deviancy were almost instantly read, re-interpreted, and reinscribed as homosexuality that required not merely containment but also effective regional quarantine. Unsurprisingly, this quarantining was pointedly homophobic because, as Richards notes, "American society is binaristically divided into North and South, and, depending on one's own regional affinities, sexual otherness is always *their* problem, *their* preoccupation, *their* identity, and *not* ours. Look, see; *their* literature proves it" (23, emphasis in original).

Yet in spite of, or perhaps even because of this "quarantining of homosexuality to the South in the popular national imagination," Richards adds that Southern writers were necessarily empowered to present representations of sexual otherness that could function as "acts of strategic subversion" (28). This is precisely what Highsmith does repeatedly in her fiction, although I argue that these "strategically subversive" representations are perhaps most pronounced in her Cold War works. In this chapter I show that what is more pointedly subversive about Highsmith's others, Bruno and Guy, though, is not their

demonstrated (if never expressly articulated) sexual deviance, but is instead their Southern identity.

Highsmith herself displayed a decided ambivalence toward, and frequently bifurcated attitude about, the South. She was born Mary Patricia Plangman in Fort Worth, Texas on January 19, 1921, a portentous date because, as she announced proudly in numerous interviews exhaustively detailed by biographer Andrew Wilson, it was a birthday shared with two famous Southerners: Edgar Allen Poe and Robert E. Lee (12). According to Wilson, Highsmith was undeniably Texan and unabashedly Southern, noting that in addition to superfluous culinary marks (her favorite foods were cornbread, collard greens, ribs, and black-eyed peas), at the age of thirteen, she bought a pair of Confederate swords for \$13 and showcased them prominently at her various residences for the rest of her life (12). Playwright Phyllis Nagy, whom Wilson also interviewed, noted, “The fact that Pat was from Texas is incredibly important for an accurate appreciation of her character. . . . When you say things like this to people who aren’t American they think it’s terrible facile but Southern conservatism was deeply ingrained in her” (12). Highsmith was also unabashedly proud of her familial Southern ancestry, repeatedly invoked her deep Southern roots and delighting in the fact that Gideon Coats, her maternal great-grandfather, owned a plantation in Alabama (Wilson 14).

In terms of Highsmith’s literary influences, Wilson has remarked that one of her favorite books was *Gone With the Wind* because, as she observed, “it is a true novel about the South” (15). Wilson notes further that Highsmith also admired North Carolina novelist Thomas Wolfe for his belief in the power of personal experiences and the autobiographical self in writing (77-78), and in a 1944 journal entry Highsmith compared

her writing style to that of Carson McCullers (109), who she eventually met in 1949. From this first meeting, biographer Joan Schenkar has mentioned, the two women subsequently formed a pleasant, if somewhat distant, friendship (227).

Furthermore, Wilson has noted that in a 1953 interview with the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* Highsmith named Robert Penn Warren and William Faulkner as her favorite American writers (189), and she befriended Truman Capote in 1948. Schenkar has remarked that Highsmith and Capote developed an immediate, strong kinship because of their shared homosexuality and Southern identity (250). Capote was also instrumental in securing a place for Highsmith a spot at the Yaddo art colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she completed *Strangers on a Train* in 1950 and where she was also introduced to Flannery O'Connor. According to Schenkar, O'Connor's deep religiosity and steadfast refusal to engage with the other Yaddo colonists in heavy drinking, deeply rankled Highsmith (256), but even though Highsmith frequently displayed a condescending, often outwardly dismissive attitude toward O'Connor and other Southern writers, her fiction shows that she was undoubtedly influenced by their grotesque themes, eerie and disturbing landscapes, and queerly Southern "freaks."

Highsmith's fictional milieus, particularly those in her short stories published in the 1940s and novels that appeared in the 1950s, are in fact shot through with grotesque tropes drawn directly from the Southern Grotesque Tradition. William Van O'Connor has explained in *The Grotesque: An American Genre* that the grotesque presents man (writ large) as an "inextricable tangle of rationality, irrationality, love and hatred, self-improvement and self-destruction" (18). This schizophrenic "tangle" created an atmosphere in which innocence and horror tenuously co-exist, and moral ambiguities and

contradictions are commonplace. O'Connor also concluded that in spite of the grotesque's long history outside the confines of American literature, in its most recognizable form the grotesque was a defiantly modern phenomenon that developed in response to Cold War anxieties about "atom bombs and great social changes" (6). For Americans, these anxieties stemmed from new, extraordinary experiences that disrupted previous notions of order and stability not only on the personal level, but also in terms of nationhood. It is thus not surprising that, according to O'Connor, the grotesque found its fullest expression in the South, a region seemingly overrun with persons whose very identity was rooted in defiant separateness, contradictory morals, and a paradoxical embrace of the weird, the distorted, and the disordered.

In this passage, O'Connor explains how three exemplary Cold War-era Southern authors—Welty, McCullers, and Capote, whose writings were not coincidentally appearing before or concurrent with Highsmith's own work—created their individualized manifestations of the Southern grotesque:

In Eudora Welty's stories morality and righteousness are not principles, but sentiment and sympathy are principles. Her characters seem to live in a land of dreams where everything is eerie and often incongruous. She creates comic grotesques. In Carson McCullers' stories the controlling factor is psychological motivation. Almost invariably the motivations are abnormal or perverse, but Miss McCullers seems to ask that they be taken as "normal." Some of the characters are almost mannequins, and their actions seem only a parody of human actions. The Truman Capote world is quite similar to McCullers' world in that what most of us would take to be normal is presented as monstrous. The nice people are sexually abnormal, demented or eccentric. The young frequently have the wizened appearance of midgets, civilization is decayed, and everything moves at a lethargic pace. (13)

What is surprising about this catalog of grotesque tropes and the authors associated therewith is the absence of Flannery O'Connor, who perhaps more than any other

Southern writer became the de facto purveyor and explainer of the Southern grotesque. O'Connor herself explained in "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" that grotesque characters "seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity" (44). This burden often carries with it numerous physical or psychological manifestations including, but certainly not limited to, psychological incongruities, physical decay, sexual aberration, and "monstrous" normality. Though Highsmith routinely incorporates in her fiction these grotesque variances from social norms and their concomitant senses of terror and mystery in her fiction, her Cold War-era novels deploy typically Southern fictional tropes such as dueling identities and dislocation that overtly reference the grotesque "freak," while her characters are almost always constructed as simultaneously amoral and grotesquely evil, and yet disturbingly likeable and oddly gentleman-like.

To illustrate Highsmith's re-vision and perversion of the Southern tropic landscape, I turn to Highsmith's best-selling 1950 debut novel *Strangers on a Train*. Russell Harrison has described the plot of *Strangers* as a deceptively simple one: two men, Charles Anthony Bruno and Guy Haines, meet on a train ride through Texas. Guy, an up-and-coming architect, is traveling from New York City to his hometown, Metcalf, Texas, to obtain a divorce from his philandering wife Miriam, so he can marry Anne Faulkner, the woman he now loves. On the train Guy meets Bruno, a young squirrely man without a job or any sense of direction. Bruno lives with his wealthy parents at their Great Neck, New York estate, and he spends most of his time traveling in order to escape from his father, whom he detests and wants to see dead (13).

Out of this creepily innocuous encounter, Bruno convinces—or, more accurately,

seduces—Guy into participating in a “crisscross” murder plot. Bruno explains that he will murder Miriam in Texas and, in exchange, Guy will murder Bruno’s father in New York. To Bruno’s thinking, both murders will appear to be random and motiveless because neither man has any emotional, physical, or geographical connection to their respective victims. As the novel progresses, however, regional identification becomes increasingly important, with Highsmith emphasizing the central role Southern locales and tropes such as the grotesque and the vaunted Southern moral code of honor have to the murder plot. Thus Highsmith effectively makes the South itself a third party accessory for Guy and Bruno’s murderous scheme.

Take for example the first glimpse readers are offered of Bruno, a northerner in whose character Guy, the novel’s “real” Southerner, detects almost immediately something queerly suspicious and notably grotesque. Highsmith initially describes Bruno in almost “country bumpkin” terms, noting that he was a “tall blond young man in a rust-brown suit,” with a “pallid, undersized face” that “looked neither young nor old, neither intelligent nor entirely stupid” (11). She also quickly points out that Bruno’s face is marred by a “narrow bulging forehead and the lantern jaw” that “scooped degenerately, deep where the mouth lay in a fine line” (11). This “degenerate” observation comes after Guy’s curiously self-effacing observation that Bruno’s face was “interesting... though Guy did not know why” (11), and it imbues the scene with palpable homoeroticism.

Highsmith, however, promptly disrupts any potential eroticism by foregrounding the prominence of a mountainous point on Bruno’s skin that Guy describes as a “huge pimple in the exact center of his forehead” in which “all its impurities had been drained to feed the pimple’s outburst” (11). By connecting Bruno’s pimple to his already

perceptible degeneracy and impurity, Highsmith signifies on the Southern grotesque, something to which Guy has already admitted tacit familiarity by virtue of his hopefully-soon-to-be divorced wife Miriam, who he silently recalls being “pink and tan-freckled, and radiating a kind of unhealthy heat” (9).

Interestingly enough, Highsmith consciously paints the northerner Bruno as paradigmatically grotesque, but she also takes equal pains to portray Guy as an exemplary “new Southerner” modeled along the contours of the Cold War organization man:

A tab of his soft shirt collar began to ride up. In the reflection the dusk had started to create in the window’s glass, the peak of white collar around his suggested a style of the last century, like his black hair that grew high and loose on top and lay close in the back. The rise of hair and the slope of his long nose gave him a look of intense purpose and somehow of forward motion, though from the front, his heavy, horizontal brows and mouth imposed a stillness and reserve. He wore flannel trousers that needed pressing, a dark jacket that slacked over his slight body and showed faintly purple where the light struck it, and a tomato-colored woolen tie, carelessly knotted. (9-10)

In this description Highsmith embeds signifiers showcasing Guy’s precarious temporal “place” in Cold War America. For instance, at first glance Highsmith portrays Guy as a seeming *sine qua non* “man in the gray flannel suit,” referencing her cognizance of such wildly popular sociological studies such as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* which, like *Strangers on a Train*, also appeared in 1950. According to James Gilbert, Riesman’s book articulated societal “uneasiness with the advent of mass society and its challenges to the character of man” in the years following World War II, and it did so in such a way that it “seemed to challenge the very possibility of achieving selfhood in modern society” (34). This failure of achieving selfhood was a prominent anxiety during the Cold War era because Americans feared that it would produce what Timothy Melley calls “individuals

[that] had grown alarmingly generic and pliant as they became enmeshed in ever-larger bureaucratic and corporate structures” (48).

Yet in spite of Highsmith’s overdetermined incorporation of such “organization man” tropes such as the flannel trousers and the “look of intense purpose and... forward motion,” she also carefully hedges her bets with Guy. She knows that Guy is at heart a Southerner, though she backpedals his connection to the South by casting in in terms of a place from which to get away. After Guy and Bruno’s train enters Texas, for example, Guy disembarks, and almost immediately, he observes a palpable atmospheric change from his previous northern locale, noting “the more organic air, weighted with nightfall, struck him like a smothering pillow” (13). At this point in his journey Guy has only just crossed into Southern territory, but within the “organic air” it is easy to imagine agrarian odors, stifling heat, and oppressive humidity such that Guy would in fact feel “weighted” and “struck” like a “smothering pillow.”

As Guy continues his ruminations, he thinks deeper about his Southern roots in Metcalf and promptly connects them directly to Miriam, whose rampant infidelity, scheming machinations, and almost constant deceitfulness has categorically compromised Guy’s sense of Southern honor and propriety. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has observed with regard to Southern honor, “a male’s moral bearing resided not in him alone, but also in his woman’s standing” (*Honor and Violence* 36). As such, any publicly shaming act such as flagrant adultery on the part of a female would bring almost instant dishonor to the cuckolded male, particularly if, as Wyatt-Brown continues, males were utterly impotent to “deal with such wrongs” (*Honor and Violence* 36).

Although Wyatt-Brown's references to honor are located in Old South antebellum notions of morality, family standing, and gentility, Highsmith establishes early in *Strangers* that Guy suffers from this same uncanny sense of male impotence. Guy admits ruefully, "That she was pregnant guaranteed the divorce, he reasoned, so why was he nervous? A suspicion that he might, in some unreachable depth of himself, be jealous because she was going to bear another man's child and had once aborted his own tormented him above all. No, it was nothing but shame that nettled him, he told himself, shame that he had once loved such a person as Miriam" (10). Miriam's overt control over Guy, whether by virtue of her choice to have an adulterous, out of wedlock baby or simply denying him a divorce until *she* decides the appropriate time, both shames and emasculates him, rendering him physically and mentally powerless as well as socially handicapped. Guy continues his shame spiral by recalling further, "Occasionally she wrote him for money, small but irritating amounts which he let her have because it would be so easy for her, so natural to her, to start a campaign in Metcalf against him, and his mother was in Metcalf" (10).

For Guy, Miriam's actions carry with them all the hallmarks of what Betina Entzminger has brilliantly termed the "bad belle." Entzminger explains that the "bad belle" is a "type of femme fatale—sexually knowing, physically powerful because of her allure, and morally dangerous. . . . Rather than act as moral exemplar, as a true Southern lady should, the bad belle uses her sexuality as a tool to force men to complete her evil, self-serving designs. Rather than act as her admirer's salvation and guiding star, she often leads to his destruction" (2). Arguably, Highsmith casts Miriam in the role of the "bad belle," but she does so not to ensure Guy's degradation or destruction. Rather, she

cannily refocalizes Miriam's thoroughly modern maneuverings so that they will specifically attract the attention of Guy's real admirer, Bruno.

In fact, at exactly the time in which thoughts of Miriam seem to overwhelm Guy, Bruno re-enters Guy's frame of reference: "The waiter had just taken his order when the blond young man appeared in the doorway of the car, swaying, looking a little truculent with a short cigarette in his mouth. Guy had put him quite out of him and now his tall rust-brown figure was like a vaguely unpleasant memory" (14). For Guy, Bruno's reappearance is like trading one bad memory for another. Yet following some energetic prompting from Bruno, and acting against his better judgment, Guy acquiesces to an invitation to dine with Bruno in his train compartment.

Once Guy reaches Bruno's berth, Highsmith wastes little time in establishing the decidedly louche queerness of his furnishings, which prominently feature "four yellow-labeled bottles of Scotch lined up on an alligator suitcase," along with "sports clothes and equipment, tennis rackets, a bag of cold clubs, a couple of cameras, a wicker basket of fruit and wine bedded with fuchsia paper," a "splay of current magazines, comic books and novels" and "a box of candy with a red ribbon across the lid" (14). The items in this disordered pile seem to be manifestations of Bruno's bifurcated self. The sports clothes and assorted ephemera are, of course, signifiers of Bruno's devoutly-to-be-wished masculinity, a "passing" presumption that Bruno deploys to de-emphasize (or perhaps overcompensate for) his otherwise non-normative appearance. Brian Pronger, who has written extensively on the intersection of sport and homosexuality, has remarked, "For boys, sport is an initiation into manhood, a forum in which they can realize their place in

the orthodoxy of gender culture. Sport gives them a feel for masculinity, a sense of how they are different from girls” (19).

More to the point and specific to the Cold War era, Bruno’s piles of sports equipment also serves as an ostensible rejoinder to societal anxieties over the era’s organization men’s physical lassitude brought about by their pampered white-collar jobs. Historian Jesse Berrett has observed that during this period, “concomitant with the rise of middle-class jobs that did not demand physical labor and produced nothing tangible came organized athletics, which compensated for the deprivation of productive satisfaction by resuscitating more primitive sources of manhood, such as bloodshed and violent camaraderie, and restraining them within a format of ritualized physical competition” (811).

Guy quickly recognizes that Bruno is hardly “sporty,” nor is he a “man in the gray flannel suit.” Instead, given the trappings of Bruno’s compartment, Guy surmises that Bruno is an active participant in the conspicuous consumption culture that pervaded the 1950s. This type of culture was widely considered to operate under the purview of femininity, as Berrett observes, “Whereas men’s activities, production and athletics, required sweat and toil, consumption was popularly understood as a feminine (and feminizing) pastime: passive, producing nothing, and easily overwhelming women’s susceptible dispositions” (811). The decorative wicker baskets, boxes of candy, and novels and comics, all of which are hallmarks of idle leisure, do in fact lend an air of “consumptive” feminism to Bruno’s quarters. But Bruno adds an interest offhand remark that blurs the supposedly firm line drawn between masculinized sports and feminized consumerist culture. After showing Guy a brand new tennis racket that has “Never felt a

ball,” Bruno informs him, “My mother makes me take all this stuff, hoping it’ll keep me out of bars. Good to hock if I run out, anyway. I like to drink when I travel. It enhances things, don’t you think?” (15). Bruno allows that while his mother is solely responsible for propounding his presumptively “sporty” masculinity, he finds this notion both ironic and foolish because he personally regards masculinity and its associated accouterments as utterly disposable commodities that can be easily sold and consumed.

What is interesting about Bruno’s declaration here is both its forthright honesty and its effect on Guy. Against his better judgment and for no good reason, Bruno appears to amuse and intrigue Guy. Looking around Bruno’s massed belongings and cluttered surroundings, Guy thinks to himself, “The room amused him and gave him a welcome sense of seclusion. With the smile his dark brows relaxed, transforming his whole expression. His eyes looked outward now” (15). Once Guy ensconces himself more fully in Bruno’s lair, however, his sense of awkwardness and unease over Bruno’s evident queerness begins to resurface. He notices, for example, another oddity in Bruno’s appearance that exacerbates his already-extant grotesquerie. Highsmith writes, “Bruno had odd feet, Guy noticed, or maybe it was the shoes. Small, light tan shoes with a long plain toecap shaped like Bruno’s lantern chin. Somehow old-fashioned-looking feet. And Bruno was not so slender as he had thought. His long legs were heavy and his body rounded” (15).

Apparently, according to Highsmith, size does in fact matter. Bruno’s small feet are overt signifiers of his feminization (real men, after all, don’t have small feet), while his long heavy legs and rounded body further accentuate the perception of Bruno as a reservoir of enfeebled femininity who is wholly unable to regain his masculine

subjectivity and self-control. Bruno, aware that Guy's regard for him appears to be morphing, engages in a clever conversational gambit that forces Guy to turn south again:

"What're you building in Metcalf?"

"Nothing," Guy said. "My mother lives there."

"Oh," Bruno said interestedly. "Visiting her? Is that where you're from?"

"Yes. Born there."

"You don't look much like a Texan." Bruno shot ketchup all over his steak and French fries, then delicately picked up the parsley and held it poised.

"How long since you been home?"

"About two years."

"Your father there, too?"

"My father's dead."

"Oh. Get along with your mother okay?"

Guy said he did. (16)

Unlike Bruno, whose life is on consciously full display, Guy provides little in the way of information that Bruno can remember or exploit. Instead, he retains a guarded sense of propriety and reserve that takes Bruno by surprise. This surprise is reinforced by Bruno's remark, "You don't look much like a Texan" that reflects Guy's measured reserve. Indeed, Guy's only hints to his Texas life are carefully crafted dribbles about his doting mother and deceased father.

Guy in fact consciously chooses not to dwell excessively on his family situation, preferring instead to shift the onus of conversational disclosure back to Bruno. As he watches Bruno, he again recognizes the evident grotesquerie bound up in his character: "Looking at him now, Guy saw only the top of his narrow thin-haired head and the

protruding pimple. He had not been conscious of the pimple since he had seen him asleep, but now that he noticed it again, it seemed a monstrous, shocking thing and he saw it alone” (16). Guy intuits that the pimple emblemizes Bruno’s volatile personality, and his intuition isn’t far off the mark. After a long, mostly one-sided interchange focused primarily on his deep-seated, almost murderous hatred toward his father, Bruno finally acknowledges the eruption’s grotesque presence:

“Yeah, I am. Twenty-five. You mean I do look twenty-five with this—this *thing* right in the center of my head?” Bruno caught his underlip between his teeth. A glint of wariness came in his eyes, and suddenly he cupped his hand over his forehead in intense and bitter shame. He sprang up and went to the mirror. “I meant to put something over it.”

Guy said something reassuring, but Bruno kept looking at himself this way and that in the mirror, in an agony of self-torture. “It *couldn’t* be a pimple,” he said nasally. “It’s a boil. It’s everything I *hate* boiling up in me. It’s a plague of Job!” (21)

Bruno’s observations about his festering pustule and its ostensible marking him as grotesque are remarkably accurate and perilously self-revelatory, and as their conversation continues, Bruno becomes more and more agitated, almost to the point of mania. He tells Guy, “I got a theory a person ought to do everything it’s possible to do before he dies, and maybe die trying to do something that’s really impossible” (21). Bruno then proceeds to catalog things he has done as part of his “bucket list,” primary among them a robbery done simply for the sake of robbing someone. This revelation initially intrigues Guy, though ultimately he concludes that Bruno and his concomitant fatalistic ideology are mentally unhinged: “Bruno could be violent. He could be insane, too. Despair, Guy thought, not insanity. The desperate boredom of the wealthy, that he often spoke of to Anne. It tended to destroy rather than create. And it could lead to crime as easily as privation” (22).

Guy's conclusion is eerily reminiscent of observations made by Dr. Karl Menninger, one of Highsmith's acknowledged influences. Andrew Wilson relates that after her family relocated from Fort Worth to Astoria, Queens, New York, Highsmith became obsessed with the inner mental workings of psychologically "abnormal" persons. Through Menninger, especially his pathbreaking psychiatric work *The Human Mind* (first published in 1930), she found precisely the penetrating scientific studies necessary to help her explicate what Wilson has called "her already instinctive belief that behind an individual's respectable façade lay a mass of contradictions and perverse desires" (41).

These contradictions and perverse desires were bread and butter for Menninger, who was himself both fascinated by and wholly disgusted with socially-constructed notions about so-called 'normal' and 'abnormal' behavior. As he wrote in his preface to *The Human Mind*, "The adjuration to be 'normal' seems shockingly repellent to me; I see neither hope nor comfort in sinking to that low level. I think it is ignorance that makes people think of abnormality only with horror and allows them to remain undismayed at the proximity of 'normal' to average and mediocre. For surely anyone who achieves anything is, *a priori*, abnormal" (ix). Menninger's notion of accomplishments and achievements being considered "abnormal" were an important component of Cold War American containment ideology. Elaine Tyler May has indicated that although Americans (predominately American men) literally labored under cultural and social mandates to produce and promulgate safe, secure suburban homes filled with material possessions, this same consumerist drive coexisted with what she calls a "window of vulnerability" tied directly to what was seen as an onus of selfish "over-success" (*Homeward Bound* 162). During the Cold War era, ambition and success was rewarded,

but taking pride in and advertising this ambition was viewed as socially and morally suspect. May remarks further that the predominating mindset during the Cold War period was one in which society constructed itself around “well-to-do but conservative people, not extravagant consumers” (*Homeward Bound* 157).

At this juncture, Guy fully embraces the overarching American reserved containment mentality that included suspicions and behavioral prohibitions about boasting over personal accomplishments. As a result, Guy can only conceive of Bruno’s accomplishments as harbingers of an unhinged, abnormal mind, and he again scrutinizes Bruno’s physical appearance to both reinforce these suspicions and justify his tacit censure:

Guy looked at the stiff, shaky hands that had stolen, at the nails bitten below the quick. The hands played clumsily with a match cover and dropped it, like a baby’s hands, onto the ash-sprinkled steak. How boring it was really, Guy thought, crime. How motiveless often. A certain type turned to crime. And who would know from Bruno’s hands, or his room, or his ugly wistful face that he had stolen? Guy dropped into his chair again. (22)

Guy’s thoughts are intriguing because he not only returns to Bruno’s grotesque face, but he also supplements these contemplations by reflecting on Bruno’s apparent immaturity displayed in his hands. For Guy, Bruno’s hands are the truest mirror of his soul, in that they appear to be wholly incapable of performing vicious or criminal acts, though his distorted face betrays a distinct predilection for violence.

For his part, Bruno senses Guy’s increasing discomfort over his braggadocio and displeasure with his company and embarks on an interesting conversational tack. He overcomes Guy’s reserve by inquiring about his architectural mien, “What kind of houses you build?” (23). Through this simple, unassuming question, Highsmith immediately

allows Guy to perform an about-face and jettison his modesty. He responds, ““Oh—what’s known as modern. I’ve done a couple of stores and a small office building.’ Guy smiled, feeling none of the reticence, the faint vexation he generally did when people asked him about his work” (23). This “faint vexation” is a reminder of Guy’s connection to his organization man status, in which businessmen like him were expected to perform their work duties, automaton-like, while specifically abjuring any overt displays of success. However, Guy’s vexation is also related to his regional rootlessness, in that his adoptive urbane northern identity—tied as it is directly to the “man in the gray flannel suit” ethos—explicitly hampers him from expressing any sense of pride in accomplishments, employment, or place.

Although Guy verbally responds to Bruno in very general terms about his current architectural work, he silently reflects on his newest project, the Palmyra Club, an exclusive country club commission in Palm Beach, Florida. Like his existing portfolio, the Palmyra Club involves a pattern of “low white buildings on the green lawn” (23). What is intriguing about the Palm Beach contract, however, is the curious emotional response it provokes in Guy. Unlike his previous endeavors, the Palm Beach undertaking represents a significant career milestone, making Guy feel “subtly flattered, immensely secure suddenly, and blessed” (23).

Highsmith’s decision here to locate Guy’s most important job in Palm Beach is ingeniously clever, and it seems hardly surprising that Guy’s feelings of flattery, security, and blessedness would be intimately connected to the Southern location of his venture. That being said, the Palm Beach location is also curious because it is, for all practical purposes, a decidedly non-Southern Southern city. Historian John Shelton Reed and his

colleagues James Kohls and Carol Hanchette have noted that even though Florida itself was a member of the Confederacy and was by definition historically Southern, in terms of regional integration, “the Southernmost part of the South, Southern Florida, has now dropped out of the South” (227). Reed’s team based their conclusions in part on whether or not residents of Southern municipalities identified themselves, both conceptually and geographically, as “Southern.” Accordingly, they observed, “no part of peninsular Florida is any longer included in the Southern heartland” (227). For Guy, then, the Palm Beach job represents an opportunity for him to turn south again, thus re-establishing his Southern connection while simultaneously avoiding any of the “baggage” tied to Miriam, his mother and deceased father, or his seemingly unsophisticated Texas roots.

What’s more, Guy’s Palm Beach reference has an interesting correlation to Bruno, since Palm Beach has historically been a haven for affluent northern “snowbirds” that came South to avoid cold northern winters. According to Larry Youngs, Standard Oil magnate and New York native Henry Flagler conceptualized and created Palm Beach as a subtropical elite playground and deployed a number of inducements for luring his fellow travelers to Florida. These incentives included offering “fashionable tourists’ quests for picturesque and novel destinations, the romance and nostalgia identified with notions of the ‘Old South,’ the search for ‘Arcadian’ values inherent in the ‘back-to-nature movement,’ the challenge and adventure associated with the Florida frontier, and the interconnected intellectual currents that swirled around the notions of neurasthenia and faith in therapeutic activities designed to serve as antidotes to modern living” (61-62).

Bruno represents exactly the type of northern neurasthenic who ostensibly suffers from the so-called pressures of modern living, or what Guy wryly regards as the

“desperate boredom of the wealthy” (22) and travels south to escape from or alleviate his northern anxieties. However, as the two men’s train plunges further and further south, Guy recognizes a slow but discernible uptick in Bruno’s suspected penchant for violence and insanity, thus effectively nullifying any of the South’s alleged therapeutic qualities. This predilection first expresses itself as Bruno continues his quest for personal information about Guy. After his initial architectural interrogatory, Bruno segues suddenly into questions about Guy’s marriage generally and Miriam in particular:

Bruno sneered. “What kind of girls you find to marry down there?”

“Very pretty,” Guy replied. “Some of them.”

“Mostly dumb though, huh?”

“They can be.” He smiled to himself. Miriam was the kind of Southern girl Bruno probably meant.

“What kind of girl’s your wife?”

“Rather pretty,” Guy said cautiously. “Red hair. A little plump.”

“What’s her name?”

“Miriam. Miriam Joyce.”

“Hm-m. Smart or dumb?”

“She’s not an intellectual. I didn’t want to marry an intellectual.” (23-24)

Throughout this conversation, it appears that Bruno relies almost entirely on stereotypical depictions of Southern women, specifically the alluring—if vacuous—Southern belle, in order to more fully flesh-out his conception of Miriam. According to Entzminger, this stereotype is sketched thus, “Trained from childhood in the arts of allure for the sole purpose of capturing suitable husbands on which their futures depended, Southern

belles . . . define[d] women according to the needs they fulfill for men and according to the mystery they represent to men” (11).

What I find especially interesting about this interchange is that Guy, as a born-and-bred Southerner, says precious little to contradict Bruno’s decidedly sexist ad hominem pronouncements about Southern women, especially their supposed intellectual shortcomings. Moreover, he problematically incites Bruno’s figurations by telling him that Miriam herself is “not an intellectual.” This remark could be easily explained as Guy’s attempt to commiserate with Bruno’s broad-brush dismissal of Southern women, particularly since it neatly relates to his own anger over Miriam’s refusal to grant him a divorce. Yet as Bruno watches Guy and observes his clearly emotional responses, he immediately intuits that Miriam is much closer to exemplifying a “bad belle” who is hardly an intellectual lightweight, is far more conniving, and wields a surprising amount of power over Guy.

Indeed, Highsmith quickly reveals that Miriam’s hold over Guy is not merely tied to her divorce manipulations, but she is instead actively engaged in a calculated and protracted scheme to utterly humiliate him through unabashedly flagrant infidelity. Guy is loath to reveal this information, but Bruno nevertheless manages to coax out the particulars: “What happened to your wife? She start sleeping around?” (24). Receiving a hesitant but affirmative response from Guy, Bruno then delivers a mysterious and ominous declaration, “I know that Southern redhead type” (25) and, after some further badinage, concludes that “Women like that draw men like garbage draws flies” (27).

Bruno’s obvious disgust about Miriam is at least partly grounded in her conspicuous flouting of supposedly “proper” Southern behavior because, in spite of his

questionable claim that he knows “that Southern redhead type,” Bruno relies heavily on mythic preconceptions of pure Southern womanhood as basis for assessing Miriam’s persona. Yet Bruno’s alleged understanding about Southern character traits does not end with Miriam, since Bruno also foists his preconceived notions about Southern manhood onto Guy. These manly notions, as Wyatt-Brown has explained, constituted crucial elements in the formation of Southern evaluations of conduct, and were enumerated thus: “(1) honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of women; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances” (*Southern Honor* 34). By internalizing these evaluative elements as they relate specifically to Guy, Bruno is able to adjudicate Miriam’s infidelity as a violation of Guy’s honor that should and must be revenged.

Guy quickly realizes that Bruno’s conceptualization of Southern honor and its inextricable tie to revenge is decidedly skewed and unmistakably dangerous, primarily because it precludes the definite possibility of justifiable murder. As Bruno begins laying out his scheme, he reminds Guy that Miriam has repeatedly violated his honor by impugning his respectability and threatening his economic livelihood: “Bruno took a deep breath. ‘If your wife made a stink now about the divorce. Say she fought about it while you were in Palm Beach and made them fire you, wouldn’t that be motive enough for murder?’” (32). Bruno then proceeds to strike at what Kenneth Lynn has called Southerners’ historical touchiness over virility that stemmed from deep anxieties about

how others saw them (22). He informs Guy that in addition to potentially (and fatally) damaging his career, Miriam has also openly challenged his virility, rendering him not only a cuckold but also, effectively, a eunuch. Bruno inquires flatly, “When she was two-timing you, didn’t you feel like murdering her?” (33).

For Guy, this imputation about his compromised sexuality is a bridge too far, even though he knows that taken together, Bruno’s allegations are very much true. Bruno’s reproaches here create in Guy a bifurcated or contingent self, such that while he is obviously deeply disturbed about Bruno’s insinuations, he is also plainly enthralled by the possibility of Miriam’s demise. This bifurcation does not come easily, however, since Guy knows that acknowledging his “darker half” will necessarily result in a closer bond with Bruno. The possibility of deepening their friendship fills Guy with terror and revulsion, precisely because he is well aware by this juncture that Bruno’s grotesqueness is all-encompassing, both externally and internally: “Guy looked at him in disgust. Bruno seemed to be growing indefinite at the edges, as if by some process of deliquescence. He seemed only a voice and a spirit now, the spirit of evil. All he despised, Guy thought, Bruno represented. All the things he would not want to be, Bruno was, or would become” (33-34).

Guy’s imaginative observation about Bruno becoming the disembodied “spirit of evil” is fascinating because it rests almost entirely on his understanding that evil is utterly meaningless and impersonal, and ultimately produces destructive pain along with absolute and intrinsic useless suffering. As philosopher David Morris has remarked, evil and its resultant suffering is “simply the experience of an overwhelming, violence, and cruel negation . . . in which every human effort to affirm coherence or value drains away

into absurdity” (60).³ To Guy’s way of thinking, Bruno’s murderous thoughts and actions accomplish nothing positive but instead produce a cascade effect of endless suffering for those persons who would be affected by these proposed murders.

Bruno, however, is quick to offer a chillingly plausible rejoinder to Guy’s moralistic objections. He asks Guy, “Don’t you agree she ought to be stopped before she ruins a lot of other people?” (34). Surprisingly for Guy, this simple query effectively repudiates his prior reservations—moral or otherwise—because embedded within this question is a dual understanding that not only will no one suffer from Miriam’s death, but also that her murder will alleviate the suffering she is now promulgating and will continue to spread should she be allowed to live. Therefore, according to Bruno’s aberrant calculations, rather than being an act of senseless evil, Miriam’s murder would be a logical way of accomplishing a greater good. As Guy parses his thoughts, it is exactly the extant logic in Bruno’s plan that allows him to slowly but inexorably accede to the fatal scheme:

The wall before his eyes pulsed rhythmically, as if it were about to spring apart. *Murder*. The word sickened him, terrified him. He wanted to break away from Bruno, get out of the room, but a nightmarish heaviness held him. He tried to steady himself by straightening out the wall, by understanding what Bruno was saying, because he could feel there was logic in it somewhere, like a problem or a puzzle to be solved. (34)

The “nightmarish heaviness” that holds Guy firmly under Bruno’s sway appears to be the last residual traces of Guy’s trepidation. Yet given Guy’s increasing acceptance of his newfound bifurcated self, this heaviness could also symbolize the seductive inculcation of Bruno’s amorality into Guy’s very being. In short, Guy resigns himself to the reality that he is now inescapably coupled with Bruno.

³ See also Emmanuel Levinas’s essay “Useless Suffering.”

Highsmith in fact makes explicit the suggestion that the two men's relation has evolved into something deeper and more intimate, and she connects this newfound affection directly to Guy's Southern past: "Far away on the flat black prairie a locomotive wailed, on and on, and then again farther away. It was a sound he remembered from childhood, beautiful, pure, lonely. Like a wild horse shaking a white mane. In a burst of companionship, Guy linked his arm through Bruno's" (36). These sounds signify Guy's ongoing internal and external journey *cum* "escape quest" toward ostensible freedom, be it from his banal, northern organization man persona, his ambivalent regard for the South or, more pressingly, from the negative heteronormative feelings he invariably associates with Miriam. Guy's immediate feeling of freedom after hearing the fading wail of the far-off train also provokes in him a sudden explosion of unexpected intimacy with Bruno. Linking his arms with Bruno's, Guy provides to Bruno something important about which he has always fantasized: an actual, physical connection to the South that initiates him into the ranks of Southern "others" whose cultural and sexual ambivalence is both accepted and discreetly embraced.

For Guy's part, this Southern otherness is a two-way street because by participating in Bruno's homicidal *quid pro quo*, he acquiesces to his own queerness by tacitly agreeing to be both Bruno's partner in crime and queer life partner. In so doing, Guy concedes the very real possibility that he will implicitly join the ranks of scheming commies and queers that were, according to David Savran, widely suspected by Cold War ideologues of threatening to "undermine and destroy the American way of life" (4). Robert Corber has observed that during the Cold War, this paranoid mindset was so pervasive that it led to widespread, if wholly unfounded, fears that homosexuals would

run rampant, attempting to “entice normal individuals to engage in perverted practices” (*In the Name* 64).

By first suggesting, then nurturing, and finally foregrounding the covertly homoerotic alliance between Guy and Bruno, Highsmith offers a surreptitiously pointed rejoinder to this ubiquitous Cold War hysteria. As noted earlier, Highsmith herself freely admitted that she never directly experienced any expressions of outright homophobia or homophobic violence during the 1950s, nor did she suffer any societal repercussions, condemnations, or blacklist threats related to the queer content of her Cold War-era literary output. However, she was also keenly aware of the paranoia fueled in large part by McCarthy and his targeting of alleged Communists and homosexuals. Wilson has remarked that, as Highsmith saw it, homosexuals during the Cold War era were in a “no win situation—they needed the love of a member of their own sex to survive, both physically and emotionally. But as soon as they sought this out, they were victimized by society and left fearful of their own desires, unable to conquer their repressed wishes” (163).

In fact, Highsmith later wrote in the afterword to her wildly successful lesbian love story *The Price of Salt*, published in 1951 and later re-released and re-titled as *Carol*, “Prior to this book, homosexuals male and female in American novels had had to pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, drowning themselves in a swimming pool, or by switching to heterosexuality (so it was stated), or by collapsing—alone and miserable and shunned—into a depression equal to hell” (*Carol* 261). Highsmith’s observation that, prior to *The Price of Salt*’s publication, American fiction writers were obliged (if not out-and-out ordered by their editors) to give their fictional homosexuals

unfortunate endings coexistent with their debased lifestyle, is of course somewhat self-referential given the respective “tragic” fates that befall her queer antiheroes in *Strangers*.

However, in *Strangers* it is not Guy and Bruno’s inchoate queerness that precludes their morally and socially sanctioned punishments. Instead, perhaps the most important component of what truly resigns Guy and Bruno to their punitive outcomes is their respectively inbuilt and inculcated Southernness. In addition to making the two men perfectly queer, their Southernness imbues them with a fearfully transgressive, grotesque Gothicism that allows them to reach into what George Haggerty calls “some undefinable world beyond fictional reality” and, in so doing, “render it lurid and pathological” (10). Haggerty then goes on to argue that Gothicism “reflects in perhaps predictable, but nonetheless often powerful, ways the anxiety that the force of culture generates” (10).

During the Cold War era, these type of forceful cultural anxieties promulgated the notion that most if not all Southerners were either susceptible to or overtly evinced some form of lurid pathology. This in turn produced an atmosphere of palpable suspicion and outright terror about the South that Highsmith masterfully exacerbates as she slowly unfolds Guy and Bruno’s murderous trajectory. Guy, for example, debarks from the train in Metcalf and leaves Bruno to continue his leisurely southwestward trek to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Highsmith, though, curiously omits any details of the two men’s parting. There is also no mention made of emotional farewells, promises of reunion, or future reinvigorations of the crisscross murder plot. Instead, Highsmith indulges in a protracted homecoming for Guy during which time he is reminded of the good, bad, and ugly about the South.

This homecoming involves a terse meet-up with Miriam, who receives an initial peculiar “strange girl under the trees” description from Guy. This reflection is then followed quickly by observations about her “orangey-pink lips” that disguise a prominent “space between her front teeth,” her “plump” figure, prematurely wrinkled face, and “stubby hands” that, ironically, remind Guy of Bruno’s hands (37-39). Taken together, Miriam’s features give off a grotesque impression that Guy associates with her correspondingly malicious personality. And indeed, as Bruno surmised to Guy on the train, Miriam is indeed a discernibly different type of Southern woman, a bad belle whose internal and external ugliness is prominently evident.

Miriam’s grotesquerie aside, however, Guy appears to hold no longstanding animus toward her, and they part from their reunion on tenuously cordial terms. Yet unbeknownst to Guy, Bruno has never swayed from his determined conviction to literally execute his part of their agreement. After meeting his mother in Santa Fe, Bruno books passage back to Metcalf for the sole purpose of killing Miriam. In his train compartment, Bruno becomes increasingly content with his decision:

His energies that had been dissipated, spread like a flooded river over land as flat and boring as the Llano Estacado he was crossing now, seemed gathered in a vortex whose point strove toward Metcalf like the aggressive thrust of the train. He sat on the edge of his seat and wished Guy were opposite him again. But Guy would try to stop him, he knew; Guy wouldn’t understand how much he wanted to do it or how easy it was. But for Christ’s sake, he ought to understand how useful! (67)

Given their now-active queer association, it is no surprise that Bruno wishes Guy were accompanying him on this portion of his journey, although Bruno’s notation that Guy would also try to stop him is odd. Arguably, this statement could be read as his displaying a slight twinge of conscience, thus projecting Guy’s alleged Southern sense of propriety,

respect for women, and overarching moral fortitude as a way to both express and overcome any possible associative guilt.

Bruno's guilt is short-lived, and he returns almost immediately to justifying his murderous *modus operandi*. As part of this justification, he reinvigorates the bad belle imprimatur, noting that while Miriam likely epitomized a bourgeois social climber, she was in all likelihood nothing but common white trash. In laying out his imaginative description, he envisions Miriam as "*Rather pretty. Red hair. A little plump, not very tall. Pregnant so you could tell probably since a month. Noisy, social type. Probably flashy dressed. Maybe short curly hair, maybe a long permanent*" (67, italics in original).

Though Highsmith does not explicitly articulate this, it is likely that Bruno sees red hair as an overt emblem of a belle gone very bad, a supposition likely drawn from his viewing hyper-stereotypical Southern filmic heroines such as *Gone with the Wind*'s fiery Scarlett O'Hara (1939) and *Jezebel*'s free spirited and rapacious Julie Marsden (1938). What's more, Bruno admits that he must rely on Miriam's auburn tresses as a way of recognizing her, even if they plainly symbolize her as a "little bitch" that, in spite of never actually meeting her, he already hated (67).

Recalling Miriam's pregnancy and her associated machinations toward Guy, Bruno then expounds further on his conception of Miriam-as-jezebel. He first dismisses her as a "little floozy" but then makes a crucial connection between Miriam and his father, "Women who slept around made him furious, made him ill, like the mistresses his father used to have, that had turned all his school holidays into nightmares because he had not known if his mother knew and was only pretending to be happy, or if she did not know at all" (67-68). The seamless symmetry between bad Southern belle Miriam and the

various mistresses his father paraded before his mother now established, Bruno not only locates the crisscross murder motive but also identifies his grotesque and gothic Southern pathological impetus necessary to perform the actual action. *Pace* Gary Richards, Bruno's pathology is his ultimate accession to Southern otherness and deviance brought about by essentially abnegating all traces of his former northern life. As he continues his inexorable Southern trek, Bruno thinks to himself, "Now, on the train to Metcalf, he had direction" (69).

By the time he reaches and disembarks at Metcalf, Bruno's resolve is set. Interestingly, though, as he begins his pursuit of Miriam in earnest, the self-same northern attitudes he ostensibly repudiated on the train keep intruding on his thoughts. For example, as he walks along trying to locate Miriam's address, his first impression is that Metcalf is a small hick town made up of block after block of unassuming lower-class domiciles, "small flimsy-looking wooden houses. . . where people sat in swings and on front steps" (70). Surveying this bleak landscape further, he ruminates that "He couldn't have dreamt up a neighborhood more likely for Miriam to live in" (70).

Finally, after catching sight of his eventual prey exiting a yellow-tan clapboard dwelling, in need of paint, with a scraggly lawn and an "old Chevvy [sic] sedan sitting at the curb," Bruno catches a taxi—which he considers a rare thing in "this dead burg"—and follows Miriam and two friends to a local amusement park, Lake Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun (73-74). Watching as she enters the park, Bruno measures Miriam's reality versus his imaginative conceptions, and finds them both amazingly compatible:

She was cute in a plump college-girl sort of way, but definitely second rate, Bruno judged. The red socks with the red sandals infuriated him. How could Guy have married such a thing? Then his feet scraped and he stood still: she wasn't pregnant! His eyes narrowed in intense perplexity. Why hadn't he noticed from the first? (74)

Bruno's humorous dismissal of Miriam's red socks with red sandals reinforces his previous impression that she is unfashionable, common Southern trash. Moreover, by continually deriding her as white trash and ultimately dehumanizing her as a "thing," Bruno is able to mentally square himself with the impending murder, such that he can kill her in cold blood without sustaining any lasting moral repercussions. Lastly, Bruno's recognition that Miriam is very likely not pregnant concretizes his resolve, representing as it does another in a string of examples of Miriam's demonstrated, constant mendacity toward Guy.

Miriam's unapologetic dishonesty is what galls Bruno most, because he has witnessed firsthand its detrimental effects on Guy: "He could see why Guy would loathe her. He loathed her, too, with all his guts! Maybe she was lying to Guy about having a baby. And Guy was so honest himself, he believed her. Bitch!" (75). Bruno's imaginatively shared mutual hatred of Miriam harkens back to his impression that through her repeated deception she has severely, and possibly irreparably, violated Guy's honor. Adding insult to injury, Bruno observes that Miriam appears to be little troubled by her actively destructive campaign against Guy. Instead, she and her friends blithely overindulge in carnival food, leading Bruno to remark that they are "pigs," before climbing aboard a merry-go-round.

It is on the merry-go-round that predator and prey come in perilous proximity to each other. Curiously, though, as Bruno narrows in on Miriam, he locates within himself

a surprising bravado that he associates with his newly adopted regional homeland. He climbs aboard the carousel and surveys the amusement park crowds, concluding, “He liked Texas, Guy’s state! Everybody looked happy and full of energy” (76). As the carousel begins its motion, he banters with one of Miriam’s male friends, “‘Yeeee-hooo!’ yelled the redheaded fellow. ‘Yeeee-hooo!’ Bruno yelled back. ‘I’m a Texan!’” (77). Highsmith’s cleverly “outs” Bruno here as a Southerner through his punning declaration that he liked Texas because it was “Guy’s state,” literally because it is Guy’s home state and figuratively because of Texas’s reputation as being filled with hyper-masculine cowboys.

Through this “outing,” Highsmith neatly triangulates the three adversaries Bruno, Guy, and Miriam. Although absent from the “field of battle” with Miriam, Guy’s presence is nevertheless clearly invoked through Bruno’s incipient Texan identity, something Bruno obviously intends as he muses to himself, “What would happen if he shouted ‘Guy!’? What would Guy think if he could see him now?” (79). Bruno’s conjuring of Guy seems to be the last source of strength needed to complete his deed, even if it is mitigated somewhat by his being assaulted by “those dumb Southern accents!” (80), including that of Miriam’s.

Immediately after this declaration, Bruno finally sees Miriam up close, “Under the bright lights, he saw that Miriam was covered in freckles. She looked increasingly loathesome [sic], so he began not to want to put his hands on her soft sticky-warm flesh” (77-78). Again, Highsmith foregrounds Miriam’s manifold grotesqueness, allowing Bruno to draw upon his presumptive Southernness in order to defend and revenge Guy’s

wounded honor, while also giving him ample rationale for strangling Miriam without guilt or moral qualms.

At least temporarily, Bruno does in fact get away with murder, and he exults in the coroner's report that the "murder would seem to have been committed by a maniac unknown to the victim and the other parties" (98). Even more important to Bruno is the finding of a hastily convened Metcalf jury that Miriam died at the hands of "person or persons unknown" (98). Highsmith's use of this popular Southern juridical phrase is shockingly ironic because, as she would have been well aware, up until the mid-1950s it was primarily used to reference extralegal lynchings of blacks, primarily black Southerners. Lynching scholar Philip Dray, in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, has observed, "The coroner's inevitable verdict, 'Death at the hands of persons unknown,' affirmed the public's tacit complicity: no *persons* had committed a crime, because the lynching had been an expression of the community's will" (ix). Though Miriam's death could hardly be considered a true lynching, I am intrigued by Dray's noting that because lynching was an expression of the community's will, it was therefore a necessary end for those persons who, at least according to overarching community thinking, might have deserved to be killed.

Following this (albeit torqued) logic back to *Strangers*, because of Miriam's numerous negative attributes, personal defects, acts of demonstrated deceitfulness, and performances of moral turpitude, Bruno rationalizes that she absolutely deserved her ignominious end. He then uses this same justification to insistently remind Guy that the Captain, Miriam's crisscross quasi-doppelganger, is still very much in need of killing. Guy, however, wants nothing more to do with Bruno or his demonstrably deadly scheme.

Yet something inside Guy, whether his pronounced sense of Southern gentlemanly propriety or queer affinity, keeps him from escaping Bruno's perverse clutches:

“What's your game, Bruno?”

“You know,” Bruno said quietly. “What we talked about on the train. The exchange of victims. You're going to kill my father.”

Guy made a sound of contempt. He had known it before Bruno said it, had suspected it since Miriam's death. He stared into Bruno's fixed, still wistful eyes, fascinated by their cool insanity. Once as a child he stared at a mongoloid idiot on a streetcar, he remembered, like this, with a shameless curiosity that nothing could shake. Curiosity and fear.

“I told you I could arrange every detail.” Bruno smiled at the corner of his mouth, amusedly, apologetically. “It'd be very simple.” (122)

Between regarding the cool insanity in Bruno's eyes and obliquely comparing him to a “mongoloid idiot on a streetcar,” Guy again recapitulates the fearful presence of the Southern grotesque. Yet unlike Bruno's visceral, retrograde northern reaction to Miriam's grotesquerie, Guy's Southernness also obliges him to mitigate his fear of Bruno and instead regard him with curiosity, pity, and some small measure of semi-filial kinship.

Bruno seizes on this kinship and uses it to establish for Guy his own sense of wounded honor. He sends Guy a letter explaining why his father deserves to die, “He comes of low-class peasants in Hungary, little better than animals. He picked a wife of good family, with his usual greed, once he could afford her. All this time my mother quietly bore his unfaithfulness, having some concept of the sacredness of marriage contract. . . . He is the kind of man who thinks all your ideas about architecture as beauty and about adequate houses for everyone are idiotic & doesn't care what kind of factory he has as long as the roof doesn't leak and ruin his machinery.” (126, errors in original).

Bruno knows that the allegations about his father's dismissive attitude toward

architecture are too transparently obvious to wound Guy's pride. However, by incorporating the allusions to his father's low-class status and rampant infidelity, Bruno also clearly intends to reinvigorate the specter of bad belle Miriam, thereby providing to Guy a way of supplanting his latent rage about Miriam's numerous honor violations onto Bruno's father.

Guy ultimately relents and performs the assassination, but not because of Bruno's persistent hectoring or his provision of a supposedly airtight motive. Instead, he reasons that this murderous impulse was at least in part a vestige of his Southerness and its concomitant historical propensity for violence. According to historian Sheldon Hackney, this innate Southern proclivity manifested itself in numerous ways and across social classes. Acts ranged from "dueling gentlemen and masters whipping slaves, flatboatmen indulging in rough-and-tumble fights, lynching mobs. . . robed night riders engaged in systematic terrorism, unknown assassins," and myriad other explosions of bloodshed and savagery (906).

Up until the murder, Guy's cognizance of his susceptibility for brutality is, like his queer affinity for Bruno, at best deeply closeted. But as his thoughts grow deeper, he moves from Southern past to Cold War present, connecting his "killing instinct" to pervasive 1950s saber rattling. He reflects, "If he believed in the full complement of evil in himself, he had to believe also in a natural compulsion to express it. He found himself wondering, from time to time, if he might have enjoyed his crime in some way, derived some primal satisfaction from it—how else could one really explain in mankind the continued toleration of wars, the perennial enthusiasm for wars when they came, if not

for some primal pleasure in killing?—and because the capacity to wonder came some often, he accepted it as true that he had” (242).

Guy’s uneasy assimilation of enjoyment over committing a heinous crime with vitriolic Cold War anti-Communist rhetoric mirrors the overarching divided mindset displayed by the majority of Cold War-era Americans. After all, it was seemingly easy for Americans to exult over “justifiable murder” espionage triumphs such as the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg affair. As I noted in Chapter One, the Rosenbergs were tried and convicted of “atom espionage”—handing over classified information about U.S. atomic technologies to the Soviets—in 1951 and, after exhausting numerous judicial appeals, were put to death via the electric chair in 1953. Andrew Ross has observed that for most Cold War-era Americans, the Rosenberg’s alleged crime was not only treasonous, but it also essentially put the nation, if not the entire world, at risk of atomic annihilation: “J. Edgar Hoover called it ‘the crime of the century,’ while Judge Irving Kaufman, in his sentencing speech, opined that the Rosenbergs had ‘altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country.’ Invoking the spirit of Cold War antagonism—‘this country is engaged in a life and death struggle with a completely different system’—he concluded that the Rosenbergs’ alleged crime of atom espionage was ‘worse than murder’” (57).

Chest-thumping paranoid patriotism aside, it was nevertheless (though not unexpectedly) difficult for Americans to justify or rationalize acts of *actual* murder, no matter how odious or detestable was the person being murdered. So too is it difficult for Guy to completely square himself with killing Bruno’s father, in spite of his own attempted socio-political rationalization. Josh Lukin has remarked that after the murder, Guy’s former feelings of exaltation over committing the murder are short-lived: “He soon

begins to see accusers around him again” and “Eventually Guy decides that guilt is a state of anxiety in which one anticipates punishment and sets about feeling this way” (186-187).

Apropos of his historical predilection for violence, Guy again associates his resurgent guilt and anticipatory punishment with his Southernness. He recalls, for example, two episodes from his past in Metcalf where guilt overrode feelings of supposed justice: “I have no great respect for the law,” he remembered he had said to Peter Wiggs in Metcalf two years ago. Why should he have respect for a statute that called him and Miriam man and wife? “I have no great respect for the church,” he had said sophomorphically to Peter at fifteen. Then, of course, he had meant the Metcalf Baptists” (178).

Guy observes that the objects of his protestations are precisely those institutions that rely on the presumption of guilt for their very survival. For example, although the law declares the marital union of man and wife to be inviolable, there is nevertheless embedded within this declaration a guilty possibility that something or someone can or will go wrong. Guy then notes, wryly, that the church (in his case, Southern Baptists) also operates under exactly this same ethos of presumptive guilt, such that people’s assumptive goodness is always mitigated by their innate sinfulness. In both cases, he concludes, bad acts or thoughts will always require penitential punishment.

Guy’s self-imposed punishment for his own bad acts takes the form of employment at Horton, Horton, and Keese, which he regards as a “rotten” architectural firm. At this disreputable outfit, Guy opines that he can not only labor under the illusion that “revulsion was atonement” (196), but he can also effectively exorcise his most

prominent demon, Bruno. He convinces himself that “It was only a part of himself that he had to cope with, not his whole self, not Bruno, or his work. He had merely to crush the other part of himself, and live in the self he was now” (189).

Guy’s self-flagellation project is, however, conveniently interrupted by Bruno’s re-emergence in his life. As Lukin has observed, Bruno’s reappearance represents a fundamental breach of trust between the two men, with Bruno “breaking his promise to make their crimes ‘perfect’ by keeping their acquaintanceship a secret” (187). For Guy, this intrusion is also a profound violation of honor, although one for which he can hardly seek or exact revenge. Yet instead of utterly disavowing Bruno or excising him from his life, Guy instead inexplicably agrees to meet with him again, thus apparently cleaving to the cliché that while friends can be held close, enemies should be kept even closer. What’s more, Guy also realizes that he must see Bruno, whether out of curiosity, compulsion, kinship obligation, or because the meeting represents what Highsmith calls “some torture that perversely eased” (218).

Indeed, as the two men sit down for cocktails and lunch, Bruno tries repeatedly to assuage Guy’s myriad suspicions. For instance, he orders Guy’s favorite lunch entrée, and then produces four tie boxes in which are held a variety of luxurious silk and linen summer ties. Bruno singles out one tie in particular:

“This is my favorite. I never saw anything like this.” Bruno held up the white knitted tie with the thin red stripe down the center. “Started to get one for myself, but I wanted you to have it. Just you, I mean. They’re for you, Guy.”

“Thanks.” Guy felt an unpleasant twitch in his upper lip. He might have been Bruno’s lover, he thought suddenly, to whom Bruno had brought a present, a peace offering. (205).

Guy's "unpleasant twitch in his upper lip" reaction to Bruno's gift could easily be interpreted as knee-jerk homosexual panic, especially since their reunion transpires soon after Guy and Anne's wedding. As the two men continue their conversation, however, Guy comes to understand that Bruno is an emotional cripple utterly incapable of evincing positive feelings such as love. He thinks silently, "Bruno did not know how to love, and that was all he needed. Bruno was too lost, too blind to love or to inspire love. It seemed all at once tragic" (207). Yet to Guy's mind, Bruno's incapacity for love is tragic only because it has been wholly supplanted by profound amorality, mental instability, and an incessant desire for retribution.

Faced with this realization, Guy again recasts Bruno as a fanatical Southern grotesque freak whose reproachful fanaticism, *pace* Flannery O'Connor, has grown increasingly strident. Bruno's threatening "fanaticism" is precisely what Guy fears most, because he has already experienced Bruno's penchant for delivering potentially damaging revelations. But Guy also knows that by reiterating Bruno's qualified Southernness, he may be able to remind him of their inferred kinship and, in so doing, keep Bruno in check and possibility mitigate any future vengeful outbursts.

Guy's carefully considered control over Bruno takes prominence after his fiancé Anne invites Bruno to a sailing celebration. Although Bruno arrives already drunk, Guy manages to maintain his Southern gentleman politesse. As the boat gets underway, Bruno lurches drunkenly from the boat's cockpit to the deck and shouts, "Yee-hoo-oo! I'm a Texan! Ever ride the merry-go-round in Metcalf, Guy?" (262). This deliberately provocative statement, which Bruno intends as a way of both reminding Guy of Miriam's murder and of his shared Southern otherness, also fails to muster a response from Guy.

It is only when Bruno, either accidentally or purposefully, falls overboard and into the icy waters of Long Island Sound, does Guy abandon his Southern propriety and attempt to rescue him: “He cursed the gigantic, ugly body of the sea. Where was his friend, his brother?” (263). Bruno, predictably, sinks under the waves and drowns, which provokes in Guy intense sensations of loss, isolation, and agonized queer longing. Critic Julian Symons has commented that although “[v]iolence is necessary” for Highsmith because the “threat or actuality of it produces her best writing” (184), she is also scrupulous about incorporating real, unadorned pathos into her works. Symons observes, “There are no more genuine agonies in modern literature than those endured by the couples in her books who are locked together in a dislike and even hatred that often strangely contains love” (183).

With the decidedly queer Bruno finally dispatched, most readers would expect for Highsmith to opt for a conventional, “happy” ending for Guy. After all, according to Lukin, “The disruptive force of unrestrained desire has been eliminated, the Bad Guy is gone, and domestic bliss has been restored, with perhaps a mild uneasiness at how close it has come to being destroyed” (188). In *Strangers*, though, all’s not well that does not end well because, as Lukin continues, not only is Highsmith not willing to provide a “comforting” resolution for the reader, but also, ironically, “Bruno’s death only creates new complications in Guy’s battered psyche” (188). These complications emanate from Guy’s incessantly guilty conscience over both his queer relationship with Bruno and the murder of Bruno’s father, along with his coexistent masochistic compulsion for punishment.

Guy's guilt is in fact so corrosive that, as Leonard Cassuto suggests, it "erodes and dissolves his psychological mortar until he collapses" (135). In order to finally, ultimately expiate his guilt, Guy turns south once again, this time so he can locate the one person who he believes would ostensibly be most affected by Miriam's death. That person is Owen Markman, who Lukin regards as Guy's new "secret-sharer" (189). Guy initially remembers Owen as a "dim figure in the background" in Metcalf, before surmising that he must have loved Miriam because "He had been going to marry her. She had been carrying his child" (265). Convinced that the only way of validating his guilt and assuaging his conscience is meeting Owen, Guy writes up a confession and flies to Houston. What Guy quickly discovers in his conversation with Owen, however, is the Texan's marked lack of concern about Miriam's murder and about Guy and Bruno's queer attachment.

For instance, Guy reveals to Owen his partial culpability in Miriam's murder, "I told him Miriam's name. I told him I hated her. Bruno had an idea for a murder. A double murder" (270). But when Owen establishes that Guy did not actually *commit* Miriam's murder, he responds, "I mean, sure I can understand how you felt afterwards, but if it was just a conversation like you say, I don't see where you should blame yourself so awful much" (271). Guy then switches tack, confessing to Owen that he did murder Bruno's father. This too evokes an unexpected answer from Owen: "'You're not the first man I seen that killed another man. Or woman.' He chuckled. 'Seems to me there's more women that go free'" (274).

Growing increasingly frustrated by Owen's steadfast refusal to condemn him, Guy then appeals to Owen's feelings about morals and how they help ensure the greater

social good: “Listen, how do you feel about the men you know you’ve killed somebody? How do you treat them? How do you act with them? Do you pass the time of day with them the same as you’d do with anybody else?” (277). Owen counters, simply, “Live and let live” (277). As a Texan, Guy is mindful that Owen’s reply draws heavily from the ambivalent Southern penchant for what William Mark Poteet calls “both celebrating and reproving difference, as opposed to hiding it away” (1). But because of Guy’s own ambivalent position as an effectively de-regionalized organization man, he is also shocked by Owen’s response because its unabashed relativism flies in the face of Cold War society’s moral dictates.

As *Strangers* reaches its downbeat conclusion, Guy finally receives his just rewards. Private detective Gerard, who has been shadowing both Bruno and Guy in the novel’s latter half, appears at the door to Owen’s hotel room and promptly arrests Guy. With this arrest, Guy expresses no small amount of relief because it validates his historical Southern guilt, relieves what Lukin calls his “terrifying anomie,” and ironically reinforces his belief in the efficacy of Cold War society’s juridical norms and punishments. Lastly, when Guy utters the novel’s last line to detective Gerard, “Take me” (281), he successfully alleviates Cold War anxieties over what Robert Corber sees as the “increasing heterogeneity of American society” (*In the Name* 9) by abnegating his Southernness, adjudicating his queerness, and quarantining his demonstrated Southern deviancy. In so doing, Guy’s confession and surrender becomes integral to helping shore up the increasingly fragile stability of America’s Cold War containment ethos.

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