

SEARCHING FOR “SODALITY”: ABJECTION AND QUEERNESS IN NAYLOR  
AND KENAN

A Thesis  
by  
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ABSTRACT

SEARCHING FOR “SODALITY”: ABJECTION AND QUEERNESS IN NAYLOR  
AND KENAN  
(December 2011)

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While other scholars, most notably Trudier Harris, have explored the similarities and differences between Gloria Naylor’s and Randall Kenan’s texts, few have considered the transformative queerness these two authors construct in their narratives. This thesis explores the intimate connection between queerness and the abject, using Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. This queerness, explored in Naylor’s queer community of *The Women of Brewster Place* and Kenan’s queer space of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, emerges during moments of abjection, and its recognition is the production and destruction of subjectivities, communities, and ideologies. Consequently, the queerness that defines the characters and places in the two works deconstructs both oppressive binaries and heteronormative ideology and recognizes sameness, as defined by Stephen Guy-Bray. Ultimately, the exploration of abjection and queerness in both Naylor’s and Kenan’s texts is a search for unity that transcends differences and binaries and a yearning for “queer sodality,” a possibility proposed by Christopher Nealon that challenges the alienation of queerness.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began working on my thesis, I was confident that I knew exactly what the final product would be. Looking back on the process and reading through the final version, I have realized that little could be further from the truth. My project has evolved greatly since its inception, and this thesis has come to represent both the scholar and person I strive to be. Most importantly, I would like to thank my entire committee, especially my director Dr. David Orvis, for sticking with me through this academic journey and believing in me even when I lost faith in my own abilities. Without their guidance and support, completing my work would not have been possible. Dr. Orvis, Dr. McEntee, and Dr. Dick first impacted me in their classrooms as a student, and as mentors on this thesis, their knowledge and experience proved to be invaluable as I encountered unforeseen complications.

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## **Introduction: From Naylor's Queer Community to Kenan's Queer Space**

When surveying the scholarship on Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan, one is sure to find literary arguments that unite the two within the African American literary tradition, or scholarship that explores similar questions in its examination of an individual author's work. Trudier Harris, among others, has considered the connections and differences between the two authors in their uses of storytelling and folklore.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have discussed the two authors' contributions to the development of contemporary blackness, an interest of Kenan himself in *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*.<sup>2</sup> While many scholars continue to explore the presence and impact of Southern culture on African American characters within the texts, others have expanded the relationship between Southern-ness and blackness to issues of American disillusionment, northern migration, and economic oppression.<sup>3</sup> Although the similarities between the two authors are numerous, the differences between Naylor's and Kenan's work and the critiques of their texts

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the discussion of Naylor and Kenan as storytellers or folklorists see Harris's *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* among other texts she has published. Harris explores the power of oral tradition in African American literary works, especially by Southern writers.

<sup>2</sup> In this ethnological study, Kenan constructs a multifaceted image of blackness from over 200 interviews that challenge the idea of a monolithic black identity.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this subset of Naylor and Kenan scholarship, see Montgomery's "The Fathomless Dream: Gloria Naylor's Use of the Descent Motif in *The Women of Brewster Place*," Montgomery's *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance*, Harris's *Power of the Porch*, Barbara Christian's "Naylor's Geography: Community, Class, and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*," Susan Ketchin's *Christ-haunted Landscapes: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction*, and Uzzie T. Cannon's "Disturbing the African American Community: Defamiliarization in Randall Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*."



do not divide the two writers but create compelling and complex illustrations of significant concerns within African American literature and culture, including issues regarding sexuality.

Perhaps the most conspicuous section of scholarship on Naylor's and Kenan's texts is the extensive scholarly exploration of their constructions of black femininity and masculinity, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Still others, including Trudier Harris, Maxine L. Montgomery, and Roderick A. Ferguson, discuss the presence of same-sex desire, acts, and sexuality in the two writers' texts. Ranging from LGBT to queer critiques, both Naylor and Kenan are identified as black writers who include homosexual characters in their texts. More recently, though, scholars have become interested in the presence of queerness in Naylor's and Kenan's works. This shift in interest also reflects the recent emergence of the area of study currently labeled as black queer studies.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have become interested in the intersection of black and queer literary theory and texts, and one of the major concerns of this recent scholarship is confronting the negative consequence of analogies drawn between African American existences and gay/lesbian existences, including that they are parallel experiences. Simply, these analogies assume that to live as a black individual is parallel to living as a

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<sup>4</sup> For more scholarship on Naylor's constructions of black femininity, see Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Cheryl Lynn Johnson's "A Womanist Way of Speaking: An Analysis of Language in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*," and Larry R. Andrews's "Black Sisterhood in Naylor's Novels." For more on Kenan's constructions of black masculinity, see Keith Clark's *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*.

<sup>5</sup> Most notably, Siobhan B. Somerville's *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Roderick A. Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, and Kathryn Bond Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* have greatly impacted this field of study.

gay/lesbian individual. However, the objective of black queer studies is not to identify how black studies and gay/lesbian studies are similar but how they intersect. As Siobhan B. Somerville explains, “The challenge is to recognize the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously rather than to assume the fixity of one to establish the complexity of another” (5). Consequently, black queer studies is concerned with the destabilization of racial, gender, sexual, and other binaries concurrently instead of drawing connections and parallels between disconnected theoretical moments.

The distinction between the queer and the LGBT theoretical framework is another important and complex understanding. While queer theory evolved out of LGBT criticism, it has some very significant differences from its predecessor. Initially queer theory challenged “notions of stable lesbian and gay (or ‘straight’) identification,” but as the field has evolved, “queer studies has implicitly and explicitly challenged the seemingly ‘natural’ status of epistemological assumptions of established disciplines” (Somerville 6). Consequently, queer has become as much a political subjectivity, in that it challenges the social politics of power, as a sexual subjectivity. Throughout my project, the terms “gay” or “lesbian” will be used when referring to same-sex desire or same-sex desiring individuals, and the term “queer” will be used to refer to non-normative subjectivities and ideology, be it sexually related or not.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the term “queer” does not necessarily either define subjectivity or apply to subjectivity. As Lee Edelman explains, “Queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (17). Using Edelman’s understanding, queerness does not stabilize the concept at

hand but destabilize it in order to examine and reveal the uncertainty and ambiguity binary thought strives to camouflage.

Reminiscent of the scholarly shift from LGBT criticism to queer studies (not that the two fields are mutually exclusive), the trajectory of my analysis evolves from ideological binaries to queer manifestations. Connecting Naylor and Kenan, I am concerned with how the movement from distinctly gay or lesbian individuals to queer individuals also initiates the proliferation of queer communities or spaces. Naylor's queer community seems to be produced within a specific time and location; however, this bifurcation is challenged through Naylor's development of such a community. The queer space that Kenan develops is intrinsically connected to all times and locations; furthermore, as notions of isolated time and location are challenged, Kenan also questions the stability of binary relationships that normalize and naturalize privileged subjectivities.

Stephen Guy-Bray focuses on the notions of sameness and difference in much of his scholarship, especially in terms of how the concepts of sameness and difference affect constructions of binaries. Guy-Bray explains that his "problem is not with binaries *per se*, but rather with the narrow way in which they are used" ("Same Difference" 113). He continues: "As a rule, all that is at issue in any given binary taxonomy is whether two things or people are the same as each other or different from each other; furthermore, the tendency is to consider only one aspect with each pair: male or female; big or small; black or white; and so on" (113). The focus on difference often overlooks sameness, so throughout my argument, I will examine relationships that are formed through sameness, in many cases, despite differences such as gender or sexuality. As Guy-Bray

articulately notes, “Interplay of sameness and difference can most immediately be observed in sexuality: being heterosexual means liking that which is different and therefore being the same as everyone else and being homosexual means liking that which is the same and therefore being different from everyone else” (“Textual and Sexual Sameness” 2). The recognition of sameness is a deconstructive move from ideological binaries, as binaries consist of oppositional constituents; however, this shift is not the identification of equality or the mitigation of difference.

Time as a theoretical concept must also be considered before beginning my discussion of the texts. Within my argument, time does not move consistently forward, and existence is not along “one temporal plane” (Dinshaw et al. 185). The passing of seconds on the clock and the rising and setting of the sun does not order the progression of existence. Instead, time is a social force upon subjectivity’s development. The term “history” or “past,” both individual and collective, is used to denote a time that has already occurred; it is not to say, though, that this history or past is teleologically or causally connected to another moment in time, be that the present or the future. The “present” is the transitory moment of now; however, it is not singular. All subjectivities are within a unique present yet also within a collective present. Most importantly, no one present is privileged over another present, just as no history is privileged over another.

The privileging of one aspect of time over another promotes the production of a “straight time” vs. “queer time” opposition. Tom Boellstroff’s development of “straight time” is not just punning on the prevailing ideology that time is linear and teleological; it is also an examination into the forces,

specifically marriage, that perpetuate this hegemonic understanding of time. Boellstroff “hypothesize[s] that straight time is shaped by linked discourses of heteronormativity, capitalism, modernity, and apocalypse” (228). Similarly, Judith Halberstam defines “queer time” as a “critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development into normativity” (Dinshaw et al. 182). Living according to “straight time” is maturation in which one forms a heterosexual partnership, marries this partner, and reproduces children, all the while working within a capitalist system; in contrast, living in “queer time” is creating a subjectivity and existence not governed by the heteronormative narrative.

Before I develop the literary lens through which I analyze Naylor and Kenan and outline the trajectory of my project, it is vital to define central terms that consistently appear and/or impact my argument. The term “race” within my text “refers to a historical, ideological process rather than to fixed transhistorical or biological characteristics” (Somerville 7). Race is an ever-evolving social category within American hegemony, and the racialization of bodies is an oppressive force meant to guard and control social boundaries. Within the American context on which I focus, this hegemonic force divided individuals between “white” and “black” bodies to create a racial binary in which whiteness was the privileged category.<sup>6</sup> Within American hegemony, whiteness, as the privileged subjectivity, was then naturalized as normative.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the American racialization of bodies, see Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Julian B. Carter’s *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940*, and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer,”* among others.

Sexuality throughout my study will refer to more than sexual desire and acts. Instead, sexuality, like race, will refer to a transhistorically social and ideological position “into which one is interpellated based partly on the culture’s mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one’s response to that interpellation” (Somerville 6). I, like Somerville, am not interested in producing a conclusion on the connection between sexual desires/acts and sexual subjectivity; instead, I focus on an individual’s struggle to develop a sexual subjectivity that is both socially recognized and personally fulfilling within an oppressive social system. Although the sexual spectrum includes more subjectivities than the polar heterosexual and homosexual subjectivities, my argument will focus on the hetero/homo sexual binary in an effort to deconstruct this division between the normal heterosexual and the queer homosexual.

Gender is yet another important bodily classification at the center of this argument that is a historically and socially situated aspect of subjectivity. As Judith Butler argues, “Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (*Gender Trouble* 10). Like race and sexuality, gender is interpellated within the cultural system, and its production and understanding is camouflaged as natural. While gender is culturally inscribed on the “natural” body, it is also performative: “The stylization of the body [...] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191). For example, throughout this argument, domestic actions

are deemed as a feminine gender performance, whereas physical assertions of power, many times in acts of violence, are deemed as a masculine gender performance.

Within the gender binary of masculine/feminine, masculine subjectivities occupy the privileged position, oppressing feminine subjectivities. As my argument manifests, the masculine is presented as the “naturally” normative subjectivity, and the feminine is the “naturally” divergent gender. Furthermore, my argument will work to deconstruct this binary and privileging, just as it does in the previously discussed aspects of subjectivity. Ultimately, the development of masculine realms and feminine realms will be the development of normative and subversive realms, respectively.

Within normative ideology, gender and desire are oppressively linked. Judith Butler elucidates this linkage, explaining that “although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender itself and, as a result, no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire” (*Undoing Gender* 1-2). Butler is arguing that one’s gender is determinant of an individual’s socially expected and accepted sexual identity. Simply, to be male is to desire females, and to be female is to desire males within heteronormative ideology. This connection between gender and desire is the foundation of the gender-sexuality system, a system that promotes compulsory heterosexuality.

Adrienne Rich, in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience,” argues that feminist ideology and criticism needs to no longer simply tolerate lesbian identity and experience but embrace the option of a

lesbian lifestyle as being a source of both power and knowledge for women amidst a hegemonically structured gender/sexual hierarchy. Rich highlights the fact that “heterosexuality is presumed the ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most women,’ either implicitly or explicitly” (13). Rich continues by “suggesting that heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution” (17). Rich is highlighting the prescribed connection between gender and desire and extending her argument to identify sexuality as a political institution, just as the marriage and court systems are political institutions. The development of compulsory heterosexuality is both a coercive and passive act; it is the production of internalized and reproduced social norms, or as Rich explains, “maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness” (27). Ranging from descriptions of the ways in which men subjugate women to the development of a “lesbian continuum,” Rich argues against the cultural assumption of an individual’s heterosexuality and advocates the deconstruction of rhetoric and ideology that promote heterosexuality as the default and normative sexual identity. Further, Rich promotes the notion of subjectivity formation through an understanding and acceptance of sexual desires within the formation of the self and the location of this self within social structures. Therefore, the dismantling of social ideology and institutions that produce compulsory heterosexuality will simultaneously unleash both power and knowledge to individuals who do not identify as heterosexual, an act that allows self-identification as opposed to the extrapolation of the self within a heteronormative society.



The forces of “straight time” and compulsory heterosexuality impact an individual’s development of subjectivity. Throughout my project, I will focus on the relationships between subject and object and between independent subjects; thus, the use of subjectivity rather than identity is more appropriate. Its use also reinforces my focus on the development of the self through interaction with otherness. Jessica Benjamin states that “where objects were, subjects must be” (*Shadow of the Other*, xii). Therefore, the presence of a subject reveals the presence of an object, just as the presence of an object reveals the presence of a subject. However, I will not only examine otherness outside of the self, but subjectivity and objectivity will also be presented within a single existence.

Intersubjectivity will also be an important concept within my argument, most notably in my discussion of Naylor’s text. Intersubjectivity, which Benjamin defines as the “dialectical encounter between two consciousnesses,” (*Shadow of the Other*, xii) differs from the interaction between a subject and an object. Benjamin elucidates that intersubjectivity “refers to that zone of experience or theory in which the other is not merely the object of the ego’s need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent center of self” (*Like Subjects, Love Objects*, 30). I will focus on intersubjectivity that emerges between the women in the Brewster Place home, which is foundational for the creation of the queer community.

The development of intersubjectivities impacts the formation of communities, and the definition and formation of these communities is a major area of interest in scholarly work, especially recent queer projects. Carolyn Dinshaw, in *Getting Medieval*, analyzes communities in late fourteenth- and

early fifteenth-century English texts, including *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, in an effort to theorize queer history. I will be borrowing her understanding of communities throughout this study: “That term ‘community’ is taken most generally here to denote some sort of social grouping that is not a conventional kinship group; the term as [Dinshaw] use[s] it does not in itself imply unity or homogeneity” (22). Her argument about the nature of communities furthers her development of queer history by proposing the formation of “communities across time.” Dinshaw explains that she “focused on the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then, and [...] suggested that with such queer historical approaches we could form communities across time” (Dinshaw et al. 178). The notion of “communities across time” will figure into my analysis of communities greatly, particularly in the transition from Naylor to Kenan. Thus, communities are not bound by time and space, and with the formation of communities despite binaries and boundaries, queerness—or the destabilization of binaries and deconstruction of meaning—also expands.

While Dinshaw proposes “communities across time,” Miranda Joseph examines the compelling impact of capitalism on identities and communities, revealing connections between seemingly disparate identities and communities. In an effort to deconstruct the uses and implications of the romanticized and idyllic notion of community, Joseph explains that

using the term *community* to refer to social practices that presume or attempt to enact and produce identity, unity, communion, and purity, and observing the use of the term community in such social

practices, critics noted a diverse range of oppression [...] that seemed to follow from the idealization and deployment of community. (xix)

The conservative notion of community that is fraught with capitalism perpetuates oppression and “legitimate[s] social hierarchies” (Joseph viii). Consequently, Joseph is deconstructing the idea of community that denotes a peaceful and amicable existence among homogeneous individuals to reveal the discursive and oppressive consequences of the rhetoric of community.

Within my argument, these two critiques will impact my use of the term “community,” especially when considering the formation of communities and individuals’ participation in these communities. “Communal subjectivity,” for myself and Joseph, “is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption” (viii). While Joseph is concerned with economic production and consumption, I am more specifically interested in social production and consumption of subjectivities and norms, and this communal participation is both compulsory and voluntary. Much of the community participation considered in my argument is compulsory, and two major markers will indicate community participation: abjection and queerness.

Within the queer communities, though, the separation between the homosexual and the homosocial is a social struggle to identify normative and non-normative acts and individuals. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, explicates the term homosocial to be “a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism,

obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual’” (1). Sedgwick also explores “the ways in which the shapes of sexuality, and what counts as sexuality, depend on and affect historical power relationships” (2). Thus, the obsession of separating the homosexual from the homosocial is an effort to police social and bodily boundaries that perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva theorizes the collapse of meaning that is the result of abjection, or the loss of distinction between subject and object or self and other. As Kristeva explains,

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts that I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The object is not an object facing me, which I can name or imagine. Nor is it an object, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. (1)

The object is both subject and object and neither. It shares only one characteristic of the object, “that of being opposed to the I” (Kristeva 1). Also, the object “is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). If previous knowledge and meaning collapse in abjection, then what emerges after abjection? “Abjection is above all ambiguity,” continues Kristeva (9). After abjection, then, uncertainty is the destabilizing new knowledge, meaning, and order. This ambiguity is characteristic of both abjection’s consequence and production, “Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (Kristeva 9). The threat that initiates

and enables abjection is not eliminated or transcended but resituated within the emerging ambiguity.

Kristeva is careful to distinguish knowledge of death or the meaning of death from the traumatic experience of confronting actual death. The most prominent example used by Kristeva is the image of the corpse, which exposes the materiality of both the body of the subject and the body as the object. Interaction with a lover's body—their voice, their skin, their scent—is also interaction with the body as an object and subject, making bodily interaction an abjective experience.

Naylor's and Kenan's queerness is abjection. Queerness is “on the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (Kristeva 2). This queerness, especially queer space that transcends the boundaries of time, is inconceivable yet experiential, and its recognition is the production and destruction of subjectivities and realities. This queer space, a space of abjection, deconstructs the connections between self and other and between object and subject. Although I am connecting queerness and abjection, this argument does not identify queerness as something that should be thrust away or hidden, but through abjection, queerness becomes a liberating force meant to be embraced.

In chapter 1, “Naylor's Queer Community,” Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is revealed to be a text structured by the abject. The women navigate the twists and turns of their lives only to find themselves at the dead end that is the Brewster Place home. Throughout their lives, the women encounter

the masculine force of the patriarchal gaze, an abjective threat. However, the female relationships that form before and in Brewster Place enable the women to shift their subjectivities from male-defined female roles to feminine subjectivities within a queer community that includes feminine intersubjectivities, a feminized male, and a grieving lesbian. Although many scholars, most notably Larry R. Andrews and Maxine L. Montgomery, explore the multifarious female-female bonds as all contributing to the formation of the community, I will draw a distinction between the female relationships that cling to the male-defined female roles and those “sister-friend” bonds that are distinctly transformative. In order to make this distinction, I first explore some of these relationships and the scholarship concerning these womanly connections. I then focus on the most significant female-female bond in the novel, the Mattie-Etta bond; furthermore, I draw a parallel between this “sister-friend” relationship and the bond shared between Ben, the drunken handyman, and Lorraine, one of the lesbians from 312. My argument then refocuses on the abjective experience in two pivotal scenes: Lorraine’s violent gang rape and the wall’s physical dismantling. Ultimately, as rain falls on the block party, the women construct a queer community through the abjection of the patriarchal gaze.

Chapter 2, “Kenan’s Queer Space,” examines selected short stories from Randall Kenan’s *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* through the same abjective lens. Tims Creek, North Carolina, appears to be a typical Southern town, but as Kenan constructs its residents and activities, its normalcy is revised to include the queer. This revision extends not only to include the queer but also to depend on the queer. Consequently, the community—both as a people and a place—is defined

both by normative and queer ideology, and the transgression of normalcy is not the destruction of a community but its creation. Kenan creates a community that is fraught with queerness, and this tension between the expected (or normal) and the actual (or many times the queer) is the space in which the community and its people thrive. The tension also becomes illustrative of the internal tension with which many of the characters live. Kenan, then, deconstructs the idea of an exclusively normative community, revealing the contradictions that allow the community's subsistence. Death and the body pervade the selected stories: a widower seeks the company of a young boy to connect to his dead wife, two male lovers desire the power of bodily intimacy in each other's arms, and a corpse's return to its Southern home initiates a destabilizing quest for knowledge. Consequently, the abject haunts these stories, and Kenan, as he writes into existence the queer space of Tims Creek, concurrently exposes the naturalness of queerness and dismantles the binary of normative/queer.

Ultimately, the exploration of the abject in both Naylor's and Kenan's texts is a search for unity that transcends difference and binaries. It is a yearning for "queer sodality," a possibility proposed by Christopher Nealon. Nealon's vision entails imagining on the one hand, an exile from sanctioned experience; most often rendered as the experience of participation in family life and the life of communities and, on the other, a reunion with some "people" or sodality who redeem this exile and surpass the painful limitations of the original "home." (1-2)

This queer sodality is only imagined in the final dreams of Naylor's novel; however, Kenan creates queer sodality in Tims Creek. Although Naylor does

construct queer sodality in her queer community, the queer space of Tims Creek defines the community, and as more queer disciples spread queer knowledge, the queer sodality of Tims Creek will also spread. Ultimately, the movement from Naylor to Kenan is the movement from possibility to realization, and only in realization is change possible.



## Chapter I: Naylor's Queer Community

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* opens with "Dawn," the prologue, which recounts the birth and development of Brewster Place in an unnamed Northern city. Brewster Place is initially a hopeful site for growth and development, but the building quickly becomes a dead end. The conception of political bargains and financial gains, Brewster Place is abandoned while others "were fighting for the lifeblood of their community" (Naylor 2). The building that is now a dead end to many, however, becomes a beginning filled with possibilities for the women of Brewster Place.

Just as the building is a contradictory dead end, so are the lives of the African American women who move into the derelict space—lives constructed by both what was and is and what was not and is not. These "colored daughters" do not move in and out of the gray building with the fulfillment of their dreams, or the American dream.<sup>7</sup> These women and children "were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason" (Naylor 4). These seven women who ground the novel's stories are connected in their pasts, and their bonds in the present enable the formation of a new community at this dead end. The shared history of male-

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<sup>7</sup> Maxine L. Montgomery argues that in creating her fictive world, "Naylor not only documents the failure of the American dream, but she challenges its validity in terms that point to the formation of an intensely private reality suspended above time and space in which dreams are fulfilled" ("The Fathomless Dream" 42). While Naylor's critique of the possibility for African Americans, especially African American women, to realize the American dream is infused into many aspects of the novel, my concern is not with the power of disillusionment regarding the American dream myth but with the power of disillusionment regarding the myth of compulsory heterosexuality, as promoted by interaction with the abject.

defined subjectivities and the resulting lack of fulfillment initiates all the women's journeys to Brewster Place, and the prescribed roles of daughter, lover, wife, and mother are images projected upon these women. Not until they arrive at Brewster Place can the women deconstruct these prescribed roles to re-construct their subjectivities and homes based on their private desires. Thus, the women form a queer community that recognizes the possibility of feminine subjectivities and intersubjectivities in the presence of the lingering and oppressive patriarchal gaze that has defined their pasts.

The women of Brewster Place share experiences of a masculine threat, and the presence of the enduring threat initiates their individual and collective experiences of abjection. Although many scholars, most notably Larry R. Andrews and Maxine L. Montgomery, examine the similarities and differences between the various forms of female friendships and relationships in the text, I will draw a distinction between the female relationships that cling to male-defined female roles and those "sister-friend" bonds that are uniquely transformative. In order to make this distinction, I first explore some of these relationships and the scholarship concerning these womanly connections. I then focus on the most significant female-female bond in the novel, the Mattie-Etta bond and draw a parallel between this "sister-friend" relationship and the bond shared between Ben, the drunken handyman, and Lorraine, one of the lesbians from 312. Kristeva's work on abjection informs my argument on the abjective experience in two crucial scenes: Lorraine's violent gang rape and the wall's physical dismantling. Ultimately, as rain falls on the block party, the women

construct a queer community as enabled by their intersubjectivities and abjective experiences.

The women of Brewster Place struggle to survive despite and in spite of the intense void of sons, husbands, and fathers, resulting in a community defined by the presence of women and the absence of men. Just as the women have seen men move in and out of their lives, the building was also abandoned: it was “the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality Company” (Naylor 1). As Maxine L. Montgomery argues, “Bastardy serves as an apt metaphor for the exclusion owing to race that the residents of the community experience” (“The Fathomless Dream” 42). While many of the women have been discarded by fathers, husbands, or sons (the exception being Kiswana Browne’s boyfriend Abshu), the influential absence of men creates a presence in the women’s lives. The women, like the building itself, were constructed by masculine forces, but after the males flee, the masculine influence remains.

Arriving at this dead end, the novel’s women are still searching for themselves and each other as they venture beyond the wall and into the halls of Brewster Place. Montgomery notes that “residents of the failing community find that home is an elusive construct, and like the fictional neighborhood itself, it exists both everywhere and nowhere” (*The Fiction* 2). The ambiguous location of home is promoted by abjection, a production of the patriarchal gaze. Abjection does not separate the women from the patriarchal gaze’s threat; instead, abjection recognizes its inescapable incidence. The patriarchal gaze cannot and will not be eliminated, and with its continued existence, the women approach and

experience abjection. In these abjective moments, the women experience the collapse of the division between their subjectivities and otherness, producing not stability but uncertainty.

As abjection surfaces, the ambiguous home is created, and in this space, the women construct bonds that form the foundation of their subjectivities and community. The women, with the exception of the two lesbians, enter the community as individuals, yet during their time at Brewster Place, they become members of a familial community. This community is generated by woman-woman bonds still impacted by the patriarchal gaze; although voiceless, the internalized masculine force is proliferated within the female community as the women interact to consider the boundaries of their bonds with one another. These connections come in many forms as the female characters take on the roles of friend, mother, and/or lover to the other abandoned and lonely women of Brewster Place. Just as the novel is constructed by six independent stories until the final chapter, “Block Party,” the Brewster Place community’s foundation is the individual women’s subjectivities. Therefore, the book’s very structure is representative of the community’s formation.<sup>8</sup> While the emerging subjectivities form the feminine community, ultimately the amalgamation of these subjectivities makes the creation of a queer community possible. As the women and text are constructed and re-constructed, the patriarchal gaze lingers and abjection looms, and the budding female intersubjectivities—a consequence of

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Nicosia explores Naylor’s text as an evolution of the composite novel in terms of how Naylor’s content, style, and structure develop community within and beyond the novel. Nicosia defines the genre of the composite novel by using Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris’s language that “focus[es] on how the shorter texts composing a literary work, though individually complete and autonomous, are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles” (174).

the connecting female subjectivities—construct a queer community from the feminine community.

Mattie Michael arrives at Brewster Place in the shadow of the wall and her past, a past defined by the objectification of the patriarchal gaze. Mattie's narrative follows her evolution from daughter to lover and lover to mother until she stands man-less on the steps of Brewster Place. Considered by most scholars to be the central character of a novel told in seven stories, Mattie Michael becomes the heart of the community; however, Naylor begins Mattie's section with a digression of some thirty years to a time when Mattie was an innocent yet curious girl on a hot Tennessee afternoon, for this is "the beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster" (8).<sup>9</sup> The smooth-talking Butch Fuller seduces Mattie in a field of wild herbs after teaching her how to eat sugarcane by knowing when to stop chewing, an act that is illustrative of how Butch lives his life and interacts with women. Naylor describes the eating of the sugarcane while also developing Mattie's sexual maturation: "The thick blade of the knife slid under the heavy green covering on the stalk, and clear, beady juices sprang to the edges and glistened in the dying afternoon sun" (18). Butch's thick blade slides into Mattie's green virginity, resulting in the girl's pregnancy. Having given in to Butch's advances and her desires, Mattie is no longer her father's female object, or daughter, and becomes that of Butch's lover and Basil's mother.<sup>10</sup> Mattie

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<sup>9</sup>For more scholarship on Mattie Michael as the central character of a "novel told in seven stories," see Virginia C. Fowler's second chapter in *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*, Larry R. Andrews's "Black Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor's Novels," Jill L. Matus's "Dream, Deferral, and Closure in *The Women of Brewster Place*," and Maxine L. Montgomery's *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* among others.

<sup>10</sup> Montgomery focuses on Mattie's oneness with the other African American women, "who find that their gendered identities cross the narrow boundaries that the larger society constructs" (*The*

identifies not as a woman but as a mother, a male-defined female role, and she, even after fleeing her father's and lover's gazes, constructs her subjectivity within the patriarchal gaze of her son, Basil.

In the absence of her father and her lover, Mattie has become dependent on another man for her subjectivity, her son. Larry R. Andrews explains that “one of the problems several women face is that in their isolation they come to focus all their needs on their children and define themselves exclusively as mothers, thus enacting a male-defined, exploitive role” (287). Andrews argues that the women must transcend the male-defined roles for “survival if not yet conquest” and identifies the black sisterhood that creates the Brewster Place community as the catalyst for this transcendence. While the relationships between the women are vital for the creation of female-defined subjectivities, ultimately the abjective experience, promoted by the female bonds, advances the reconfiguration of feminine subjectivities and the patriarchal gaze.

During the years spent in Miss Eva Turner's house, it is not Mattie's mother-son connection with Basil that provided her with stability but her relationship with Miss Eva. While wandering the streets in search of a place to stay if even just for the night, Mattie meets Miss Eva who welcomes her into her home and offers her a warm meal served with sides of hard-earned life lessons. Over the years, Miss Eva becomes Mattie's “sister-friend who provides the unconditional love and acceptance that Mattie forfeits with her move away from

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*Fiction 4*). For Montgomery, the journey from her rural beginning is a quest to achieve her potential as an African American woman, just as the migration is for many of the other women in the Brewster Place building. Montgomery's argument focuses on the struggle for African American women to find their place in a patriarchal society, and throughout her argument, gender difference remains critical. As my analysis continues, a focus on difference, especially gender difference, is deconstructed and replaced with a focus on sameness.

Rock Vale,” (Montgomery, *The Fiction* 6). The home as a feminine space exists through the “sister-friend” connection, and this significant and emerging space awakens Mattie to the power of female-female bonds.

This home and its female occupants, though, are not distinctly feminine, as Mattie clings to her subjectivity as a mother and Miss Eva clings to a heteronormative narrative, symptoms of the patriarchal gaze. In a conversation during breakfast, Miss Eva questions the lack of men in Mattie’s life, while trying to remember the last time a man took Mattie out on a date or filled her bed and night with intimacy. Miss Eva asks Mattie, “Ain’t you ever had no needs in that direction? No young woman wants an empty bed, year in and year out” (Naylor 37). Mattie, while sipping on her coffee to give herself time to think before answering, wonders if there is something unnatural about her lack of desire for male companionship both in and out of the bedroom. Mattie then replies, “My bed hasn’t been empty since Basil was born, [...] and I don’t think anyone but me would put up with the way that boy kicks in his sleep” (Naylor 38). Mattie replaced her father’s gaze with her lover’s gaze, and after leaving her Tennessee home, she became dependent on her son’s patriarchal gaze to define her subjectivity. Miss Eva’s insistence on Mattie finding a man to fill the masculine and nightly void illustrates the internalized masculine gaze still permeating this potentially feminine home. These two masculine presences, Basil and heteronormativity, within the feminine bond make this connection—although stabilizing—remain within the masculine realm.

Although Mattie enters the building as a lost woman with a wounded spirit, she is reborn within her role as the Brewster Place matriarch, a

reawakening that concurrently invigorates the community. Mattie's identification as the Brewster Place matriarch is illustrated in the many scenes where she protects, mentors, and encourages the other women in the community, acts that parallel the interaction she shared with Miss Eva. The most poignant scene of Mattie mothering another woman occurs in the section detailing Luciella Louise Turner's hardships. Mattie saves Ciel, Miss Eva's now-grown granddaughter, after her only daughter's death, her husband's abandonment, and her private and painful abortion. As Ciel moans, Mattie washes and rocks her, and Naylor weaves together language of rebirthing and baptism while Mattie nurtures the hurting woman:

She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it—a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled—and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (Naylor 104)

The mourning mother, husbandless wife is reborn in the rocking of another woman, and like Mattie, her loss of a female role as determined by patriarchy—the “huge hole”—makes possible the creation of female-centered subjectivity. However, Ciel's creation of a feminine subjectivity is not a certainty, as the masculine threat is not eliminated through Mattie's mothering, and the details of Ciel's new life in San Francisco, where she has met another man and is “ready to



start another family” reveal that she has remained dependent upon male-defined female roles (Naylor 178). Ciel’s “healing” has been outside of the feminine Brewster Place and returned to a masculine realm in which she must uphold the heteronormative narrative of marriage and reproduction and fulfill male-defined feminine roles. As with the relationship between Mattie and Miss Eva, this mother-daughter connection does not produce a feminine subjectivity but illustrates the pervasiveness of the patriarchal gaze.

Parallel to Mattie and Ciel’s dependence on male-determined identities, Etta Mae Johnson has also constructed her subjectivity within patriarchal female roles. Whether leaving Rock Vale and Johnny Brick or Florida and an unnamed, married man, Etta is constantly running from a failed sexual relationship in which she sought a sense of self and home in a man’s arms. Despite Etta’s ability to make her own rules, she is unable to escape the patriarchal context of female subjectivity, a reality that destroys any possibility for satiating her ultimate feminine desire to be truly recognized by both herself and another. As James R. Saunders argues, Etta, Mattie, Ciel, and the other women in Naylor’s text “live through the men with whom their lives have become intertwined” (52). This is the history shared by the Brewster Place women. By living through others, specifically men, all of the Brewster women are perpetuating feminine oppression and consequently denying their private desires.

Although a non-female society has previously narrated the women’s subjectivities, Brewster Place is an isolated space where the women have the ability to create their own selves and homes. The community at the dead end is not the end of the women’s journeys but the beginnings of their self-determined

lives, a space where the women can embrace private desires or deferred dreams. The black women in Brewster Place experience the double consciousness of the African American experience described by W. E. B. Du Bois as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (4). Furthermore, for the African American women of Brewster Place, the double consciousness of their existences is not only the division between blackness and American-ness but also a splintering between private and public female desires, as these private desires are resistant to the public demands. “The woman of color,” argues Helen F. Levy, “like the female author of color, finds it necessary to sort out authentic portions of her self-image and reject the false images projected by sexism and racism” (264). The prescribed roles of daughter, lover, wife, and mother are images projected upon the women, and not until they arrive at Brewster Place can the women deconstruct these prescribed roles to reconstruct their subjectivities and homes based on their private desires.

Arriving at the Brewster Place dead end for Etta is coming home to her life companion Mattie, and the relationship between the two women, as developed in the final scene of Etta Mae’s section, illustrates the power of the female intersubjectivities to fulfill feminine desire. In the dark of night and loneliness, Etta returns to Mattie’s stoop after a failed intimate night with Reverend Woods, discovering the light and sound of their “sister-friend” relationship. Mattie is playing Etta’s records, and while silently standing beyond Mattie’s door, Etta strains to hear the lyrics of the song, only to realize the words of the song do not

matter. What does matter is that “someone was waiting up for her” (Naylor 74). The someone waiting up for Etta is not a man but Mattie, her closest companion. Naylor continues: “Someone who would deny fiercely that there had been any concern—just a little indigestion from them fried onions that kept me from sleeping. Thought I’d pass the time by figuring out what you see in all this loose-life music” (74). Previously in the novel, Mattie is described as a fan of gospel music; Mattie even questions Etta’s love of her blues albums. However, she decides to put on Etta’s music while she waits for her broken friend, a result not of indigestion but of heartfelt connection. Etta’s records are not just music to her but the embodiment of her own essence, as made evident with the continual narrative interruptions of blues lyrics throughout her section.

The free-indirect speech Naylor uses in the conclusion of Etta’s narrative allows the reader to hear a conversation that has yet to occur, as the omniscient narrator’s language is replaced with Mattie’s own language, a rhetorical shift that illustrates the nonlinear progression of the novel and the characters’ lives. The notion of linear time, or “straight time,” is challenged by both the text’s structure and the women’s lives. Through this challenging, the privileging of teleological progression through a heteronormative narrative is deconstructed to imagine female subjectivities that satiate desires not constitutive of “straight time.”

Naylor concludes with the omniscient narration of the final thought of Etta’s section: “Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (74). The light below the door is representative of the light each woman is for the other. When Mattie was lost with her son after fleeing Rock Vale, Etta started her down the path of the

next portion of her life, and now when Etta is left alone on the street by Reverend Woods, Mattie is waiting to lead her back to love, home, and self. Walking into the light of Mattie's home and the sound of her spirit is Etta's spiritual rebirth within the feminine realm.<sup>11</sup> Although Montgomery argues that the connections between other women in the novel are "sister-friend" relationships (including mother-daughter relationships) that allow the women the comfort necessary to create feminine subjectivities and spaces, the relationship between Mattie and Etta is the first one I characterize as a uniquely and transformatively "sister-friend" relationship, as it is distinctly feminine in its rejection of male-dependent feminine subjectivities. Other female relationships presented in Naylor's text and considered within Montgomery's argument remain within the patriarchal roles of lover and mother.

This scene is also illustrative of the deeply feminine and liberating connection between the two "sister-friends," a bond defined by the love and acceptance the two women feel for each other. Nurturing the other woman when she is broken by masculine forces, Mattie and Etta facilitate not only a feeling of belonging but also a feeling of desiring, for each woman both welcomes and yearns for the other. Etta and Mattie share a past, just as Mattie, Miss Eva, and

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<sup>11</sup> While my argument does not focus on the African American men and masculinity in Naylor's novel (a subject she explores more fully in her 1998 novel *The Men of Brewster Place*), other scholars have investigated the masculine aspects of both *Brewster Place* novels, including Larry R. Andrews and James R. Saunders. Andrews focuses on the men who inhabit the Brewster Place walls, arguing that "most of the men in the novel may indeed be so ego-crippled by racism as to be unable to love their women but Naylor still holds them accountable" (290). However, Saunders investigates a prominent male figure who resides outside the community's walls, Reverend Woods. After considering Andrews's argument, Saunders makes Reverend Woods distinct among these men as one who is not ego-crippled but highly self-confident and self-aware. Saunders concludes from his analysis of Reverend Woods's sexual relationship with Etta that the man "is a formidable obstruction intent on relegating women to a position where they will be no freer than the antebellum slave women who were vulnerable to being visited periodically by the master" (52).

Ciel do: “Etta and Mattie went way back, a singular term that claimed co-knowledge of all the important events in their lives and almost all of the unimportant ones. And by rights of this possession, it tolerated no secrets” (Naylor 58). Despite the differences between their individual journeys to Brewster, the two women have navigated their winding paths back to the same place and back to each other. This female-female relationship provides each woman with the agency to transcend the oppressive roles of their public selves and to embrace their private female desires, creating in this action their individual selves and shared home. When the door closes behind Etta, she has “no choice but to be herself” (Naylor 58). Being herself in the home she shares with her “sister-friend” is the production of a female-defined subjectivity in the feminine home. The power of their life-long connection is captured in the final moment’s light and sound, but in a later conversation about the two male lovers living in 312, these two “sister-friends” will indirectly explore the boundaries of these intimate connections.

A new threat—lesbians—then moves into Brewster Place, and the two’s homosexuality is a destabilizing force for the female-female relationships of the Brewster community that produces uncertainty about the newly emerging identities fostered in these feminine connections. The chapter that contains the two’s narrative opens by stating that “at first they seemed like such nice girls” (Naylor 129). However, the two “nice” female roommates reveal the true nature of their relationship on the stairs one afternoon: “And they had started up the steps when the skinny one tripped over a child’s ball and the darker one had grabbed her by the arm and around the waist to break her fall. ‘Careful, don’t

want to lose you now.’ And the two of them had laughed into each other’s eyes and went into the building” (Naylor 130). Sophie, the community gossipmonger, observes the interaction between the two, and although she may not have started the rumors, she becomes the biggest critic of the two women living in 312. The rumor “spread through the block like a sour odor that’s only faintly perceptible and easily ignored until it starts growing in strength from the dozen mouths it had been lying in” (Naylor 130). Spreading through the community of women is both the reality of the women’s relationship and the fear of their lesbianism. “It is not that the lesbians do not fit at Brewster Place, “argues Farwell; “they fit so well that they are threatening” (161). The sexual nature of the relationship between the two just beyond their lowered shades is threatening, in Miss Sophie’s and others’ minds, to the community and its morality.<sup>12</sup>

Miss Sophie voices her concerns, which are cast to protect their community and Christian souls; however, she is interested in protecting herself and invested in forming a community against any form of otherness. As the homosexual threat becomes more pervasive, one must identify this menace and separate oneself from it. Miss Sophie, like all the other mouths spreading the rumors and fears, hates “out of necessity”:

Confronted with the difference that had been thrust into their  
predictable world, they reached into their imaginations and, using

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<sup>12</sup> Many scholars, including and most notably Barbara Christian, are interested in how the homophobia in *The Women of Brewster Place* reflects the homophobia present in both African American culture as a whole and the feminist landscape of the 1980s. My argument, however, is not as specifically interested in the presence of homophobia within either of these represented communities. Rather, my exploration of homophobia in both Naylor’s and Kenan’s texts is meant to transcend such community boundaries, focusing on how the developments of sexuality and subjectivity in these two texts when analyzed together present a possibility of subjectivity, sexuality, and community that does not privilege difference. Consequently, by shifting from definition by difference to identification through sameness, such communal boundaries dissolve.

an ancient pattern, weaved themselves a reason for its existence. Out of necessity they stitched all of their fears and lingering childhood nightmares into this existence, because even though it was deceptive enough to try and look as they looked, talk as they talked, and do as they did, it had to have some hidden stain to invalidate it—it was impossible for them both to be right. (Naylor 132)

Lacking the stabilizing female-female relationships the other women in the novel have created, Miss Sophie must have something to define herself against, a form of subjectification parallel to other oppressive institutions such as racism and sexism. Miss Sophie's homophobia is the result of her continued reliance on gendered, patriarchal roles, a reality she herself perpetuates by denying female-female bonds and privileging difference. Her inability to recognize the power of female connections and to embrace her own feminine desires makes her homophobia a necessity. If she is not a lesbian like the two, then she is acceptable, a feeling for which she yearns within a society that tells her she is nothing since she is neither white nor male. At the heart of Miss Sophie's hate of the two, Lorraine and Theresa, is the desire for love, for Miss Sophie wishes to love herself so much that she chooses to hate the lesbians of 312.

While Miss Sophie hates and fears the two out of necessity, the discomfort Mattie feels and discusses in regards to Lorraine and Theresa contrasts with the fear Miss Sophie feels. Miss Sophie interrupts the first meeting of the Brewster Place Block Association, insisting that they discuss the "bad element that done moved in this block amongst decent people," and Etta quickly moves to defend

Lorraine and Theresa but is stopped by Mattie (Naylor 139-40). After leaving the community gathering, Mattie and Etta have a discussion about the discomfort they feel about the two's lesbianism and the nature of their own female relationships:

Mattie was thinking deeply. "Well, I've loved women, too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get I've loved you practically all my life."

"Yeah, but it's different with them."

"Different how?"

"Well ... " Etta was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "They love each other like you'd love a man or a man would love you—I guess."

"But I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man," Mattie was pondering. "And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did."

"Yeah." Etta thought for a moment. "I can second that, but it's still different, Mattie. I can't exactly put my finger on it, but ... " (Naylor 141)

Mattie, reflecting on her past "sister-friend" relationships, recognizes the intimacy she herself has had with other women; however, these bonds are still different from the connection the two share. Different how, though? It is this question and its subsequent answer that makes Etta begin to feel uncomfortable,



because this answer moves from the homosocial realm to the homosexual realm.<sup>13</sup>

The shift that occurs within a “sister-friend” bond affects intersubjectivity, as the women form these bonds with women instead of men. The women are no longer creating affective intersubjective relationships with men but with women. The way Etta and Mattie love men, and the way the men at times love them back, include moments of sexual ecstasy. Therefore, Lorraine and Theresa, if they love each other the way men and women love each other, must also share these sexual moments. Love of a man, in the experiences of Mattie and Etta, is either expressed through possession, as with daughters and wives, or through sex, as with lovers. But love of a woman to the “sister-friend,” while at times deeper than the love of a man, must never be sexual, an act that is deemed unnatural throughout the two’s narrative.

The challenge the women now face with the presence of a lesbian couple is to distinguish their intersubjective relationships with women from the erotic relationship the two share. Pamela E. Barnett explains that “the women defend against their repressed identification with the category ‘lesbian’ through a collective attempt to distinguish homosociality from homosexuality” (119). However, this separation of the homosocial from the homosexual is both possible and impossible. What, then, (wonders Mattie) is the difference between heterosexual and homosexual intersubjectivity? As Mattie continues to ponder

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<sup>13</sup> For more discussion on homosocial desire, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.

the difference between her love of Etta and Lorraine and Theresa's love for each other, she discovers not more difference but more sameness.

Mattie continues, stating quietly as if to herself, "Maybe it's not so different" (Naylor 141). The hesitancy in the women's voices and the extended pauses are signs of the unspeakable conclusion each is reaching. The love the two have for each other is not as different as they initially imagined, if not hoped. Lorraine and Theresa share a love that is similar to the love Mattie and Etta have shared with men. The two's relationship is filled with the same emotional and sexual intimacy these straight women share with men. "Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different after all," concludes Mattie (Naylor 141). However, it is not the difference between this homosexual relationship and heterosexual relationships that make the women nervous; it is the sameness the lesbian relationship shares with "sister-friend" relationships that makes Mattie whisper her final thoughts. Mattie and Etta's visions of the two's relationship is one in which the two women are fulfilling their sexual desires with another woman, fulfillment for which Mattie and Etta depend on men, and satiating their feminine desires in their same sexual partner, satiation for which Mattie and Etta depend on "sister-friends." This is both a transformative and frightening realization. Although the "sister-friends" have found themselves and their home not in the arms of a man but in the light of another woman, both women still feel the urge to see themselves through the eyes of men. This wish to be seen is the ultimate human desire, another aspect of sameness shared by all the women; the difference, then, is the gender of the eyes through which one desires to be seen. Ultimately, it seems all

characters in the book, lesbian or “sister-friend,” perhaps all in life, are connected by the desire to be seen instead of splintered by the eyes of another.

The harmonious relationship Mattie and Etta imagine the two share, however, is not the reality of life in 312. The two women do not share the same experience—meaning each woman experiences her shared relationship differently from one another—or consciousness of their sexual identities. Lorraine has noticed that the interaction between her and the other women in the Brewster Place has changed, and she brings up this shift to Theresa by stating that “no one hardly speaks anymore. I mean, I’ll come in and say good evening—and just silence. It wasn’t like that when we first moved in. I don’t know. It makes you wonder; that’s all. What are they thinking?” (Naylor 134). Lorraine is wondering if the other tenants have discovered the love the two share for each other. This concern reveals Lorraine’s double consciousness; she is one person in public, especially since she is a schoolteacher, an influence on young minds, and another person alone in the apartment with Theresa. Theresa’s response—“I personally don’t give a shit what they’re thinking. And their good evenings don’t put any bread on my table”—similarly reveals Theresa’s consciousness, a consciousness that has united her public and private self (Naylor 134). By explaining that the others’ acknowledgement and acceptance does not “put any bread on [her] table,” Theresa is illustrating that her loss of social recognizability is reconciled in the livability of her single consciousness as a black lesbian. This scene of confrontation between the two also develops the tension between two lovers when they differ in their view of their social and sexual subjectivities. The relationship not only illustrates the differences between the two women’s

consciousnesses but also develops the liberating power of self-definition that Theresa experiences.

Lorraine, however, parallels Miss Eva in her reliance and enforcement of patriarchal roles. Even without the presence of males in their homes, the women continue to define their subjectivities through masculine narrations of feminine subjectivities. Lorraine is, thus, made a victim of the oppressive forces to which she maintains a public and private self, and even in the privacy of her home, she maintains her public norms and performance.

The two women also differ in their constructions of subjectivity based on contrasting perspectives of sameness and difference. After Theresa refers to both herself and Lorraine as “just a couple of dykes,” the two have their final fight before Lorraine walks out the door and away from their relationship for good (Naylor 164). Lorraine, before leaving for a party without Theresa, tries to explain to her partner how Ben, the man living in the basement, makes her feel comfortable: “When I’m with Ben, I don’t feel any different from anybody else in the world” (Naylor 165). Ben sees the Lorraine that is not a lesbian but another person. As Barnett elucidates, “Lorraine is as concerned as the women with appearing ‘normal’ and fitting into the dominant community. She has internalized a normative femininity that blurs the homosexual/heterosexual division, and she depends on that cloudiness to affirm her own uncomplicated humanity” (129). While Theresa relishes her femininity for challenging the sex-gender system, Lorraine depends on her femininity to find sameness with other women. Barnett argues that this is a dependency on normalcy, but I argue that it is a yearning for recognition, an aspect of her feminine desire that Theresa is not

fulfilling. The feminine desires Lorraine fulfills in her moments with Ben are the same desires the other women fulfill in their “sister-friend” bonds.

Both Lorraine’s and the “sister-friend” relationships are produced through recognition of sameness. However, Theresa, like Miss Sophie, focuses on difference. Theresa counters Lorraine’s point by exclaiming, “You’re a lesbian—do you understand that word?—a butch, a dyke, a lesbo ... And you can run to all the basements in the world, and it won’t change that, so why don’t you accept it?” (Naylor 165). Although Lorraine has not fully created a sense of self or home, she has begun to narrate her own subjectivity, a reality Theresa previously noticed in other interactions with her lover. Lorraine may be a lesbian but she insists that it does not make her as different as Theresa and Miss Sophie prefer. It is her sense of sameness, as with Mattie and Etta, that initiates her creation of a feminine subjectivity. More importantly, though, it is not in Theresa’s eyes that she will find herself and her home but rather in Ben’s eyes in a damp basement.

Lorraine continues to struggle with her development of a homosexual subjectivity, but Lorraine is reduced from an active subject to a sexual and subjugated object of men in a violent gangrape, halting her construction of feminine subjectivity. After a confrontation in which Lorraine emasculates C.C. Baker in front of his friends by questioning the size of his manhood (both figuratively and literally), C.C. seeks his revenge in a dark alley at night when Lorraine is on her way home (Naylor 162-169). While Theresa lies at home in the bed the two women share, C.C. asserts his masculine dominance over Lorraine as

he and his friends take turns raping her.<sup>14</sup> Butler argues that “the radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female ‘Other’ suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory” (*Gender*, xxviii). The two, even before an explicit moment of emasculation, challenge C.C.’s masculine sovereignty with their reliance on feminine relationships for self-definition. Lorraine is not merely a woman who loves another woman but a complex threat to masculinity that must be suppressed through the act of rape, a physical and psychological invasion.<sup>15</sup>

The power of flesh and skin that can produce fulfillment now shatters Lorraine’s double consciousness as her interiority is penetrated by masculinity. Naylor develops the pain of the scene by taking the reader into Lorraine’s experience and thoughts, stating that “Lorraine was no longer conscious of the pain in her spine or stomach. She couldn’t feel the skin that was rubbing off of her arms from being pressed against the rough cement. What was left of her mind was centered around the pounding motion that was ripping her insides apart” (171). As the skin is ripped from the body by the violent force and hard cement, it is both the materiality of the subject and an object. Lorraine feels the skin that is her body and sees the skin that was once of this body; the same substance is ambiguously subject and object. “Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects” (Kristeva 1), and in this contradictory yearning and fleeing, the skin is

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<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of the rape scene’s language and content, see Laura E. Tanner’s “Reading Rape.” In this article, Tanner discusses both *The Women of Brewster Place* and William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, concluding that the rapes in both texts challenge the subject-object relationships of the acts of raping, gazing, and reading. Sabine Sielke’s *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture 1790-1990* is also an excellent source that examines the rhetoric of rape as a means to confront power relations.

<sup>15</sup> Although the abjection of the rape scene is liberating in that it enables and promotes queerness, I am by no means advocating or supporting rape. Rape, as presented in Naylor’s text, is a traumatic experience, and my reading of this scene is not meant to minimize or ignore the trauma felt by the character.

neither subject nor object. The flakes of flesh that lie on the sidewalk are the abject, “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). As pain fades with the fading of Lorraine’s consciousness, Lorraine’s subjectivity is replaced by objectivity until finally “her body fell over like an unstrung puppet” (Naylor 171).

Throughout the scene, Naylor focuses on both abjection of the body and the internal violence of physical domination. C.C. and his gang have destroyed Lorraine’s chance for self-identification, and with this destruction comes the loss of Lorraine’s chance for livability or survival. “There was nothing moving that early October morning—except Ben,” who then approaches Lorraine (Naylor 172). Lorraine strikes him with a brick, killing the man with whom she once shared an intimate friendship. Many critics, including Michael Awkward, Virginia Fowler, and James R. Saunders, argue that Ben’s death is, in Awkward’s language, “authorial retribution” for Ben’s ignorance of his daughter’s sexual abuse (124). I, however, feel that Ben’s death is a consequence of Lorraine’s traumatic experience of the rape, not the consequence of his own actions. Due to her rape, Lorraine has lost the feminine subjectivity she began constructing with Ben. Consequently, Ben also loses his ability to attain recognizability and livability, since Lorraine was the only one who truly saw him. Although rape does not always result in a loss of subjectivity, Lorraine no longer appears in the novel after the violent events of the dark night; her rape and reaction conclude her active development of subjectivity. Therefore, C.C. and his boys kill both Lorraine and Ben in their act of brutal physical and psychological violence.

Ben is a male parallel to Mattie in the sense that he also has a detailed development of his past that includes familial disappointment and tragedy, and he and Lorraine develop an intimate connection that contributes to their personal development of self and social development of otherness. Yet Ben's shared history with Mattie did not result in social inclusion in Brewster Place but further isolation, as Ben drinks and sings away his pain, and his drunkenness is the ultimate source of his outsider subjectivity. "Both Lorraine and Ben are problematically related to the larger community, and the text's struggle is to resolve or at least define that relationship," Farwell argues (163). Both Ben's parallels to Mattie and his relationship with Lorraine shift Ben from being a masculine threat to a feminine ally. When telling Lorraine about his troubled history as a father and husband while sharecropping in Georgia, Ben says, "If I was half a man I woulda—," ending the sentence with the same silence and inaction that characterizes his powerlessness in protecting his daughter from the white man who owned their borrowed land (Naylor 153). In this incomplete statement, Ben emasculates himself. Ben feels that he is not even "half a man" due to his inability to protect his family, a patriarchal role within a heterosexual man. His transgression of this masculine role violates the social code and "straight time." With Ben's inability to maintain the heterosexual narrative, Ben is not a male subjectivity but a subjectivity struggling with the patriarchal gaze. Barnett explains that "in the narrative present, the 1970s, Ben considers his own social and economic powerlessness in the terms of castration common to black writers and intellectuals of the era" (136). Through the many feminine aspects of Ben's subjectivity, the connection between Ben and Lorraine becomes a "sister-



friend” connection, a presentation of a queer bond as the feminine relationship is refigured between different genders.

Consequently, Ben’s social and economic emasculation and intimate female connections threaten C. C.’s masculine subjectivity and power. C. C. rapes Lorraine to assert his power over a lesbian who challenges his male agency, because she is not vulnerable to the power that lies behind his zipper. C. C. is similarly threatened by Ben’s social feminization and his inclusion in the feminine community. Although C. C. is not aware that he is simultaneously protecting his black masculinity from two threats as he rapes Lorraine, he is destroying both the independent lesbian and the feminized male. As Farwell states, “The consequence of Ben’s repositioning is the loss of agency that C. C. Baker jealously guards” (163). While some would argue that Naylor is punishing Ben’s inability to act as a husband and father in his past, Lorraine’s rape is the destruction of her relationship with the feminine realm that includes Ben; it is also a destruction of Ben’s connection with the only person who sees him through loving eyes. The oppressive masculine force presented in C. C.’s violent actions destroys a source of feminine power, a queer “sister-friend” relationship.

Mattie’s nightly vision orders the final chapter because she is the center of the feminine community through her “sister-friend” bond with Etta and her recognition of sameness with the two. Naylor does not end her novel with the destructive reality of Lorraine’s rape but with the hopeful vision of Mattie’s collective dream in “The Block Party.” A feminine community is presented in the novel’s conclusion, but this feminine entity’s existence after a cleansing and transformative rain is uncertain.

Within Mattie's collective dream, Naylor explains that all the Brewster Place women had been having troubled dreams: "Although only a few admitted it, every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress" (175). Lorraine has finally joined the community to which she desired to belong even if only in their dreams, and her inclusion in the larger feminine community only comes after she experiences abjection. The abjective scene of rape presents Lorraine's objectification by the masculine threat, and she is now not a lesbian but a woman. Finally, the women see the sameness they share with Lorraine in the blood-stained bricks, the sameness Mattie already pondered in the unspoken answer during her conversation with Etta. Lorraine's abjection is the definitive source of the final scene of female coalescence.

Abjection reemerges in the novel's conclusion in a space that ambiguously initiates beginnings and endings: the wall. Before they discover the blood that remains on the wall, the women identify the history they share with the lesbian of 312—the masculine destruction experienced by Lorraine is characteristic of their own histories. Sameness is the foundation of this connection, similar to the sameness that binds "sister-friends" to one another. Mattie explains that the woman in her dream was much like herself but somehow different, and "something bad happened to me by the wall—I mean to her—something bad had happened to her" (Naylor 179). Mattie misspeaks and inserts "me" for "her" as she recounts her dream, an illustration of the sameness now shared by Lorraine and the women. Mattie continues: "And Ben was in it somehow" (Naylor 179). Ben is a part of this feminine community through his shared history and "sister-

friend” bond, and his inclusion shifts the community from the feminine realm to the queer realm. The formation of the community becomes queer through its deconstruction of the gender binary, which focuses on difference, and the sameness between the women and the male Ben unite the individuals. The community also challenges the sexual binary, as both homosexuals and heterosexuals form communal ties.

After Cora Lee finds her daughter scratching at the wall, she discovers that blood still stains the bricks; the bodily material of Lorraine’s abjection initiates another abjective experience. As the women deconstruct the wall brick by brick, the blood seems to spread and not disappear, and although Kiswana explains that it is not blood but water from the now falling rain, they realize that the wall must go, not the blood. Lost in the communal moment, “Kiswana looked down at the wet stone and her rain-soaked braids leaked onto the surface, spreading the dark stain. She wept and ran to throw the brick spotted with her blood out into the avenue” (Naylor 187). Lorraine’s blood first stained the wall but now the women see that their blood, blood they share with Lorraine, also stains the bricks. The wall, then, becomes both subject and object. Ultimately, this scene is the abjection of both the women’s bodies and the body of the wall.

This moment of unification is interrupted by Theresa’s emergence from the building. As the cab pulls off to escape the erupting chaos, Theresa exclaims, “Dumb bastard, they’re only having a lousy block party. And they didn’t even invite me” (Naylor 187). The Brewster Place women have continued to exclude Theresa from their world. More importantly, though, is that this exclamation is Theresa’s first admittance that she desires to be invited. For the first time,

Theresa is searching for connection with these women or searching for sameness, and with the loss of her lover in masculine violence, Theresa herself shares a history with these other women. C. C. destroyed the eyes in which Theresa sought to see herself, and now she also understands the pain of masculine force. The dream ends with Theresa dropping her things to participate in the wall's dismantling, and "suddenly, the rain exploded around their feet in a fresh downpour, and the cold waters beat on top of their heads—almost in perfect unison with the beating of their hearts" (Naylor 188). This emergence of sameness is what drives the women to tear down the wall, a sentiment shared by all the women including the two. This final image, although a dream, is a vision of a queer community—a community that challenges the masculine threat and that includes a male and a lesbian.

Deconstructing the wall, though, is not the elimination of the masculine threat. As Kristeva explains, abjection does not separate one from the threat. As the women tear down the wall, "All of the men and children now stood huddled in the doorways" (Naylor 185). Just beyond the curbs, the masculine threat waits, and the roles of lover and mother will again come to define some of the women's lives, especially those who lack "sister-friend" relationships. Although a queer community is forming in the street, the patriarchal gaze peers into the queer community, waiting to assert its power. Thus, the hopeful dream is yet another deferred dream.

In "Dusk," Naylor concludes her novel with a building waiting to die; however, as the women continue to dream, the queer community lives. "No one cries when a street dies," writes Naylor; "So when Brewster dies, it will die alone"

(191). The death of Brewster Place the building is not the death of the queer community that formed at the dead end. The female subjectivities that were constructed within the walls and the patriarchal gaze continue to live in the women's dreams:

But the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they're mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into the pots of soup, and they're diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die.

(Naylor 192)

The women who continue to occupy Brewster Place as the days fade from dawn to dusk continue to share the same experience of the masculine threat and to struggle for the "sister-friend" bonds. The women strive to form intersubjectivities that are not defined by their relationships with men and children and their domestic activities of laundry, cooking, and childcare. The continuation of female subjectivities that ignore the power of female intersubjectivity allows Brewster Place to also remain, yet the queer community unites these women "over the canvas of time." Brewster Place's last breath, however, is not the destruction of a home but the construction of a queer community that transcends the boundaries of space and time.

## Chapter II: Kenan's Queer Space

Randall Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* is a collection of short stories set in the fictive community of Tims Creek, an imagined town located in the tobacco region of eastern North Carolina. This town not only connects these short stories to one another but also connects the short story collection to Kenan's first novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*. Kenan's only other fictional text, *A Visitation*, recounts Horace Cross's final evening that begins with the boy's attempt to magically transform himself into a free bird and ends with him shooting himself in the head amidst a demonic possession. However, the story is not told as a linear progression, as Cross's familial and Tims Creek's communal histories interrupt Cross's last night. Throughout this night and his life, Cross is haunted by homosexual desire, a yearning he shares psychologically and physically with another young, black, queer individual Gideon Stone. The novel follows Cross as he struggles with his sexuality, then satisfies his desire, and finally takes his life. However, as Harry Thomas argues, Kenan does not produce a text that separates homosexuality from the Southern community. Instead, Kenan's development of a sophisticated homosexual subjectivity that navigates both gender and sexual perversion in the character of Gideon Stone "makes the implicit case that these things occur as naturally within Tims Creek as do the rituals of agricultural labor or Christianity" (Thomas 127). Throughout *A Visitation*, Kenan creates a community that is fraught with queerness, and this

tension between the idealized community and the actual community is representative of the internal tension with which many of the characters live.

The queer community of Tims Creek, North Carolina, is further developed and explored in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, and the queerness of both the place and its characters is complicated by the emergence of queerness not characterized by homosexual desire. Thomas concludes that “the whole of *Visitation* suggests that the true crime of Horace’s community is less an isolated case of homophobia and more a willful ignorance and stubborn refusal to acknowledge its own multiple, often self-contradictory and queer nature” (130). The town of Tims Creek, then, becomes a queer space because of its reliance upon non-normative subjectivities not just homosexual subjectivities. Consequently, the people of this community challenge normative ideology in all of their actions, and their communal connection is thusly not grounded in the normal but in the abnormal. This transgression of normalcy is not the destruction of a community but its creation; therefore, the Tims Creek community is produced through its communal history—a history inextricably linked to non-normative entities, including homosexual desire, as presented in *A Visitation* and *Let the Dead*—and shared queerness.

In this queer space, the privileged location of difference is also challenged, and subjectivity and ideology are reconstructed around sameness. While some of the characters, most notably Miss Maggie in “The Foundations of the Earth,” explicitly deconstruct difference’s influence on normative ideology, the emerging sameness is predominantly representational and figurative, meaning the

characters, at times across stories, are not themselves aware of the existence they share with other members of their community.<sup>16</sup> Uzzie T. Cannon explains:

In *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, Kenan shows how the situation for not only homosexuals but also others ostracized from the community “has not gotten that much better.” Kenan exposes this community to show the tragedy it introduces into the lives of its members. Consequently, he disrupts the binary of normative and deviant behavior in the community. (103)

Ultimately, Tims Creek, through Kenan’s character development, becomes a queer Southern community that not only challenges heteronormativity but any form of normalcy and the binaries that naturalize oppressive, dichotomous ideology.

Arguably, every short story in Kenan’s collection explores some form of non-normative subjectivity, activity, or ideology. Ranging from the incestuous yet fulfilling sibling relationship of “Cornsilk” to Lena’s rebirth in her intimacy with a much younger apparition in “What Are Days?”, Kenan reconstructs his Southern town to not exclude queerness but depend upon it, and his illustrations of queer subjectivities and revolutions challenge the characters’ and readers’ conceptions of naturalness. The result is a transformation. As Robert McRuer claims, “Kenan transforms a place on the so-called margins [Tims Creek] into a center of the queer world” (115). I argue that not only is the Southern town relocated to “the

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<sup>16</sup> Kenan’s writing is infused with Christian theology, and as discussed in my introduction, my interest in his text is in community as a social institution not a religious entity. Still, within my discussion of *Let the Dead*, I will be drawing from critics that focus on the Christian tradition of Tims Creek and will use their arguments to support my discussion of community despite our differing approaches.



center of the queer world” but also that the town’s queerness itself is relocated. The queer space that defines the town is shifted from the dark margins of dingy hangouts and isolated homes or moments to the stunning core of the community, and its presence becomes a significant influence on the people and place.

In my discussion of “Clarence and the Dead,” I argue that the conflation of paranormal ability and homosexual desire illustrates the problematic attempt of a community to eliminate queer threats, revealing the necessity of both normative and queer existences. The presentation of normative and queer in “Run, Mourner, Run” further presents the interconnectedness of the queer and the normative. Kenan’s presentation of publics and counterpublics and political and personal selves, to borrow Michael Warner’s terms, establishes the dependence of the normative and queer spaces and subjectivities on the other, revealing that without one the other ceases to exist. Consequently, the normative and the queer become not oppositional forces but interdependent presences. This is the queer knowledge Mrs. Maggie, in “The Foundations of the Earth,” comes to understand through her interaction with her grandson’s lover, Gabriel. Normativity is inherently bound to queerness. Kenan’s queer space is the location in which queer knowledge is proliferated and queerness is recognized as both normal and natural, its supposed opposition.

*Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* opens with the non-traditional narrative of “Clarence and the Dead,” a story that begins, “On the day Clarence Pickett died, Wilma Jones’s hog Francis stopped talking” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 1). This story immediately declares two astounding events that have become prominent facts in Tims Creek’s collective history, an amalgamation of fact, folklore, and

imagination that forms the history of the town and community.<sup>17</sup> Clarence is born with the ability to communicate with the dead, a talent or a curse that causes Clarence to interact with adults in what the community labels a disrespectful manner. Clarence, though, does not narrate the story of his short and problematic—in that it challenges the town’s sense of normal—life. “The narrator is in the community and shares its values,” argues Trudier Harris; “That community generally believes that farming and family life are good, that hogs should not be allowed in church, that it is a bit strange when children talk to the dead, and that homosexuality is unnatural” (114). Clarence is not the story’s homosexual subject, and the introduction of same-sex desire is initially conflated with the heterosexual relationship between Ellsworth Batts and his deceased wife, Mildred. The introduction of Mildred’s presence is the beginning of a ghost story wrought with queer desire.

As Clarence speaks for the deceased wife, the non-normative presences in the narrative are blended into a collective queerness that includes both supernatural activity and homosexual desire. Clarence relates a message to Ellsworth from Mildred, the wife he continues to mourn—“She wants you to return to the living folk” (16)—, and Ellsworth begins to view Clarence as the embodiment of his wife’s ghost. The older man then begins courting the clairvoyant Clarence by bringing him “candy and then flowers” (19). The

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<sup>17</sup> Kenan emphasizes the intertwining of actual and fictive events in the history of places and peoples in the final story of his collection, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” which is presented as a collected history of Tims Creek firstly compiled by the Right Reverend James Malachai Green (Horace Cross’s cousin) and edited and introduced by Reginald Gregory Kain (a fictional anthropologist from the Department of Anthropology and Folklore of Sarah Lawrence College). Kain’s introduction explains that “extracts from letters, diaries, and discourses on natural history, though oddly positioned, were compiled in such a way by the Reverend Green, and after much reflection, are allowed to remain as he intended” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 280).

community becomes highly concerned about Ellsworth's relationship with Clarence, as voiced by the narrator's voice: "Nothing like talk of crimes against nature gets people all riled up and speculating and conjecturing and postulating the way they did when word got out about Ellsworth Batts's 'unnatural affection' for Clarence Pickett" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 19). The Tims Creek community, then, is not only threatened by homosexual subjectivities and acts but also by the homoerotic; however, it is important to remember that Ellsworth was not attracted to Clarence before the boy delivered Mildred's beyond-the-grave message. The community must then navigate the non-normative terrain of the supernatural and the homosexual, deciding that "the likelihood of him [Ellsworth] conversing with his dead Mildred through the boy paled next to the idea of him fermenting depraved intentions for young and tender boys" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 19). While both the man and the boy are communal threats, the homosexual desire is deemed more dangerous than Clarence's supernatural abilities. Cannon concludes that "the community, blinded by their sheer disdain for homosexuality, fails to see the rationale for Ellsworth's irrational behavior," meaning they focus on his connection with Clarence instead of his disconnection with reality amidst his intense mourning (113). Harris, however, argues that the labeling of Ellsworth as a homosexual enables the community

to slide past the real issue of other-worldliness that is key to Clarence's existence. Fighting ghosts and dog spirits is not exactly something the average human being can do. Fighting homosexuality is something for which one can muster tangible

responses, and the men come together as a community to do exactly that. (127-28)

According to Harris, the community decides to condemn not the paranormal but the homosexual, because a community can form against a threat they can see but not one that they cannot. I, though, argue that the community is not choosing one threat over another but fighting the threat of “other-worldliness” through their persecution of homosexual desire. This effort to suppress the supernatural through the destruction of the queer reveals the community’s commitment to eliminating non-normative threats.

However, the destruction of these queer entities is not the protection of a town but its annihilation. “Clarence and the Dead” ends with Ellsworth’s death after a mob has chased him into the woods and onto the Chinquapin River bridge. On the bridge, he doesn’t look down to notice that the river is at its lowest level and dives into the shallow water, breaking his neck. Shortly after, Clarence becomes sick and dies before he is old enough to enter school. The narrator explains that “life in Tims Creek went on as normal after he died: folk loved, folk hated, folk debauched, got lonely and died” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 22). With the two queer threats eliminated, the “normal” life of Tims Creek is resumed, yet the existence is not idyllic, just as it was not before, during, or after Clarence’s brief life. Those in the community both love and hate, and the passings of Ellsworth and Clarence leave room for others to fill the vacant queer space. The presence of homosexual subjects is a necessary challenge in the creation of a “normal” community, as their presence allows for an identifiable other. However, their utter absence—the presumed objective of their elimination—reveals not certainty

but instability in that it aggravates the ontological predicament that any and every subject could be homosexual. The opening story, then, is as much about a talking pig, mourning widow, and supernatural ability as it is “about the fine line between natural and unnatural desire” (McKoy 30). Only with and through the presence of the unnatural does the natural come to form, and their interdependence disrupts the oppressive ideology that only the normative is natural. While the temporary queer threats will come and go, the queer space will always remain, and it is this inescapable reality that is the foundation of the community and text. Queer space stabilizes both normative and queer ideologies, further evidence of the hybridity, not distinctiveness of normalcy and queerness.

“Run, Mourner, Run” opens with Dean Williams, a young man known around Tims Creek for sleeping with other men, reflecting on his social and sexual subjectivity. The narration takes us into Dean’s mind as he ponders his existence: “If pigs could fly and foxes could talk and dragons were for real, then surely he could be anything he wanted to be. Not many years after that he dropped out and learned to dream more mundane dreams. Yet those nuggets from grade school stayed with him” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 164). The opening scene, which blends the past and present, presents moments of both sexual and social maturation. These “mundane dreams” are dreams of life in which Dean can be his private self in the public realm, a dream further illustrated in Raymond Brown’s struggle to maintain his public image despite his private desires. Raymond Brown, the richest black man in Tims Creek, is the owner of Chitaqua Pond, and Percy Terrell, who has somehow discovered Raymond’s secret desires, homosexual desires, now wants to use Dean to expose this hidden self. With the

possibility of financial gain, Dean agrees to dive into the hidden world of the powerful and respected man.

The next day while at McTarr's Grocery Store, Dean sees Raymond and approaches the striking black man about the year of his car. Throughout their first conversation, Dean's thoughts are presented within parentheses, textual illustration of his double consciousness. Kenan writes, "What can I do for you?—Ray spoke in a slow, round baritone. Very proper. (Does he like me?) He kept his too-small-for-a-black-man's nose in the air. (Does he know I am interested?) Raised an eyebrow. (He just thinks I am white trash.)—Can I help you, young man?—Ray started to step away" (*Let the Dead* 171). While Dean is searching for an inkling of homosexual desire, he must maintain a performance of heterosexuality just as Raymond does. However, the public selves of the two men gives way to the private selves when they meet again at The Jack Rabbit: "A rusty, run-down, dank, dark, sleazy, sticky-floored sort of place, with a smudged wall-length mirror behind the bar, a small dance floor crowded with men and boys, mostly black, jerking and gyrating to this guitar riff" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 173). In the darkness and anonymity of this bar, the two men can abandon their double consciousness and embrace their private, homosexual desires.

The bar's description serves as a mirror of the public perception of homosexual desire, and, therefore, in "dank, dark, sleazy, sticky-floored" places such as this bar, it is permissible for the hidden subjectivities of these men to surface. The scene of the bar describes the depth to which homosexual desire must be hidden and separated from the public self. The bar's space is queer not only because of the subjectivities that occupy it but also because of its embracing

of “queer time.” Halberstam connects “queer time” with “the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early childhood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility” (Dinshaw et al. 182). In the bar, the heteronormative narrative of maturation and reproduction are abandoned, and the two men are their private selves in a public space. In this bar outside town, the two men can be queer individuals in a queer space.

The dark bars in which “straight” individuals seek the intimacy of other “straight” yet same sex individuals are examples of “counterpublics,” as Michael Warner explains:

A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like. (56)

The public self, or in Warner’s terms the “political” self, is the creation of a subjectivity mediated through the heteronormative narrative of straight time; however, the private self, Warner employs the term “personal,” is a subjectivity in which the desires that often remain silent or closeted in the political self are embraced. Still, the political self and personal self are not two separate entities, meaning they are not easily separated or compartmentalized, just as counterpublics are not easily divorced from publics. Warner elaborates on the

connections between subjectivities and these public spheres, explaining that “Even as subaltern counterpublic, this subordinate status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members’ identities are formed and transformed” (57). Consequently, the creations of both the political and personal selves are not independent phenomena but a highly interdependent formation of subjectivities that depend on one another, essentially connected through intersubjective bonds.

The political and personal selves are not easily bifurcated and are inseparably linked. Just as the connection between subject and object is not neatly divided, the public self and the private self simultaneously emerge and hide. The two are meshed in to one subjectivity, and this one subjectivity is then impacted by intersubjective relationships. Therefore, my discussion is not an attempt to dissect subjectivity into two distinct realms but to identify the privileged constituency of the moment. It is the reality of this privileging that highlights the oppressive binary of heterosexuality and straight time.

Raymond takes Dean back to the homeplace at Chitaqua Pond, another counterpublic space, where the two can unleash their desires and private selves. Nevertheless, even in the intimacy and privacy of the bedroom, social norms interrupt Dean’s passion:

As Dean trembled and tingled and clutched—all the while in his ears he heard a noise: faint at first, then loud, louder, then deafening: and he was not sure if the quickening *thu-thump-thump*, *thu-thump-thump* of his heartbeat came from Ray’s bites on his nipples or from fear. Dean felt certain he heard the voices of old



black men and old black women screaming for his death, his blood,  
for him to be strung up on a Judas tree, to die and breathe no more.

(Kenan, *Let the Dead* 176-177)

The voices of heteronormative culture ring in Dean's ears, but most importantly, these are the voices of the community in which Raymond's public self is constructed and respected. Dean's agreement with Percy is meant to destroy the prominent man, a reality Dean had not previously considered.

Dean had also not considered falling in love with the man he is being paid to seduce. Butler elucidates the power of touch and flesh by stating that "the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence" (*Undoing* 21). The skin and flesh are both the inscription of norms and desire; however, with homosexual desire, flesh and touch concurrently complete and shatter the self. The impact with the other that holds vulnerability and agency within their gaze for these queer men is the denial of the public self and the liberation of the private self. Butler further explains: "The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where 'doing' and 'being done to' become equivocal" (*Undoing* 21). In the sexual act being shared by these two men, the "doing" and "being done to" is the emergence of the personal self and the denial, if only for the time, of the political self. Dean realizes his connection with Raymond has become more about their love than Percy's promised money. Dean tells himself, "I ain't jealous of no black woman and of no black man. I don't care how much money he got," yet as he crawls into his lonely bed, he is still "thinking of Ray's voice, the feel of his skin, the smell of his aftershave" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 178). Dean knows that his lover

Raymond has returned to his family's home, to his political self, and to the heteronormative narrative, while Dean is left alone with his personal, queer desires.

In a moment of external and internal chaos, Percy and his sons interrupt the intertwined lovers: "The order and the rhyme of what happened next ricocheted in a cacophony in Dean's head even now: Ray blinks awake: Percy: his three sons: ... Well, well, well, look-a-here, boys, salt-n-pepper ... fucking queers, fucking faggots: damn, out of film" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 179). Percy and his sons have not only confronted Raymond's private self but also captured it on film, evidence of the homosexual desire thriving in the admired man. However, Raymond has not yet realized the ultimate power Percy now has over him with the knowledge and evidence of his private self; he replies, "You got to be kidding, Terrell ... expect me to whimper like some snot-nosed pickaninny, 'Yassuh, Mr. Terrell, suh, I'll give you anything, suh. Take my house. Take my land. Take my wife. I sho is scared of you, suh.' Come off it" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 180). However, the man replying in this moment is the public self of Raymond, a man who has refused to give the white man his land or a man who has refused to be Percy's Uncle Tom.

Ultimately, Raymond prioritizes the heterosexual performance of his political self over the homosexual desire of his personal self, and Percy buys the homeplace and Chitaqua Pond. The love between the two men is destroyed with the closeting of Raymond's personal self. Raymond has been betrayed by his lover, as revealed by Percy when he congratulates Dean on a job well-done. The flesh and touch that previously completed Raymond has now destroyed him,

illustrating Butler's power of touch and flesh. Raymond returns to his family, and Dean returns to his poverty.

This real estate deal for the purchase of the homplace is not made immediately upon the confrontation between the Terrells and the two lovers; instead, it happens two weeks later. This delay reflects the power Raymond has retained despite Percy's confirmation of the other man's homosexual desires according to Sheila Smith McKoy. McKoy continues:

In essence, Kenan refuses to "punk" Brown. Instead, he subverts heterosexual privilege in the narrative by allowing Brown to "punk" the two conspirators. In this refusal to be affected by the limited and socially limiting definitions of black masculinity and gay manhood, Raymond Brown is Kenan's most fully realized portrait of black gay manhood. (33)

While this short story does revise both black masculinity and black queerness, one must not forget that Raymond returns to his heterosexual life every time he leaves the homeplace, especially after the Terrells' interruption. I find it hard to accept McKoy's claim that "Kenan's most fully realized portrait of black gay manhood" is a man who perpetuates the straight time narrative of marriage and reproduction as expected by a heterosexist community.

Although only Dean is presented in the story's conclusion, his thoughts are the presentation of both men's current existence as he is "waiting for the world to come to an end. Waiting for this cruel dream world to pass away. Waiting for the leopard to lie down with the kid and the goats with the sheep. Waiting for everything to be made all right—cause I know it will be all right, it has to be all

right” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 191). As both men return to their political selves, normalcy will be restored. This reemergence of both the political self and gender norms is also the reemergence of the two men’s recognizability; however, both are still waiting on the return of livability. Again, it is not the story’s characters and their ultimate fate that Kenan is revising but the communal space.

The homeplace, like the Jack Rabbit, is a queer space that, along with the spaces of normalcy, forms the community’s connectedness. The community, including Percy who has his eye on Raymond’s land, knows that the beautiful piece of land around the Chitaqua Pond belongs to the Browns; however, few are aware of what goes on in the walls of the unoccupied house. The homeplace is a queer space, a counterpublic, that impacts all subjectivities in the community. Thus, the character of Raymond Brown is not the (re)emergence or (re)construction of queerness that is progressive but Kenan’s presentations of queer spaces that transform communal knowledge. When Percy bursts into the homeplace, he is not only confirming his suspicion but also revising his knowledge of and connection to Tims Creek. He now shares the queer space and knowledge with Raymond and Dean. As McKoy concludes (an aspect of her argument with which I agree), “Theirs is the uncomfortable knowledge that homosexual desire and heterosexual desire are intimately woven into the fabric of every community everywhere” (33). This queer knowledge also includes the existence and recognition of the abject; therefore, the transformative queer space and queer knowledge is characterized by the emergence of the abject. The interconnectedness of both political and personal selves and publics and counterpublics is parallel to the interconnectedness of normative and queer

subjectivities and spaces. Only with both the normative and the queer can Tims Creek exist.

Sitting on the porch in the afternoon heat, Mrs. Maggie MacGowan Williams and her guests soon uncover the abnormality in the ordinary. “The Foundations of the Earth” opens with an object, a tractor: “Of course, they didn’t pay it any mind at first: just a tractor—one of the most natural things in the world to see in a field—kicking up dust into the afternoon sky and slowly toddling off the road into a soybean field” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 49). The group—Mrs. Maggie, the Right Reverend Hezekiah Barden, Henrietta Fuchee, a music teacher and president of the First Baptist Church Auxiliary Council, Emma Lewis, Maggie’s housekeeper, and Gabriel, “Mrs. Maggie Williams’s young, white, special guest” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 50)—are in the midst of two forms of deviancy: Sunday labor and homosexual subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> These two subversive forms drive the short story in which Mrs. W., as Gabriel comes to call her, confronts, deconstructs, and (re)constructs her foundations of love and life.

While the story opens with a tractor, it quickly shifts to Mrs. Maggie’s interiority. As the conversation around her focuses on the white man operating his tractor on the land he leases from Mrs. Maggie, the narrative weaves together the present on the front porch with the past that dominates Maggie’s thoughts. This narrative structure challenges “straight time,” as the past comes to impact

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<sup>18</sup> As Trudier Harris-Lopez notes in her discussion of “The Foundations of the Earth,” the name Gabriel has significant resonance in African American religious folklore and tradition. As one of the Archangels, Gabriel “waken[s] ‘the quick and the dead’ on Judgment Day” by blowing his horn (Harris-Lopez 162). As Harris explains, “Gabriel is therefore a disturber of superficial tranquility, a transformer of life and death, and a cherished representative of a beloved God. For Maggie to have to confront the name so well known to her in the figure of a northern, white, gay, male who loved her grandson is, to put it mildly, a bit much for her to bear” (162-63).

the present. The memories come to occupy a space in the present as they interrupt the narrative progression, progress the assumed goal of “straight time.” While this is a story of a grandmother’s struggle to accept both the life and death of her beloved grandson, the tale also explores the past as an inescapable and consequential presence in the present. This past tells of the separation between a grandmother and her grandson, Edward, and connects Mrs. Maggie to her special guest, Gabriel. Most importantly, though, the past is all that is left of Edward’s life, and in this past, he shared his life with the white man who now sits on a porch in Tims Creek. Thus, in the present, Gabriel is Mrs. Maggie’s only surviving connection to Edward and the past, and he is also foundational to the changing of Mrs. Maggie’s future.

In the present, the group is discussing Morton Henry’s Sunday labor as a violation of the Lord’s Sabbath; however, Gabriel does not quite understand why his hosts are scorning the hard-working man on the tractor. While the others discover that Gabriel is not a church-going man and conclude that Morton Henry is not a God-fearing man, Mrs. Maggie observes that although the group is conversing with Gabriel, “they chose not to see him,” choosing instead to view him “with ill-concealed scorn or petty curiosity or annoyance” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 53). She herself is still resisting fully seeing Gabriel, and although she is sure she is doing the “right thing,” she revisits her phone conversation in which she invited the white man back to the South:

She could confront him face to face. She wanted to know about her grandboy, and Gabriel was the only one who could tell her what she wanted to know. It was that simple. Surely, he realized what this

invitation meant. She leaned back looking out the big picture window onto the tops of the brilliantly blooming crepe myrtle trees in the yard, listening to the grandfather clock mark the time.

(Kenan, *Let the Dead* 54)

The rightness in this invitation and visit is not for Gabriel but for a grandmother and her lost grandson.

The opportunity to confront Gabriel face to face is more than merely standing in front of the most important figure in her grandson's Northern life, a life that excluded her; it is the chance to discover and understand the boy who left her home for a scholarship to Boston University, an opportunity for personal and professional fulfillment. Gabriel has the answers to her many questions, and to Mrs. Maggie it is just that simple. Still, when Gabriel arrives, their shared trip into the past and the unknown is not a simple exchange of questions and answers but a complex interaction between subjectivities and realities. The big picture window into which Mrs. Maggie stares after the phone conversation is illustrative of Gabriel's trip's impact on her life: his truths and knowledges will destabilize the big picture for Maggie, enabling her to (re)consider the foundations of her self, others' selves, and their shared world. The transformative interaction that is to occur between Mrs. Maggie and Gabriel will germinate a new understanding, and just as the crepe myrtles are blooming, so will this new queer knowledge.

Edward's funeral was six months prior to the time on the porch, but to Mrs. Maggie, the length of separation between herself and her grandson make it seem much further back in time. When he first left her home for school and life in the North, Maggie was filled with pride. "He'd make somebody a good..." Mrs.

Maggie thinks to herself upon his departure (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 55). She is not able to complete this statement with the word “wife,” though. This inability to utter the final word of the imagined future is significant. Edward’s life is cut short by his death, leaving a plethora of unfulfilled possibilities. Also, within Tom Boellstorff’s definition of “straight time,” he has not yet reached his social, political, and economic maturation of forming a family and reproducing. Lastly, his grandmother’s hesitancy to complete the phrase could be revealing a deeply disruptive suspicion of her grandson’s sexuality. This thought and possibility remains incomplete, and Edward’s homosexuality and his premature death leave these imagined lives unfinished. However, in two important conversations with those who share queer knowledge, or knowledge that existence depends on both the normative and the queer, Maggie’s foundations are first shaken, then dismantled, and finally revised.

Maggie remembers the first time she was confronted with the reality of her grandson’s life:

Clarissa was the one to finally tell her. “Grandma,” she had said, “Edward’s been living with another man all these years.”

“So?”

“No, Grandma. Like man and wife.”

Maggie had never before been so paralyzed by news. One question answered, only to be replaced by a multitude. (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 56)

After the news of her grandson’s death, Maggie is forced to confront yet another unthinkable: Her grandson was gay. While Maggie may have been suspicious of



her grandson's sexuality, hearing the details of the home he shared with another man is perhaps more of a shock than his death. Edward's queerness is incomprehensible, and only when it is refigured within a heterosexist framework—"like a man and wife"—does Maggie begin to comprehend Edward's homosexual life. Maggie is indeed more taken aback by the revelation of queerness than death, as the answer to one question produces exponentially more unknowns. Consequently, Maggie, with the emergence of queerness, must now come to know both her grandson and herself.

Edward—the man and the corpse—is brought back by his lover. The presence of a dead body is a powerful moment of abjection. Simultaneously subject and object, the lifeless corpse is an object, but it was once a living subject. The flesh and blood of the corpse is the same flesh and blood of the living. In the presence of the dead, "I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (Kristeva 3). The materiality of the dead object is the materiality of living subject. Gabriel's return is the emergence of the dead in the living and the emergence of the abject.

The convolution of the dead and the living and of the subject and the object—or the abject—promotes deconstruction of gender and sexual binaries. While Maggie at first has difficulty asking the questions to which she desires to know the answers, she ultimately realizes that she has the opportunity "to realign her thinking about men and women, and men and men, and even women and women. Together ... the way Adam and Eve were meant to be together" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 63). Maggie's house, with the presence of Gabriel, is becoming a queer space in which heterosexual and homosexual desires are woven together to

form the queer knowledge that will be her new foundation. Still, her gradual understanding is not yet free from heterosexist institutions, as marriage and Christianity pervade the revolutionary possibilities of same-sex love that are emerging. Still, it is important to remember that the dead body was once a living gay man; the corpse before them is not of a deceased husband and father but of a deceased queer individual.

When Edward's body arrives at Tims Creek, it is not alone: Gabriel has accompanied his lover to a final resting place. "Gabriel had come with the body, like an interpreter for the dead. ... He gave her no explanation; nor had she asked him for any, for he displayed the truth in his vacant and humble glare and had nothing to offer but the penurious tribute of his trembling hands. Which was more than she wanted" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 56). Maggie does not want the man who brought her grandson's body home and who now stands before her to display the characteristics of a mourning lover. Gabriel's behavior confirms Edward's lifestyle to which her granddaughter recently introduced her. Edward and this man were lovers, and she deduces that she really knows neither of these men.

Gabriel, as Edward's queer lover, should not be filling the role of the widowed lover, as he is a man mourning the loss of his male lover. However, the loss of a lover is not just the loss of (an)other; it is also the loss of the self. As Butler argues in *Precarious Life*,

Maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that show us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds

that compose us. It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. (22)

Gabriel, like Mrs. Maggie, has lost part of himself in the loss of his lover. The act of mourning, then, reveals the intersubjectivity of subjectivities, and in this short story, it is revealing the intersubjective bonds between two queer subjectivities and queer subjectivities and normative subjectivities. Again, the normative comes to depend on the queer.

The recognition of this interconnectedness, however, is dependent on governing norms. Butler continues: “If vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (*Precarious Life* 43). The recognition of Gabriel’s mourning and subsequent vulnerability is also the recognition of his humanity. He is not merely a queer object to be rejected but a human subjectivity. Gabriel’s queer mourning challenges the heteronormative impulse to dehumanize him and others like him in the quest to eradicate queerness. Gabriel is as much an interpreter for the dead as for the living, as his mourning challenges the extinction of queerness in revealing the dependence of the self on the other and the normative on the queer.

Maggie is curious about living an abnormal, or queer, life: “But don’t you want to be normal?” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 64). Gabriel answers that he is normal. Gabriel, as the interpreter for both the dead and living, is answering the questions of the living with the answers of both the living and the dead. He is

answering as both himself and as Edward, allowing him to connect Maggie with Edward and the past with the present. Edward is, thusly, a queer connection, and furthermore, he is a queer educator as he assists Maggie with her formation of queer knowledge, or the recognition of the queer in the normative.

Maggie revisits questions of normalcy on the way home from church on the same Sunday of the story's present. She asks Gabriel if being gay was and is hard for the two men, and Gabriel answers that he (and Edward) simply does not have a choice. Both he and Edward are normal, and part of their normalcy is grounded in the fact that they are who they are. At times, this is hard, just as it is for everyone and all sexualities. Maggie has come to accept the fact that the man before her and her dead grandson both feel they have no choice about their sexuality, but she insists on more clearly understanding the difficulty her grandson and his partner must face. As Maggie imagines, a queer life must be filled with unique challenges, hardships Maggie cannot experience or understand. Maggie is choosing to focus on the difference between a heterosexual, or accepted, life and a homosexual, or unaccepted, life; however, Gabriel again exposes the sameness between not just gay and straight but all:

“Edward and I used to get into arguments about that, Mrs. W.” His tone altered a bit. He spoke more softly, gently, the way a widow speaks of her dead husband. Or, indeed, the way a widow speaks of his dead husband. “He used to say it was harder being black in this country than being gay. Gays can always pass for straight; but blacks can't always pass for white. And most can never pass.”

“And what do you think now?”

“Mrs. W., I think life is hard, you know?”

“Yes. I know.” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 65-66)

Edward, like his grandmother, focused on the differences between subjectivities, but he focuses on racial differences not sexual differences. Gabriel, in contrast to both his partner and Maggie, focuses on the sameness that unites instead of the difference that divides.

Maggie’s shift from the female possessive pronoun of “her” to the masculine possessive pronoun of “his” when considering the relationship between Gabriel and Edward should also be noted. This intellectual shift within Maggie’s understanding of connections between her grandson and her white guest, and more broadly a man and another man, reflects a major ideological shift. Edward’s homosexuality was first conceptualized within a heterosexual framework of man and wife, but Maggie is now conceptualizing relationships between same-sex individuals, a foundational shift in her understanding of love and life. With Gabriel’s knowledge, Maggie is forming her queer knowledge, making her mind and her space a place where queerness is a reality, not a deviant presence but a true possibility. It is not the sureness of a life before encountering queerness that allows Maggie to dismantle her foundations but the many questions she continues to confront within herself and her conversations with Gabriel. Queer knowledge is, thusly, not only the recognition of the queer in the normative, or vice versa, but also the rejection of certainty grounded in binaries and bifurcation; it is the embracing of the interdependence of the queer and the normative and the resulting ambiguity.

It is the emerging queerness in Maggie that allows her to come to the conclusion that she “must learn better” (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 69). Gabriel is the foundational force in her life and in the text, and his queer knowledge facilitates Maggie’s growth and acceptance. Thus, the queer journey illustrated by Maggie’s interaction with the dead and the past through Gabriel is a collective journey. As Harris -Lopez elucidates,

“The Foundations of the Earth,” finally, is a story about striking out from the ark of safety—in spite of age and comfort and perhaps with only the self as guide—and discovering and rediscovering what it means to love and forgive. ... A willingness to ask and to learn, to explore and to accept leads Maggie to a state of calm; instead of rejecting the shaking of her foundations, she seeks the time and quiet place to contemplate all the newness that she must accept and absorb if she is to continue to label herself as a sensitive and caring human being. (173-74)

While I agree with Harris-Lopez that Maggie’s ability to embrace the destabilization of her foundations is vital for her evolution and the story’s progression, she is not able to do this alone. Maggie’s changes are not possible without Gabriel; more importantly, though, Maggie’s ideological shifts would not matter without another’s presence. Shifting from difference to sameness and from division to unification is inconsequential without both the self and the other. The connection between the self and other(s) is the queerest of moves and the foundation of Gabriel’s knowledge. This transformative (re)construction of self, other, and connection that Maggie is coming to understand and embrace is

her development of queer knowledge. She is learning the queer truths that Gabriel and other queer disciples have to teach, and with this final realization, the story ends with a tractor.

As the group of believers and nonbelievers approach the working Morton Henry, the first test of Maggie's new queer understanding is coming to form. Morton is at first puzzled by the group's motivation to interrupt his plowing until Reverend Barden explains that he is not supposed to be working on "the Lord's Day" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 71). In response, Morton makes clear that his "two jobs, five head of children, and a sick wife," which "the Lord don't seem too worried about" make his Sunday fieldwork a necessity (Kenan, *Let the World* 71). With the eyes of her community glaring at her in the midst of the dusty field, Maggie knows that she must abandon the expectations of a declaration that Morton stop working, allowing her to further her queer knowledge and new foundations. She takes a deep breath and simply tells Morton, "You do what you got to do. Just like the rest of us" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 72). Maggie is simultaneously rejecting her old knowledge and accepting the sameness of her new knowledge.

Turning to head back to her porch and away from the Reverend's disapproving words, Maggie, with Gabriel at her side, thinks, "When, Lord, oh when will we learn? Will we ever? Respect" (Kenan, *Let the Dead* 72). In this final thought the two pillars of queer knowledge amalgamate. Firstly, one must seek questions and not answers: A willingness to always learn yet never know is at the heart of queer knowledge—a drive parallel to interaction with the abject.

Secondly, one must respect all others: Respect is the truest connection between the self and the other.

Respect of Gabriel and Edward produces her redemption, and respect, in Maggie's words, is when the "mind's eye" sees (an)other. It is the act of respecting and the desire to be respected that is the ultimate connection between self and other. It is the hardness that Gabriel recognizes all experience in life, the foundation of our shared sameness. With Gabriel as educator, Maggie becomes a queer disciple, and the spaces that she fills with her queer knowledge also become queer. As Maggie and Gabriel approach the porch, Kenan's illustrations of queer transformations expand, and the queer knowledge the two now share is not the production of a certain future but of a vague expansion of possibilities.



**Conclusion: The Inescapable Queer Space**

Queer space. Queer knowledge. Queer disciples. Through abjection, queerness emerges and expands to redefine the boundaries of what is queer and what is normal. Naylor, with her construction of “sister-friend” bonds, proposes a queer community formed through the transformative power of non-normative subjectivities and intersubjectivities, and Kenan’s development of the inextricable link between the normative and the queer transports queerness from the fringes of society to its very center. Using the theoretical lens that I defined in my introduction, these two texts amalgamate to not only revise the relationship between queerness and normalcy but also reconfigure the positioning of each. Furthermore, the exploration of the abject in both Naylor’s and Kenan’s texts unveils sameness that transcends difference and binaries, including the distinction between the queer and the normal.

The emergence of “queer sodality” becomes more complex when considering it in accord with the abjective reading of the texts. As previously noted, Christopher Nealon proposes the idea of “queer sodality” in his scholarship, a theoretical concept that allows individuals and groups to overcome the social exile that compulsively unites them to then create a new “home” with which they complicity interact. Nealon states that what is most striking about his concept is the discovery of “a history of mutually isolated individuals, dreaming similar dreams, arrayed before me in the aftermath of collective struggles and new identities” (Dinshaw et al. 179). The boundaries and borders that once isolated and exiled individuals are replaced with queer space, and the new

“home” of “queer sodality” thrives in this queer space. Most significantly, though, as the queer space and “queer sodality” come to form, normative ideology fades.

Although this project started with my interest in both African American literature and queer theory, it evolved into a study that is not propelled by the differences presented in these two distinct yet intersecting areas of literary study but by the sameness that these two authors weave into their narratives. Within the texts, communities form in spite of binary and temporal separation, and these constructions, in their transgression of normalcy, embody and enable queerness. Naylor’s dreams that fill Brewster Place evolve into Kenan’s reality that structures Tims Creek, and from these two textual presentations, possibilities for the reality in which we all struggle with our own queerness are captured. Ultimately, these texts illustrate the centrality of queerness, a quintessential aspect of existence that should not be thrust out or hidden away but revealed in as a powerful source of acceptance.

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## VITA

Megan Anne McSwain was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on June 17, 1987, to her loving parents, Vivian and Steve McSwain. Her family then grew to include her brother and close confidant, Alex, and her always lovable sister, Allison. After graduating first in her class from Pelham High School in 2005, Ms. McSwain accepted a full academic scholarship to Auburn University. Despite entering college as a Chemistry major, she changed her course of study during her sophomore year, choosing to focus on American literature as she worked to complete her Bachelor's of Arts degree in English. In the Spring of 2009, Ms. McSwain graduated *cum laude* from Auburn University and began to prepare for graduate school in pursuit of a Master's of Arts degree at Appalachian State University.

While attending ASU, Ms. McSwain worked in the University Writing Center and as a teaching assistant in the English department. The M.A. was awarded in December of 2011. Ms. McSwain plans to continue teaching composition until she returns to graduate school for her doctorate degree in African American literature and queer theory.