

QUEER RURALITIES: BOTTOM-FEEDER
POLITICS

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POLITICS

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This thesis is dedicated to Kathryn Leigh Howell.

Toni Morrison says it best:

*"It's good, you know, when you got a woman
who is a friend of your mind."*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: BOTTOM-FEEDER POLITICS

As early as 2005, J. Jack Halberstam voiced the real need for cultural studies to begin a more detailed investigation of rural queer subjectivities (*In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*). Her prompting came in response to cultural theorists' inability to properly analyze and document the factual and fictional events surrounding the brutal murder of Brandon Teena. In the second chapter of *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam offers what is arguably the most significant analysis of how rural space influences queer sexuality and suggests that the Brandon archive might serve as a potentially rich source from which to theorize rural queer experience. *In a Queer Time & Place*, along with Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010), represent the leading cultural studies of rural queer existence to date, and I want to explicate and compare each of their modes of analysis here in order to best explain my own.¹

Following the 2005 publication of *In a Queer Time and Place*, Herring's *Another Country* is much more concerned with examining queer cultural

¹ An earlier anthology entitled *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representation Beyond the Metropolis* (2000) and edited by Richard Phillips, David Shuttleton, and Diane Watt provides some interesting studies concerned with literature and rural queer sexuality that I would suggest for further reading.

productions and theorizing a rural queer aesthetic than understanding the complex dynamics of sexuality and space. Herring's analysis is, nevertheless, highly dependent on Halberstam's work, especially her conception of *metronormativity*. While Herring acknowledges the double-use of *metronormativity*—it can signify urban gay cultural norms or a common gay cultural narrative—he primarily uses the former to develop what he terms *rural stylistics*. These aesthetic practices, according to Herring, exhibit a *queer anti-urbanism* or a purposeful critique of metronormativity; however, this rural queer aesthetic is not singularly limited to artists and creative works. Instead, it extends to the general rural queer subject, who exudes a rural stylistic that challenges the solidification of an urban gay identity. Herring calls this destabilizing ability *paper-cut politics*, which provides him with the imagery to suggest that rural queers constantly aggravate, rather than outright change, the urban gay identity so prized in queer academia and culture. Although I certainly agree with Herring, insofar as the rural queers do, indeed, seem to be sites of transgression against an urbanized gay identity, I want to focus more on metronormativity as a cultural narrative, or a critical reading practice, and this requires a more detailed explanation of Halberstam's writing.

Because Halberstam's analysis derives from her personal interest in the real lived experience of Brandon Teena and what compelled him to deny the urban in favor of the rural, she turns to the only critical studies available to her at the time: those in the social sciences. Since the publication of *In a Queer Time and Place*, studies in the social sciences about rural queers have proliferated; however, preceding the book's 2005 release, the number of relevant studies was limited.

Therefore, while Halberstam includes important queer ethnographies by Will Fellows and John Howard and uses the insightful queer anthropological studies of Kath Weston, she also pulls from works concerned with general rural existence.² This compilation of studies allows Halberstam to trace the common experiences of rural queers as they navigated and negotiated the socio-political demands of both urban and rural space. For example, Halberstam notes that the rural queer men interviewed by Fellows often disassociated their sexual practice from any gay political identity, and thus she suggests that “this desire to have a sexual practice separate from an overt ideological critique of the state or heteronormativity can be taken as one legacy of the history of whiteness that marks the communities the gay rural men left behind” (Ch. 2). Halberstam’s personal observations about the specificities of rural queer subjectivity support her conception of *metronormativity*, a term she uses to describe what Karen Tongson has called the “urbanist legacy in queer studies” (Ch. 1). In other words, by documenting the idiosyncrasies of rural queer identities, Halberstam is able to show how academia practices a monologic, or metronormative, approach to theorizing gay identity. Of metronormativity, Halberstam writes:

This term reveals the conflation of “urban” and “visible” in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities. Such narratives tell of closeted subjects who “come out” into an urban setting, which

² The queer works Halberstam uses are as follows: Fellows’s *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men in the Rural Midwest* (2001), John Howard’s *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (2001), and Kath Weston’s “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration” (1995) and *Long Slow Burn* (1998). Further, Halberstam specifically references anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996), which is an ethnographic study of peoples in rural areas of West Virginia.

in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gay/lesbians/queers. The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of coming out tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from “country” to “town” is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy. Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from closet case to out and proud. (Ch. 2)

One important thing that Halberstam’s definition reveals is that in blanketing the metronormative narrative across the rural queer subject’s experience, queer academia absolves any individual queer identity into a collective urban queer identity. As the metronormative narrative implies, the rural queer subject can never actualize a personal queer identity in the country; it is only in the city that the rural queer subject comes to recognize and live out a queer identity. This method of reading, then, is of course problematic because it performs a general erasure of rural queer identity by foreclosing any considerations of how region, class, race, and other intersections of identity influence the subject formation of queers living outside of urban space. In the process, as Halberstam goes on to write, metronormativity prizes an urban gay identity and “reveals the rural to be the

devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities” (Ch. 2). That is, the urban is figured as a gay-mecca, a place where queers congregate to celebrate and form communities, while the rural is depicted as a place of homophobia and violence, where the opportunity to live an open, or fulfilling queer lifestyle, is typically denied.

In *Queer Ruralities*, I want to build from Halberstam’s claim and examine three cultural productions that are concerned with rural queer experience: Richard Linklater’s *Bernie* (2012) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011). Grouping these works together may seem problematic, considering that *Bernie* is a film about a Southern gay man that is directed by a straight man and *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy* are a novel and memoir written by a British lesbian. But I choose to analyze these works in order to address two specific problems within queer studies that Halberstam describes. For one, she suggests that the specificity of rural queer life is rarely examined in queer academia, so I use *Bernie* to map out one way of rural queer being in the world. Secondly, she points out that one reason for the elision of rural queer experience is that queer academia has internalized the metronormative narrative. Thus, I turn to Winterson’s works in order to complicate the metronormative narrative and show that a rural queer’s migration to the city is not always based solely on sexual identity and that living in the city is not always personally fulfilling either. Moreover, I also place these texts together due to the rural queer archive having very little cultural productions and documents from which to theorize rural queer experience. As Halberstam notes, literature has largely

contributed to theorizations of “twentieth-century gay identity,” and since “gay men and lesbians tend not to be artists and writers in such great numbers,” the majority of queer cultural productions “are written by people from the cities or suburbs” (Ch.2). That being said, it is necessary that we take narratives, like *Bernie*, that are about rural queers but produced by urban queers or straight folks and find ways to work around their chosen representations in order to get at more truthful understandings of rural queer experience. Likewise, it is imperative that we find actual cultural productions by rural queers. This might require some reclamations and searches for obscure works, but it also requires acknowledging the rural backgrounds of queers, like Jeanette Winterson, that have previously gone unrecognized.

To analyze these works, I employ a critical lens that I call *bottom-feeder politics*. I use the term bottom-feeder politics because it connotes a devalued way of being in and experiencing the world. For example, whether we envision the human bottom-feeder making gains through unseemly tactics or the lowly catfish collecting scraps along the river’s floor, the term inevitably suggests a negative conception of existence. The term thus accurately reflects how mainstream gay culture has come to denigrate rural queer life in comparison to urban queer life. Or more specifically, if urban queer lifestyles and modes of being are more valued than those of the rural, then bottom-feeder politics aims to speak for and affirm the alternative ways of being that rural queers practice. Bottom-feeder politics can thus be read as a re-appropriation of sorts insofar as the term—like other pejoratives that have been

reclaimed by the groups at which they're directed—self-consciously acknowledges mainstream gay culture's disparagement of rural queer life.

As a methodological approach, bottom-feeder politics builds from queer of color critique, which, in turn, builds from women of color feminism. That is, where women of color feminism urged the mainstream feminist movement to consider how power and oppression work through the cluster of aspects that constitute identity—race, gender, sex, class, sexuality, and nationality—queer of color critique encourages queer studies to perform a similar critical approach. Like queer of color critique, then, bottom-feeder politics addresses another problem in queer studies that Halberstam mentions: attending singularly to “gender variance and sexual practices” at the expense of race and class (Ch. 2). However, when I use bottom-feeder politics in the pages that follow, I'm not only sensitive to how the aforementioned factors influence one's personal politics, but how rurality and regionalism affect them as well. I add and specify rurality and regionalism because one's proximity to the city and regional location no doubt impact the way one chooses to and is allowed to be in the world. Numerous critics have written comparative analyses about country life and city life, and from my discussion thus far, it should be evident that these two geographic spaces offer different modes of being for the queers who inhabit them. In order to clarify how I see regionalism working, though, let me offer the following example: if we take two white males who are American citizens and identify as cisgender, middle-class gay men but who reside in different rural areas of the country—the first in Northern California, the second in East Texas—we can assume that their navigation of the socio-political

demands of their respective communities and environments will have some similarities but some definite differences as well. For instance, although a number of variables dependent on regional location will contribute to the differences in these men's lived experience, we might consider, in particular, the political leanings of each state and how these attitudes might affect the manner in which each man exhibits his queerness. Even if we concede that rural Northern California is predominately conservative, the fact that the state is commonly a blue state and has passed pro-gay legislation on a number of significant issues suggests an environment in which a gay man might be more apt to proudly display his queerness. In contrast, a rural East Texas gay man might be hesitant to openly flaunt his sexuality, since both the region and the state consistently vote Republican while actively pursuing anti-gay legislation.³ Because bottom-feeder politics takes into account the various aspects of identity that make up and influence one's subjectivity, it does not lead to a monologic theorization of queer identity but, rather, allows for the theorization of diverse queer identities. Thus, analyzing the subjectivity of a gay man from the rural American South (Bernie) in conjunction with a lesbian from rural Northern England (Winterson) is not supposed to produce a singular conception of rural queer lived experience, but individual conceptions according to the specifics of these rural queers' subjectivities.

In Chapter Two, then, I plan to trace how the bottom-feeder politics of the film's eponymous protagonist, which involve an outing but un-naming of his queer

³ We can use the same logic when considering how region might affect the lived of urban queers as well. For example, a queer native of a gay-mecca like San Francisco would not lead a life identical to a queer native of Dallas.

identity, affect his positionality within his rural community. I see Bernie's bottom-feeder politics as being directly influenced by rurality and regionalism: the plot is set in Carthage, a small town in East Texas with a population of around seven thousand. While I refuse to go so far as to vouch for this un-naming of queer identity as a practice peculiar to the South, I do see it as one that predominates in the South. My claim is that Bernie's participation in this practice partly allowed him to become a highly respected citizen of Carthage and receive communal support during his arrest and trial for the murder of the town's wealthiest woman, eighty-one-year-old Marjorie Nugent. By partly, I mean that Bernie's generous and caring nature—he was loved across racial, class, and gender lines—certainly garnered him the coterie of folks who admired him before, during, and after his trial. However, these accomplishments would not have been possible, or at least much harder to achieve, had he not willingly silenced any naming of his queer identity.

Because the film is a fictional representation of a true story, and one done through the lens of a straight man, I pay particular attention to how Linklater queers Bernie. I argue that Linklater, along with fellow screenwriter Skip Hollandsworth, manipulates how the actors representing East Texans conceive of Bernie's queer sexuality. More specifically, the film features interviews with townsfolk in addition to a larger narrative that tells the story of Bernie and Nugent's relationship. In these interviews, I suggest that Linklater and Hollandsworth have the townsfolk actually name Bernie as *gay*, *homosexual*, and/or *queer* in order to appeal to a mainstream audience. This naming, however, contradicts the way actual East Texans discuss Bernie's sexuality in newspaper and magazine articles. Moving from this analysis, I

turn to the film's larger narrative, which offers a more accurate portrayal of Bernie's queer way of being since his queer identity is never named. Here I examine how a queer man might lead a markedly queer lifestyle in a rural area and ultimately argue that class conflict, rather than sexual identity, serves as the primary source of prejudice in his rural hometown.

In Chapter Three, I use one of the most significant and popular queer *Bildungsromans* in the literary canon to ask why a rural queer might migrate to the city. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is Winterson's semi-autobiography of her coming-of-age in an evangelical, working-class community in rural northern England. It tells the tale of a young protagonist named Jeanette whose lesbianism gets her kicked out of church and home. As a result, Jeanette is forced to depend on the generosity of the community to offer her work and housing. All along the way, Jeanette dreams of escaping to the city, and she eventually achieves this by getting accepted at Oxford.

Critics have typically read Jeanette's migration as one that is largely based on sexual identity and focused on Winterson's challenging of gender roles and her depiction of lesbian subjectivity. What I would like to do is step-away from those discourses and think more about *Oranges* in terms of class. Beginning with the memoir, *Why Be Happy*, I outline how Winterson's desire for the city was intimately influenced by rurality, sex, and class status. As with Bernie, Winterson's queer experience was also affected by regionalism and rurality. The limitations placed upon her as a northern working-class woman drove her to seek the city and Oxford as a means to overcome her class status. Thus, class becomes integral to Winterson's

bottom-feeder politics, which entail an all-or-nothing mentality that visions escape to the city and education as the only way to rise above the working-class.

Using the memoir as a frame to understanding how issues of class are worked out in *Oranges*, I trace how Jeanette depicts her experiences growing up working-class and what motivates her to leave for the city. Together, the memoir and novel reveal that fear of remaining working-class, rather than sexual identity, serves as Jeanette's and Winterson's primary drives. Winterson's experience thus complicates the metronormative narrative and also shows that the city doesn't necessarily become a place of celebrated asylum for rural queers. Instead, as the memoir and the novel portray, it often lets them down and forces them to reevaluate their understanding of their personal rural queer experience.

CHAPTER II

“NOT FUNNY HAHA, FUNNY QUEER”: RURAL QUEER LIFE

IN RICHARD LINKLATER’S *BERNIE*

In a review of Richard Linklater’s *Bernie* (2011) for *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody describes the film’s eponymous protagonist as “an emotionally stunted, frustrated man whose diminished private life leads him to seek a sort of public adulation” (“‘Bernie’ In the Heart of Texas”). We might reasonably ask why Brody chooses to characterize Bernie as an “emotionally stunted” and “frustrated man,” but he’s quick to justify his claim when he specifies what Bernie’s so-called “diminished private life” entails: “people in town assume he’s gay yet celibate” (“‘Bernie’ In the Heart of Texas”). Translated, Brody assumes that Bernie obsessively seeks acceptance and acknowledgement in his hometown because his sexual identity—the fact that he’s gay—is not recognized outright and, as a consequence, is denied him. “Public adulation,” according to Brody, serves as a substitute for an absent queer identity that greatly affects Bernie’s sense of self-worth, causing him significant psychical and emotional pain (“‘Bernie’ In the Heart of Texas”). Brody’s argument, however, is flawed for a couple of reasons: first, it misrepresents the film’s portrayal of how the community perceives Bernie, since some characters believe he is gay, others think he is straight, and some agree with either the former

or latter but believe he is celibate. Second, and even more importantly, it perpetuates misconceptions about rural queer identity via a comparison with urban queer identity. By this, I mean that Brody fails to ask what the differences and similarities between rural queer life and urban queer life might reveal about diverse queer identities and, instead, falls into a trap commonly practiced both inside and outside of academia: denigrating and invalidating any queer identity that doesn't easily line-up with an "out and proud" urban queer identity.



Fig. 1. Concrete patio behind Bernie's childhood home in Kilgore, Texas, where he signed his name in wet cement.

In this chapter, I want to tease out the complexity of Bernie's rural queer identity without placing any valuation on his way of queer being in the world. My approach to Bernie's queer identity is perhaps best understood through an explanation of the line that serves as a title for this chapter, "Not Funny Haha, Funny Queer," which comes from Billy Bob Thornton's 1996 film *Sling Blade*. Written and directed by Thornton, *Sling Blade* tells the story of Karl Childers (Thornton), a man

with a mental disability who returns to his rural Arkansas hometown after being institutionalized for murdering his mother and her lover with a Kaiser blade. The line, which is initially delivered by Frank (a young boy) to Karl and subsequently delivered by Karl to Vaughan (the queer in question), depicts a common practice throughout the rural South and arguably the South as a whole. This practice involves employing euphemisms to mark an individual's queerness rather than actually naming an individual's identity as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Thornton, who hails from rural Arkansas and who uses *Sling Blade* as a homage to the regional culture of his hometown, incorporates Frank's line in order to explain this practice to the outside—meaning un-rural, un-Southern—viewer. In other words, where Frank typically would have followed “he’s funny” with a “you know what I mean” or a certain physical or facial expression, Thornton prompts him, instead, to elaborate his exact intentions so that the viewer can recognize and become accustomed to this particular rhetorical practice.

In what follows, I examine how this rhetorical practice, in which a queer identity⁴ is rendered invisible through the speaker's opting for an adjectival epithet that, in effect, merely denotes a singular characteristic or trait, influences how Bernie navigates and negotiates the socio-political demands of his East Texas environment. My claim is that rural queer subjects are permitted to lead whatever individualized queer lifestyle they choose, as long as that queer identity remains

⁴ My use of “queer identity” is meant to be inclusive of any identity or practice deviating from heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality.

unspoken or unnamed within their community.⁵ Bernie's personal experience, in which his complicit participation in a silence surrounding his queer identity partly⁶ allowed him to become a highly respected citizen of Carthage and receive communal support during his incarceration for the murder of Marjorie Nugent, provides an illuminating case through which to develop an understanding of this particular way of queer being in the world.

In order to flesh out these claims, I begin my first section, "Life Behind the Pine Curtain," with a basic synopsis of the events leading up to the trial, in which the middle-aged, local mortician, Bernhardt Tiede II, was tried and convicted for the murder of Carthage's wealthiest elderly widow, Marjorie Nugent. I follow this discussion with an exploration of how Linklater and Skip Hollandsworth, the film's co-screenwriters, decided to depict this factual story through film. More specifically, I briefly detail how Linklater and Hollandsworth met and the method by which they composed the script, before moving to an analysis of the interviews with townsfolk that are spliced into the film's larger narrative. In this section, which I've entitled "That Dog Don't Hunt," I argue that Linklater, much like Thornton, has the actors, directly refer to Bernie as *homosexual*, *gay*, and *queer* so that the film might appeal to a wider audience. By offering a sampling of newspaper write-ups and magazine articles, I show how the film's naming of Bernie's queer identity contradicts factual documentation, where East Texans, and Texans alike, display a refusal to recognize any queer identity and associate Bernie, instead, with queer traits and epithets. I

⁵ I have no intentions of essentialism here, as I'm aware that this is certainly not the case for every rural queer. Nevertheless, it is the experience of many, and I'd like to map out that specific way of being in and experiencing the world.

conclude this section by looking at the larger narrative of the film, which primarily showcases Nugent and Bernie's relationship but is also concerned with the events leading up to and during the trial as well, because it more accurately reflects the queer way of being that Bernie actually lived. That is, Linklater never names Bernie's queer identity in the larger narrative, so it offers us the opportunity to see how a rural gay man can lead a markedly queer life and still be accepted by his heteronormative community. Thus, I ask how Linklater chooses to mark or queer Bernie in the larger narrative and focus, for instance, on the director's emphasis on theatricality, singing, cooking, fashion, and traveling.

In my final section, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," I deconstruct the courtroom scene in which Danny Buck Davidson (Matthew McConaughey) grills Bernie (Jack Black) on the basis of class. Linklater, who attended the trial, has commented on this particular scene, noting that it accurately depicts how the district attorney used class conflict to appeal to the jury and garner a conviction. Davidson's public statements have, likewise, verified Linklater's claims. My aim here is to point out how Linklater's somewhat offensive exacerbation of the class difference between the people of San Augustine and Bernie reveals an oblique form of homophobia on the jury's part. That is, if Bernie's conviction was a result of class conflict—with the jurors of lower-socioeconomic status perceiving Bernie as espousing elitist and upper-class cultural values—then Bernie's identification with and celebration of stereotypical gay male culture, which is usually characterized as affluent and associated with high culture, played the ultimate damning role in his case. The class culture of Bernie's chosen queer identity, rather than his actual

sexual preference, was what attracted the most extreme form of prejudice in his rural community.

Life Behind the Pine Curtain

“He was an angel, God’s gift to Carthage. He sure as tootin’ was. And Mrs. Nugent just made him plumb crazy.”—Reba Tarjick, Carthage resident

“Oh, he’s an angel, all right. An angel of death!”—Danny Buck Davidson, Panola County District Attorney

On August 19, 1997, police and family members discovered the body of eighty-one-year-old Marjorie Nugent stuffed in a deep freeze in the garage of her estate on the outskirts of town. Wrapped in a Lands’ End sheet and hidden under chicken potpies, Nugent’s body, as investigators would later discover, had been sitting there for nine months. During that time, Nugent’s absence had largely gone unnoticed in her small East Texas town, since the elderly widow’s caretaker and companion, Bernhardt Tiede II, successfully convinced inquiring minds that Nugent was recovering from a stroke and didn’t want to be bothered. Or she was in an assisted living center for rehab. Or she was visiting relatives out-of-state.

Whatever the case, wherever Nugent was or what she was doing was of little concern to most Carthage residents, who purposely avoided a woman that they felt was a hateful old biddy. Instead, Carthaginians were more concerned with the daily happenings of their own lives, and the fact that many of them, especially those who were struggling financially, were receiving a wealth of gifts from one of the town’s most beloved residents, Bernie.



Fig. 2. Bernie's childhood home in Kilgore, Texas.

The assistant director of Hawthorn Funeral Home, Bernhardt Tiede II, affectionately known as Bernie, moved to Carthage in 1985 after studying mortuary science at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana and growing up predominately in Kilgore and Abilene, Texas. Even before Bernie met Nugent, however, the citizens of Carthage welcomed him with open arms, as his sweet nature and philanthropy wooed the majority of townsfolk. For example, he contributed to and participated in the community in a number of ways, including singing and preaching in the First United Methodist Church, volunteering in the music and theatre departments at Panola College, serving on the Chamber of Commerce Christmas decorating committee, sponsoring Little League baseball teams, and entertaining the community's many elderly widows. After he met Nugent, though, Bernie's philanthropy became much more indulgent, as his contributions significantly increased in terms of material wealth.

In March of 1990, Nugent and Bernie met at the funeral of her husband, Rod Nugent Sr., who had built a fortune working in the Texas oil industry and later bought a controlling interest in a local Carthage bank. Following the internment of Nugent's husband, Bernie began frequently checking-in on Nugent and bringing her gifts to offer his condolences. From these visits, a friendship sprung up between the town's beloved, thirty-something-year-old mortician and its dreaded, wealthy matriarch. Bernie began accompanying Nugent to different cultural events, such as The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, and eventually, the two became world-travelers, visiting destinations, such as Russia and Egypt, together. In return, Nugent, whose wealth greatly overshadowed Bernie's meager \$25,000 salary, paid for their expenses in full. And, over time, she gradually convinced Bernie to quit his job so that he could care for her everyday needs. Some of his many duties included grooming her—cutting her toe nails and pulling out chin hairs—taxiing her around as need be, washing and folding her laundry, and managing her financial accounts. This relationship, which caused much town conjecture as people wondered whether the two were intimate or not, lasted a little over six years, until November 16, 1996, when Bernie shot Nugent four times in the back with a .22 rifle. During the nine months that followed—before police and family members searched Nugent's house at the nagging behest of her Kilgore stockbroker, Lloyd Tiller—Bernie funneled Nugent's money into the hands of Carthage citizens while also fueling his own personal interests. He paid for church renovations, bought failing community businesses, financed people's mortgages, and gave people cars and jet-skis. All of these gifts stopped, and were eventually revoked by the IRS, however, in August

of '97, when Bernie was arrested and placed in jail for the murder of Marjorie Nugent.

Bernie's arrest caused an uproar in his small East Texas town, as its citizens found it unbelievable that this sweet, caring middle-aged man could commit such a heinous act. While some were outright convinced that Bernie was guilty and should suffer the consequences, the majority either staunchly defended his innocence, felt that he should be sentenced leniently, or thought, as offensive as it may seem, that Nugent had it coming. In fact, the contention voicing support for Bernie was so influential (groups attempted to raise funds for his 1.5 million dollar bail and drove back-and-forth in front of the jailhouse with statements of support emblazoned across vehicle windows), that the District Attorney, Danny Buck Davidson, sought a change of venue based on the defendant's overwhelming likeability—a practice unheard of in Texas, where trials are typically moved for the opposite reason.

As these events unfolded in Carthage, Skip Hollandsworth, who at the time was a reporter for *Texas Monthly*, visited the town and the larger East Texas area, where he began the process of meticulously interviewing and recording locals' and officials' responses to the case. In January of 1998, Hollandsworth published "Midnight in the Garden of East Texas" in *Texas Monthly*, and the article caught the eye of native East Texan and up-and-coming filmmaker, Richard Linklater. A few days after the article's publication, Linklater phoned Hollandsworth to set up a meeting to discuss the possibility of writing a screenplay about the case. Soon, the two were traveling together to San Augustine, Texas, the town about an hour south of Carthage where the trial had been moved. As they sat in the courtroom, Linklater

and Hollandsworth watched as Bernie testified that Nugent had brought him to a psychological breaking point by emotionally and verbally abusing him, and together, the two men watched as Bernie was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison amid a courtroom of supporters crying out, “We love you, Bernie!” (qtd. in Hollandsworth, “Lights, Camera, Action!”). After the trial ended on February 11, 1999, Linklater and Hollandsworth spent the next seven months putting the script together, which would be rejected by the Los Angeles film production company that had commissioned it and shelved until the spring of 2010.

When Linklater and Hollandsworth reconvened on the set of the film, which was largely shot in Bastrop, Texas, it was under the pressure of a twenty-two day shooting schedule and a five million dollar budget. In addition to casting high-profile actors as his leads—Jack Black as Tiede, Shirley MacLaine as Nugent, and Matthew McConaughey as Davidson—Linklater also cast twenty-one East Texans after holding auditions in Longview, Carthage, and Texarkana. During these auditions, East Texans were recorded as they were asked to tell a story. Later, Linklater would review these recordings, deciding who would lend the most authenticity to the town gossip vignettes that he and Hollandsworth sprinkled throughout the film. While Linklater’s desire to portray the people of East Texas and the story itself partly stemmed from his personal background—having grown up in Huntsville, Linklater wanted to create a film that would capture the culture of East Texas—the greater impetus was how he and Hollandsworth had decided to write the script. In teaming up with Hollandsworth, who is now executive editor of *Texas Monthly*, Linklater committed himself to what was a quasi-journalistic film project. Because

Hollandsworth had fastidiously documented his journalistic work on the case, the screenwriters grounded much of their script in his recorded documents, later supplementing them with prison-house interviews with Bernie.⁷ In an interview with *The A.V. Club*,⁸ Linklater confirms their dependence on these documents: “Most of the things we’re showing were things Bernie talked about, or that were pretty well-known. Even the biggest events, like her closing the gate on him [trapping him on her property]. That was all part of the record also. It didn’t feel like we had to make up too much, really” (Linklater, “*Bernie* Director Richard Linklater On the Delicate Art of the True-Crime Dark Comedy”). Moreover, in an interview with *The Chicago Tribune*, Linklater describes how invaluable Hollandsworth’s journalism was in comparison to Linklater’s own personal documentation of the case: “But so much more of it came straight from Skip’s reporting, his interviews and the way he was able to piece his own work on it together” (Linklater, “Director Richard Linklater Takes Journalistic Approach to ‘Bernie’”). Hollandsworth, likewise, vouches for Linklater’s dedication to the record in an interview with *Texas Monthly*: “I also wrote a lot of slapstick scenes—bodies falling out of caskets, caskets falling out of hearses—that made Rick just shake his head in bewilderment. He kept telling me, over and over, that we didn’t need to add much to what really happened—the real story itself was interesting enough” (Hollandsworth, “A Q&A with Skip Hollandsworth”).

⁷ Linklater and Hollandsworth did not interview Bernie when they initially wrote the script. The prison interviews occurred in 2011, when Jack Black asked Linklater to request a prison visit.

⁸ This is an entertainment newspaper and website.

If Linklater ensured that he and Hollandsworth pretty much stuck to the record in writing the film's larger narrative, he also strove for the same credibility with the interview scenes. For instance, the dialogue in these scenes is heavily dependent on Hollandsworth's transcriptions of interviews with townspeople during the actual trial. In fact, several comments from townsfolk that originally appeared in Hollandsworth's "Midnight in the Garden of East Texas" also appear in the film. Nevertheless, the interview scenes do not solely rely on Hollandsworth's transcriptions. Instead, they become more an amalgam of fact, fiction, and impromptu acting. Hollandsworth comments on this process in the same interview with *Texas Monthly*: "Some of them were reciting lines we had written for them, and some were talking off the top of their heads. As a result, viewers are uncertain what's taken from real life, what's being made up by us, and what's being made up by the real life gossips" (Hollandsworth, "A Q&A").

Although the interviews with East Texans may veer from Hollandsworth's record of the case, they do achieve one of Linklater's primary goals: to capture vivid depictions of local color. By employing interviews in the film, a technique that has only previously been used in Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981), Linklater captures the cultural milieu of East Texas in a number of significant ways. First, the interviews serve as a mouthpiece for members of the Carthage community and others involved with the case; and second, because the East Texas actors were allowed to improvise, their performances are documented contemporary contributions that speak to the story's on-going legend in East Texas. As we shall see in the section to come, Linklater placed a fair amount of pride in these interviews—refusing to rewrite or

edit them out, despite film studios' protestations—and took one strategic liberty, in particular, with how the East Texans broached a specific topic.

That Dog Don't Hunt

"Our lord and savior wore sandals, and he never married. And he had twelve disciples. And I don't think any of them ever married. And the Apostle Paul, he was a lifelong bachelor. And you never heard anybody in the New Testament say they was a bunch of queers! Pfft. No."—Kay "Baby" Epperson, Rusk resident, as a townspeople in *Bernie*

Let me begin this section by explaining my second reason for using the line, "Not funny haha, funny queer," as the title for this chapter. *Bernie*, which was marketed as black comedy, is not inherently—haha—funny. It's funny because it's about a queer. That is, one primary reason that the film successfully appealed to a wide, mainstream audience⁹ is that people found it hilarious and unbelievable that a Southern rural community would openly support not only a queer, but a queer who had clearly murdered one of the town's grande dames. Arguably, if this story were about a rural straight man, it would just be a typical run-of-the-mill murder case of little interest. Thus, highlighting Bernie's queer identity and the townsfolk's response to it becomes essential to ensuring the film's mass audience appeal.

As I outlined in my introduction, it is in the interviews, rather than the larger narrative, that Linklater has actors actually naming Bernie's identity as *homosexual*, *gay*, or *queer*. In terms of marketing practices, then, the interviews—which initially worked to the film's detriment, as studios cited them as the basis for rejecting the

⁹ As of September 16, 2012, the film had grossed \$9,203,192 in the U.S. (Source: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1704573/business?ref=tt_ql_16)

project—act, I would argue, as the key component to the film’s critical success. What I want to offer here is a comparison between how the actors in the film interviews discuss Bernie’s queer identity and how East Texans—and Texans in general—comment on his queerness in magazine and newspaper articles. In doing so, I show that Linklater manipulates how the actors, in the interviews, conceive of Bernie’s queer identity so that the film might achieve more mainstream success.

The first hint we get that Bernie’s sexuality possibly deviates from heteronormative standards occurs eighteen minutes in the film, during an interview with Kathleen McConaughey. She states: “Oh yeah, ol’ Bernie. He loved to hug and kiss on those older women. Women his age, now, they were lucky to get the time of day from him.” For the viewer, this comment could be interpreted in several different ways. At face value, it might merely suggest that Bernie is fond of intergenerational love and has a preference for older women. As an underhanded comment, however, the line might imply that Bernie’s distaste for women his age signals homosexual proclivities. The line thus successfully tips the viewer off to any queer traits that might be associated with Bernie in the larger narrative and encourages us to analyze his performance and behavior so that we might label his questionable sexuality. Linklater purposely feeds this narrative tension by delaying a discussion of Bernie’s sexuality for another fourteen minutes and including interviews and scenes in the larger narrative that further challenge Bernie’s heterosexuality. For example, in one interview, Reba Tarjick relates: “And Bernie could do just about anything. I mean, he could hang wallpaper in people’s houses, and I’ve never seen many men do this, but he could make curtains for people. And

he was the head honcho for the Chamber of Commerce Christmas decorating committee. That's a big thing in Carthage, too. A big thing." Tarjick's emphasis on Bernie's ability to decorate and offer services that not "many men do" adds further speculation to his sexual preference, which is, likewise, highlighted in the scene at the East Texas Art Festival. As Bernie and Mrs. Nugent approach a well-built, handsome young man making wood carvings with a chainsaw, Bernie motions for him to stop and asks him what the tool is called before complimenting his business card, which is made out of wood, and saying he is interested in hiring him for a commissioned project. When he and Mrs. Nugent depart, Bernie adds, "I'm gonna call you. You're a gem." One could well read into the symbolism of this encounter, but a focus on the verbal exchange between Bernie and the artist is enough to render Bernie queer. For instance, it is highly unlikely that Bernie would not know the name for a chainsaw, so his act seems more a ploy to engage the artist in conversation, a conversation that will lead to Bernie having access to this man's phone number and end with him calling the fellow "a gem"—something that most straight men would unlikely do. In short, the encounter smacks more of a pick-up than a solicitation for a commissioned art project.

Throughout the film, Linklater uses intertitles to guide the narrative and let the viewer know the general topic that will be discussed by the townsfolk. After toying with our conception of Bernie's sexuality for the first quarter of the film, Linklater devotes an explicit section to precisely that topic. At time stamp 32:24, an intertitle appears with "WAS BERNIE GAY?" written in all caps. The interviews that follow interestingly feature only one East Texas actor, Kay Epperson. The other

actors include Sonny Davis (townsperson), Rick Dial (funeral home director), and Matthew McConaughey (defense attorney). The lack of East Texas actors in this section suggests, I would argue, that they were likely uncomfortable with discussing the topic in such explicit terms, and therefore, Linklater was limited to who he could film and how well they would perform their lines.

The early film interviews in this section, which are less explicit and emotional in deliverance, more accurately parallel Hollandsworth's documented testimonials. In fact, the film interviews with Sonny Davis and Rick Dial pull from commentary originally published in "Midnight in the Garden of East Texas." Davis's line—"Bernie was a little effeminate. I mean, an unmarried man in his late thirties going to all the musicals with a bunch of old blue-hairs?"—does not entirely line-up with, but is clearly inspired by the statement from a Carthage man that Hollandsworth encountered in a barbeque restaurant: "He acts . . . well, you know . . . effeminate!" ("Midnight"). Linklater and Hollandsworth include a revision of the rest of this man's statement in a café scene well after the "WAS BERNIE GAY" section. Here, as well, the Carthage resident, and Davis, avoid naming Bernie's queer identity and, instead, describe traits that mark him as queer. The complete statement from Hollandsworth's article reads as follows: "Danny Buck . . . it's just hard for me to believe that old Bernie could fire a gun straight. He acts . . . well, you know . . . effeminate! You can tell he's never been deer hunting in his entire life" ("Midnight"). Similarly, in the film, Davis delivers: "Hell, Danny Buck, you know Bernie doesn't know anything about shooting a rifle. I mean, he doesn't go hunting. He wouldn't know a deer blind from an outhouse." Together, both of these lines are revealing

insofar as they argue for Bernie's innocence on the basis of his queerness. This suggests that some of the townspeople of Carthage might have believed in Bernie's innocence because his queerness, not just his sweet personality, hindered his ability to commit the crime. A line shortly before the café scene shares a similar sentiment in much more explicit terms: "The Bernie I knew was somewhat of a sissy. And it just ain't no way I could see him ever killing anybody. I thought they made a mistake."

Like Davis's interview in the film, Dial's represents a more authentic portrayal of how real-life East Texans discussed, and continue to discuss, Bernie's sexual identity. Dial's line, which is sourced from Don Lipsey, the funeral director of Hawthorn Funeral Home, speaks of Bernie's queer identity through euphemism and advocates for Bernie as celibate: "There was always talk about Bernie being a little light in the loafers, but I always thought he was celibate. He was a nice-looking man, and there were a lot of girls in the community who would've loved to have a date with him. But he never seemed to show much interest in that. He stayed busy all the time and was working." Lipsey's statement in Hollandsworth's article, however, leaves out any mention of celibacy: "He wasn't bad-looking, and there were numerous girls in the community who have dated him But he showed no romantic interest in women his age at all. I think some of the men during their coffee shop talks would insinuate that Bernie was a little light in the loafers" ("Midnight"). It seems that Linklater and Hollandsworth inserted the issue of celibacy into Dial's dialogue in order to ensure that each successive interview engaged with and built upon the former. Let me explain this by way of discussing the interview situated

between Davis's and Dial's. In the second interview, which is with East Texas actor Kay Epperson, Linklater has Epperson expand on and clarify what Davis merely hints at in his interview. That is, Epperson names Bernie's queer identity as gay but refutes this as his sexual preference, since she thinks he is celibate: "Ah! You know, I heard that he was gay. But he was such a good Christian man. Everybody thought, you know, how could that be? That dog don't hunt. Nah." Positioning Epperson's interview between Davis's and Dial's is effective, in part, because it labels Bernie's queer identity—whereas the other two do not—but it also clearly links the successive interviews, since Dial's similarly expands on Epperson's by making explicit her euphemism about celibacy: "That dog don't hunt." What happens with these interviews in the process, then, is that they gradually move away from an accurate depiction of how East Texans conceived of Bernie's queer identity, as they become more exacting—in terms of naming—and over-the-top in performance. We see this in the remaining interviews of the section, which feature argumentative dialogues between McConaughey and Epperson.

Building on Dial's commentary concerning Bernie's behavior—the fact that his obsessive work habits deterred any sexual relations—McConaughey unleashes a list of queer behaviors that, he believes, undoubtedly mark Bernie as gay:

He had a tendency to hold onto another man's hand's touch too long after shaking it. And he had a subscription to Men's Fitness magazine. Now, if you've ever seen Bernie Tiede, you know darn well it wasn't for the workout tips. And when you see him around town, when, alright, if he wasn't at the church or working at the funeral home, he'd

always be wearing these doggone hemmed, starched shorts, with his belt line above the navel. And the kicker is, he always wore sandals.

Outraged by McConaughey's proposition, Epperson lashes into a biblical tirade in order to support her conviction that Bernie was a celibate Christian man: "Our lord and savior wore sandals, and he never married. And he had twelve disciples. And I don't think any of them ever married. And the Apostle Paul, he was a lifelong bachelor. And you never heard anybody in the New Testament say they was a bunch of queers! Pfft. No." Before I analyze this particular statement, let me provide McConaughey's concluding response: "No, he had homosexual relations. I know that for a fact. Alright, this ain't San Francisco, so around here, we got a lot of closet homosexuals. And I know at least two men he had relationships with that were heterosexual. Were." Combined, these two final interviews make obvious the creative license at play in this particular section of the film. One way we can approach them, before I supply documented commentary that contradicts their statements, is by asking what responses Linklater and Hollandsworth intended to elicit from their audience. The exchange between Epperson and McConaughey is, of course, highly humorous; therefore, we need to consider what makes each interview particularly funny. On Epperson's part, her emphasis on religiosity, and her unknowing suggestion that Christ and his apostles might be queer, in addition to her pejorative use of the word *queer*, is what likely makes her dialogue comical to a number of viewers. Likewise, McConaughey's use of *closeted homosexuals*, along with his character's infantile understanding of heterosexuality and homosexuality, is what comically appeals to a mainstream audience. These particular instances are

only funny, however, because they highlight and mock characteristics, religiosity and backwards thinking, that are stereotypically associated with people from rural areas and people from the South. In order to make the film comedic, then—because it is about a beloved queer in a rural Southern community—Linklater and Hollandsworth create hyperbolic misrepresentations of how these people conceive of Bernie’s queer sexuality.

On the one hand, these interviews do a good job of communicating that, in fact, people in Carthage and East Texas really didn’t care that Bernie was queer. On the other hand, they falsely imply that one of the reasons that people accepted Bernie was because they thought he was celibate. If we take a closer look at statements made by actual townsfolk and people involved with the case, then we’ll see that they were pretty much all certain that Bernie was queer; they just didn’t feel the need to name his identity as that. Hollandsworth’s “Midnight in the Garden of East Texas,” offers several examples where locals employ adjectives, euphemisms, or epithets to comment on Bernie’s queerness as a trait. So let’s start with a more thorough examination of Hollandsworth’s piece, which was published in ’98, and work our way forward to more contemporary discussions of Bernie and his queerness.

Hollandsworth’s article is interesting for both the way that townsfolk describe Bernie’s queerness and how he chooses to describe it as well. Here’s a sampling of two Carthaginian takes on Bernie’s queerness: one citizen says he’s “peachy and sweet,” while Don Lipsey, Bernie’s boss who I quoted earlier, admits, according to Hollandsworth, that he “had grown fond of Bernie, despite his

discomfort with”—and these are Lipsey’s words—Bernie’s “tutti-frutti speaking voice” (“Midnight”). While the latter comment displays a euphemism commonly used to reference homosexuals, the former could, arguably, be used to describe any outgoing individual. But the context in which Hollandsworth references it makes all the difference. The “peachy” statement is paired with Lipsey’s remark about Bernie being “light in the loafers” in the following paragraph:

Carthaginians are also conservative, politically and socially, which makes it hard to imagine that Berhardt Tiede II . . . would end up becoming one of the most popular people in town. Compared with the men who passed their afternoons at Leon Choate’s barbershop just off the square, the portly, mustachioed Bernie was, in the words of one person who knew him, “peachy and sweet.” When he wasn’t in his dark funeral suit, he wore colorful Tommy Hilfiger clothes and drove around town in his Lincoln Continental, smiling broadly at whomever he saw.¹⁰ (“Midnight in the Garden of East Texas”)

By couching his descriptions among quotes from citizens, it might seem that Hollandsworth is consciously mimicking the townsfolk’s approach to Bernie’s queerness, since he also avoids any naming of Bernie’s sexual identity.

Hollandsworth’s descriptions, no doubt, overtly suggest that Bernie is queer, and he obviously intends to set up a dichotomy between Bernie and his heteronormative hometown. While these reasons might lead us to conclude that Hollandsworth is playing along with the town’s little game, they don’t account for the fact that he

¹⁰ Because I’ve already quoted Lipsey’s statement, I purposely leave it off here, but it closes Hollandsworth’s paragraph.

never—not once in “Midnight in the Garden of East Texas” nor in any of his subsequent publications about Bernie—mentions the terms *homosexual*, *gay*, or *queer*. Even when discussing more concrete evidence of Bernie’s queer sexuality, Hollandsworth sticks to adjectives, euphemisms, and epithets. Take, for example, the manner in which he reports how VHS recordings of anal sex were discovered at Bernie’s home: “The town refused to abandon Bernie even after Sheriff Jack Ellett announced during his Friday morning talk show on the local radio station, KGAS (“The Heartbeat of East Texas”), that deputies had confiscated nearly fifty videotapes from Bernie’s house, some showing men involved in illicit acts” (Hollandsworth, “Midnight”). Here the sheriff uses illicit acts as a stand-in for sodomy, which at the time of Bernie’s arrest was still illegal in Texas. Hollandsworth never specifies that these illicit acts involve gay sex, though, and he also avoids clarifying this detail later in the article when he further explains the town’s reaction to the tapes:

Sheriff Ellett set off another round of fireworks when he said that certain Carthage men were seen on the videotapes confiscated from Bernie’s house. Soon there were rumors that everyone from elected city leaders to a DPS trooper to a sheriff’s deputy was seen on the tapes, engaged in what the local newspaper, the Panola Watchman, described as ‘misconduct.’ One man showed up at a Carthage High School football game wearing a T-shirt that read “I’m the only one in Carthage NOT on the videotapes.” (“Midnight”)

In both accounts, Hollandsworth reports the town's labeling of these acts, whether they be "illicit" or "misconduct," and moves on, without elaboration, to the next point in his article. From his initial portrayal of Bernie, which is rather rich in description, it's obvious that Hollandsworth is not striving for straightforward journalism here; he's definitely after the intrigue of a story. Therefore, we could reasonably argue that part of this intrigue stems from Hollandsworth's tease of never naming Bernie's identity as queer. Nevertheless, it seems odd that his publications about the film also steer clear of any explicit naming. This is especially true when we consider that many newspaper and magazine articles about the film openly refer to Bernie as gay. We need only look at one example from *The New York Times* written by Nugent's nephew, Joe Rhodes. In "How My Aunt Marge Ended Up in the Deep Freeze," Rhodes notes, as a comical aside, that Bernie used some of his aunt's money to buy German gay porn. Rhodes adds this, however, after specifying Bernie's sexual preference. In describing Bernie's relationship with his aunt, Rhodes writes: "But, he says, there was nothing sexual about it. He thought of her as more of a mother figure and a friend. Besides, Bernie is gay. 'We never talked about that,' he said when I asked if Aunt Marge knew he was gay. 'It just didn't crop up'" ("How My Aunt Marge Ended Up in the Deep Freeze . . ."). What we might gather from Hollandsworth's hesitation to name Bernie's queer identity in his journalistic work and his willingness to name it in the film is that Hollandsworth has his audience in mind. When primarily writing for Southern/Southwestern readers, Hollandsworth resorts to commenting on queerness; and when writing for the diverse viewers of an art-house film, he directly says queer.

Turning away from Hollandsworth and back to Carthage, the community's reaction to the tape fiasco clearly demonstrates that its members knew that Bernie was queer. The sidestepping of the words *sodomy*, *anal sex*, and/or *gay sex* with phrases like "illicit acts" and "misconduct" did not deter their understanding of what was documented on the tapes, and it most certainly did not lead to any confusion that he was celibate. In the special features included on the DVD release of the film, East Texas actor and Carthage resident, Ira Bounds, offers more insight into the footage on the tapes. More specifically, in *The Gossips* feature, which has some of the recorded auditions held in East Texas, Bounds relates that his nephew, who was interning with Danny Buck Davidson for the summer, was asked to watch and detail the contents of each tape. Bounds describes the content in the following way: "What it was, was that Bernie swung both ways." Similarly, here, years after Hollandsworth wrote about how the town discussed the tapes, Bounds also opts for euphemism rather than using words like *bisexuality*. We see this same evasive naming practice in recent statements made by Danny Buck Davidson and Lloyd Tiller. Speaking of Bernie, Davidson notes: "He did have very active other lifestyles, probably from you and myself, in that he liked older women and young guys" (qtd. in Draper 1A & 7A). Davidson's indirect approach to Bernie's sexuality could be construed in a number of different ways. For instance, by using the word *like*, Davidson leaves us wondering if Bernie liked elderly women and young men sexually, if he liked them both platonically, or if he liked one sexually and the other platonically. This manner of discussing Bernie's sexuality contradicts, of course, McConaughey's outlandish performance in the film, where the dialogue becomes a gross exaggeration of the

real-life Davidson's public statements. While some lines in the film are taken, verbatim, from statements Davidson made during the trial, the "WAS BERNIE GAY?" section displays a glaring discrepancy between fact and fiction. Although the film may render Davidson as quick to call Bernie queer, the actual Davidson's public statements suggest otherwise.

Perhaps the closest we get to a direct reference to Bernie's queer sexuality comes from Nugent's stockbroker, Lloyd Tiller: "I always thought he was very effeminate, which is fine, but I had an inkling that his sexual preferences would not be females, which is his business" (qtd. in Draper 7A). While Tiller's specification of *sexual preference* is much clearer than previous comments, Tiller still visions Bernie's queerness as a preference, or trait, and not an identity. What remains consistent in the comments I've looked at then, is that both before and after the film's release, East Texans were well aware of Bernie's queer sexuality but never openly named his identity as queer. This is not to suggest, of course, that people in East Texas do not recognize queer identities or that they never specifically call(ed) Bernie, or any other individuals who identify as queer, gay. Instead, the point is that it isn't proper social decorum to publicly announce an individual's identity as queer. What is sanctioned, however, is sideways acknowledgement of that identity through noting queerness as a trait. Therefore, it's okay to describe Bernie as *tutti-frutti* or *peachy* in the same way that it's acceptable to describe a lesbian as *sporty* or *tomboyish*. An in-depth analysis of this rhetorical practice is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, we can begin a surface level discussion by noting that one could arguably read it as a form of homophobia while also chalking it up to underhanded

respect. That is, if people in East Texas generally believe that being gay inevitably carries with it negative social connotations—since it is considered a deviant lifestyle—then pretending that the identity is non-existent in public, or at least a topic reserved for private conversation, works against an overt scapegoating or demonization of queer individuals. In effect, then, queer traits serve as more polite markers of difference or, conversely, as socially condoned homophobia.

We can find a comparable example of this paradoxical “acceptance” in the community’s reaction to the VHS tapes of gay sex. As Hollandsworth makes clear in “Midnight,” the town still supported Bernie despite Sheriff Ellett’s announcement about the tapes on public radio. The sheriff’s move, which was undoubtedly a ploy to blackball Bernie, backfired when the town spread a wildfire of “rumors that everyone from elected city leaders to a DPS trooper to a sheriff’s deputy was seen on the tapes” (Hollandsworth, “Midnight”). These rumors were accompanied, as Hollandsworth details, by an incident in which “[o]ne man showed up at a Carthage High School football game wearing a T-shirt that read ‘I’m the only one in Carthage NOT on the videotapes’” (“Midnight”). Both of these instances exhibit homophobic overtones insofar as being linked with the videos is denigrating because it means one participated in gay sex. At the same time, however, these instances become a way of voicing solidarity for Bernie, since they suggest that others, especially the police and powers that be in the community, are complicit in the sexual acts that are intended to criminalize and marginalize him. In other words, it’s as if this conservative small town, which is typically supportive of its police force, refused to

condone or participate in the force's attempt to scapegoat Bernie by turning the strategy on its head.

To sum up, Linklater and Hollandsworth manipulated the manner in which East Texans discussed Bernie's queer identity in the film. Looking at interviews in the film that appear following the intertitle "WAS BERNIE GAY," I demonstrated that Linklater and Hollandsworth have the actors, who are depicting East Texas locals, directly refer to Bernie as *homosexual*, *gay*, and *queer*. Contrasting their representation with statements made by East Texans in newspaper and magazine articles, I argued that East Texans instead employ adjectives, euphemisms, and epithets to comment on an individual's queerness rather than actually naming an individual's identity as queer. I suggested that the screenwriters chose to alter this rhetorical practice because appealing to a mainstream audience required highlighting Bernie's queer identity by hyperbolizing a rural Southern community's reaction to it. In the process, I hope to have shown that Linklater and Hollandsworth, as a consequence, trivialize the complexity of the socio-political demands which many rural queers face. Or put differently, I see their use of cultural commodification as further propagating stereotypical understandings of rural queer life that lend themselves well to inconsiderate analyses and inaccurate documentation of queer lived experience.

Before I move to my next section, I want to turn to the film's larger narrative, where Linklater—by not having Bernie's queer identity named—offers a more accurate portrayal of Bernie's queer way of being in the world. As I previously mentioned, Linklater establishes a tension between the interviews and the larger

narrative early in the film. The tension begins at eighteen minutes in, when we're given a hint, during an interview with Kathleen McConaughey, that something is fishy about Bernie's sexuality. More specifically, we're led to believe that Bernie is either attracted to elderly women or men. McConaughey's comment encourages us to analyze Bernie's behavior throughout the larger narrative for signs of queerness, and Linklater continually feeds this tension by having the interviews associate Bernie with stereotypical gay male traits—like interior design and decorating. Fourteen minutes after McConaughey puts a little birdie in our ear, Linklater finally delivers us from speculation in the “WAS BERNIE GAY?” section. Following the specification of Bernie's queer identity that occurs in the interviews here, the remainder of the larger narrative and interviews are absent of any naming of his queer identity. The only comments about Bernie's queerness occur in an interview and café scene after he murders Mrs. Nugent that I referenced earlier: the first statement is in an interview where a man describes Bernie as “a sissy,” and the second is in a café scene where Sonny Davis (townsperson) tells Matthew McConaughey (Danny Buck Davidson) that Bernie is “effeminate.” Because Linklater drops an open discussion of Bernie's queer identity after the “WAS BERNIE GAY?” section, the ways in which he depicts Bernie in the larger narrative become essential to solidifying a queer identity for the viewer. Therefore, I want to examine some of the ways that Linklater goes about queering Bernie in order to offer a more fruitful analysis of how a gay man can lead a markedly queer life in a rural area.

Let's start by returning to the scene at the East Texas Art Festival, where Bernie flirts with a stereotypical heterosexual male. Because Bernie does not have

intimate relationships in the film, it is important for Linklater to showcase Bernie's interest in men with a couple of scenes depicting flirtatious interactions. This particular fellow is stereotypical insofar as Linklater has him exhibiting and performing characteristics of idealized masculinity: physical strength and emotional restraint. He powerfully wields a chainsaw against a block of wood while wearing flannel and responds in a very non-descript manner when Bernie quizzes him about his artistic philosophy. His unemotional response to Bernie's interest remains constant throughout the scene, as he neither displays any excitement when Bernie voices the possibility of commissioned work nor any type of personable social engagement that is generally expected of vendors seeking potential patrons. What makes this scene particularly interesting and revealing, then, is that this exemplar of idealized masculinity, a good old East Texas boy, experiences no homosexual panic nor uncomfortableness during his interaction with Bernie. Even when Bernie compliments his business card, which is made out of wood, and playfully calls him a gem, the artist remains neutral in emotion and nonchalantly resumes his work as Bernie and Mrs. Nugent walk away. This lack of reaction, on the artist's part, to Bernie's evident queer behavior and advances suggests that Bernie could, at times, openly display certain queer traits—like feigning ignorance about a chainsaw, praising the artistic ingenuity of a business card, or teasingly calling another man a gem.

While the chainsaw artist scene is especially conducive to understanding how Bernie could exhibit queer behavior in rural East Texas, the second scene is not as representative of East Texas because it occurs on a cruise ship in international

waters. The function of this scene, which involves Bernie having a conversation with a young employee of the cruise line, is to reinforce Bernie's homosexual inclinations and further highlight the stark contrast between his and Mrs. Nugent's personalities. Partly because the young man is expected to perform the requirements of his job, which entails waiting on Bernie and Mrs. Nugent hand-and-foot, and partly because Linklater renders him shy and innocent, Bernie is able to engage in a more mutual conversation with the young man, asking him details about his job and if he enjoys it. Bernie flatters the young man with geniality and respect, while Mrs. Nugent, upon exiting the suite and being introduced to the young man, flat out ignores him. The opposing reactions that Bernie and Mrs. Nugent display towards the young man perhaps obscure an overt reading of this scene as one of queer desire; it could certainly be interpreted as a comparison of Bernie's caring personality with Mrs. Nugent's hateful one. But, likewise, the flirtatious undertones of the encounter are exacerbated by Mrs. Nugent's presence, as she interrupts (and it seems almost knowingly, since her dismissive scowl seems to signal something more than mere disgust at having to greet the young man) an intimate, private moment between Bernie and the ship's steward.

In addition to portraying Bernie's attraction to men, Linklater also queers Bernie by emphasizing his participation in stereotypical gay male interests: theatre, singing, fashion, traveling, and cooking. In the film as a whole, fashion and traveling really serve as minor queering characteristics when compared with theatre and singing. Bernie's taste for Tommy Hilfiger clothing and its notably preppy style contrasts with the heteronormative male fashion of East Texas, which consists

predominately of jeans, overalls, camouflage, and Western wear. Similarly, traveling, which will figure prominently in Bernie's trial and my analysis in the section to come, takes a backseat to theatre and singing, serving more as a side-note to comment upon the details of Bernie and Mrs. Nugent's relationship. Cooking, as well, receives less attention from Linklater, but he does use this trait, along with theatre and singing, to show how Bernie's queerness actually allows him to build community and form relationships. For example, consider the scene that takes the form of a newsreel, which features an insider's-look at Bernie in prison, where he carefully instructs what appear to be hardened criminals—tattoos and all—in the culinary art of preparing a quiche. According to the news anchor in the report, "Bernie sits in the county jail, where he's reportedly already become a popular inmate, leading a Bible study group and cooking meals for the staff."

If the queer art of cooking helps Bernie gain social acceptance in jail, then theatre and singing partially help secure his status as a respected citizen in Carthage and serve as the primary keys by which Linklater queers him in the larger narrative. For although the real-life Bernie actively participated in the theatre program at the local community college and often sang at church and funeral services, scenes involving the theatre and singing occupy a significant amount of screen time in the film. Altogether, the film dedicates nine scenes to Bernie's acting and singing on stage or singing at church, funerals, or other community services. In fact, at the very beginning of the film, following the intertitle "WHO WAS BERNIE?," the first shot is Bernie histrionically singing the gospel song "Love Lifted Me" as if it were a show-tune.

To be sure, part of Linklater's emphasis on acting, singing, and theatricality can be attributed to a desire to portray Bernie as a showman, skilled at being who and what people want and/or need him to be. On the other hand, though, as markers of Bernie's queerness, the theatre and singing reveal that Bernie could revel in these stereotypical queer interests because they ultimately benefited the community as a whole. His love for the theatre meant that the local community college could fund scholarships for students and put on successful shows. His love for singing meant that he contributed to what many people in the community felt were important moments in their lives: funerals, weddings, and church. What these socio-political demands comment on, then, is the small-town dynamics of this rural community and how Bernie's specific subjectivity functioned smoothly within it. That is, Bernie certainly was privileged insofar as his white middle-class maleness definitely granted him social respectability; however, a queer identity may have worked to his detriment had he not been a Christian and overly generous and friendly. These latter traits, arguably, allowed his possibly offensive queer identity to be overlooked. And as I will show momentarily, Bernie's queer interests could not rescue him when the community involved had not benefited from them.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

"I mean, it's like he had cast a spell over the entire area Everybody, everybody thought he was gonna get off. But I had one card left to play, and I went all in."—

Matthew McConaughey, as Defense Attorney Danny Buck Davidson

For Linklater, the San Augustine jury primarily convicted Bernie because of class. In an interview with *The A.V. Club*, he says that the actual trial was “a lot like the movie itself,” and he describes the class conflict that was at play:

By the time they got to this other town where Bernie is completely unknown and the defense had no witnesses (to testify about) his disassociation, i.e. temporary insanity, he was just screwed. There was not a damn thing he could do. . . . They [the jury] were just staring at him like, “We would just love to give you the death penalty. You’re other. We don’t know you. We don’t like you. You seem like an elitist, fancy first-class flying New York guy who can pronounce Les Miserables.” It was true. That all really happened. I couldn’t make that up. (Linklater, “*Bernie* Director Richard Linklater On the Delicate Art of the True-Crime Dark Comedy”)

Building upon this claim, Linklater argues that Defense Attorney Danny Buck Davidson was well aware of this fact and therefore sought a change of venue and used class conflict in order to successfully convict Bernie: “And Danny Buck played it brilliantly, I have to say, [by mispronouncing it as ‘Less Miserables’]. So part of me has this respect for his ploy, his game. And I asked him years later. I said, ‘So, ‘Less Miserables.’ Did you make that up?’ And he really gave me a big expression, like, ‘Hey, did you like that one?’ He’s a performer” (Linklater, “*Bernie* Director”). What I intend to initially trace out here is how Linklater’s bias towards this version of the case influences his representation of it in the film. My claim is that Linklater offensively exacerbates the class status between the people of San Augustine and

Bernie in order to prove his point. Moving from this, I focus on Matthew McConaughey's (Danny Buck Davidson) interrogation of Jack Black (Bernie) and demonstrate how Bernie's identification with mainstream gay male culture—all of those queer traits that I previously mentioned—worked to his disadvantage during the trial.

Prior to the courtroom scene, Linklater includes interviews with Matthew McConaughey (Danny Buck Davidson) and Brady Coleman (Scrappy Holmes, Bernie's attorney) so that he can begin to frame his personal narrative of the trial. The dialogue in McConaughey's interview paints Davidson as strategically moving the trial in order to gain an advantage that we're not quite sure of yet. Davidson tells us, "As far as convicting Bernie, I'll shoot ya straight. I mean, even with a confession in my pocket, I was a bit trepidatious. I mean, it's like he had cast a spell over the entire area Everybody, everybody thought he was gonna get off. But I had one card left to play, and I went all in." The next scene is an interview with Scrappy Holmes, explaining how trials are never moved in Texas due to the defendant's likeability and how he knew the move to San Augustine meant trouble. Then we lapse into the courtroom scene, where "the card" that Davidson intends to play becomes more evident.

After an intertitle stating "Guilty or Innocent?," Linklater shoots straight to the courtroom and provides the following subtitle: San Augustine County 47.7 Miles From Carthage "Squirrel Hunting Capital of the World." From here, Linklater dramatizes the class divide between the people of San Augustine and Bernie by specifically highlighting one interrogation scene and incorporating interviews with

Sonny Davis. Before I discuss these issues, however, let me start with the moniker given to San Augustine by Linklater: “Squirrel Hunting Capital of the World.” Deep East Texas, where San Augustine is located, has a rich tradition of squirrel hunting, since, historically, its forests have been prime habitats for squirrel, rather than deer, populations. With the expansion of the lumber mill industry, however, much of Deep East Texas’s pristine forests have been ruined, and as a consequence, the more adaptive species, deer, is on the rise as squirrel populations steadily decline. Therefore, San Augustine certainly has a cultural connection to squirrel hunting and definitely isn’t ashamed of it, but the area is not collectively known—in the state of Texas nor anywhere else—as the “Squirrel Hunting Capital of the World.” This isn’t some proud label that the people of San Augustine throw around like the neighboring city of Nacogdoches—which heralds itself as “The Oldest Town in Texas.”¹¹ From the way Linklater presents this moniker in the courtroom scene, though, one would likely assume that this description is something that residents stand by and forthrightly espouse. Just as Linklater and Hollandsworth’s purposefully hyperbolized rural Southern culture earlier, the two are up to the same thing here. Essentially, there’s a politics of food at stake, with the connotation that only backwoods, Southern poor folk would ever eat (and proudly eat at that) something so lowly as squirrel. The label is thus effective for two reasons: it comically appeals to a mainstream audience by mocking Southern rurality, and it characterizes San Augustine as backwoods and poor. This portrayal, of course, feeds

¹¹ There is actually, still to this day, a highly sensitive and controversial debate in Deep East Texas about which town, San Augustine or Nacogdoches, is actually the oldest.

into Linklater's subsequent emphasis on class difference, which comes in the form of interviews with Sonny Davis.

Preceding Davis's first vignette is a brief portrayal of courtroom proceedings, such as bringing in the freezer that housed Mrs. Nugent's body, showing pictures of her corpse, and questioning her weeping relatives. It's important to note that these particular courtroom instances, which could have been milked for both dramatic and comedic effect, are, instead, thoroughly underdeveloped in comparison to McConaughey's (Davidson) interrogation of Black (Bernie). What this shows is that Linklater seems more interested in highlighting the latter scene, which receives drastically more screen time, to further reinforce the idea that Bernie was convicted on the basis of class. And Davis's first interview, which occurs directly before the interrogation scene, definitely serves as a nice lead-in to guide us. He tells us:

I knew he was in trouble when I saw that jury. And Bernie was just gonna have to get up there and explain himself to a bunch of San Augustine cousin-counting rednecks over there. I mean, they got more tattoos than teeth, and there ain't a brain in the whole dozen of them, and they're supposed to decide big things like this? I mean, shoot, I wouldn't let 'em work on my car.

Notice the characteristics that Linklater and Hollandsworth associate with people of lower-socioeconomic status in rural areas: 1) inbred rednecks, 2) covered in tattoos, 3) lack of dental hygiene, and 4) mentally incompetent. Rather than simply classifying these people as poor and part of a culture that is generally devalued and considered "low" in comparison to the celebrated "high" culture of the upper-class,

Linklater and Hollandsworth, once again, employ a stereotypical and therefore inaccurate and downright offensive portrayal of these people's lives and the values they represent. Considering that San Augustine fails, indeed, to rival Carthage in terms of economic competition, since Carthage reaps the benefits of the rich East Texas gas and oil fields, while San Augustine largely depends on pulp and paper mills, Linklater and Hollandsworth could have rendered a more nuanced depiction of the economic and class disparities between the citizens of these two towns. Instead, they find it necessary to consistently depend upon outrageous stereotypes in order to elicit humor when comparing the two. The Davis interview that immediately follows the interrogation scene works in the same manner as the first. It frames how we should interpret what we've just observed:

Danny Buck, you gotta hand it to him. You know, what he did is two groups, you know? It was the high-falutin', first-class living Bernie's of the world and then there was the, you know, let's dig a hole in the backyard and cook something, you know. Put another tire on the fire, George, I'm cold. It was just two different worlds he created there. And Bernie wasn't of their world.

We get a more explicit analysis of the case here: Linklater's thoughts in the words of an actor. Likewise, Davis's lines exhibit the same derisive, belittling rhetoric that allows for a strict bifurcation between Bernie and the jury.

In interviews, Linklater has explained that he images San Augustine this way because he's riffing on the small town idea that there's another town and people more backwoods than one's own. While that may have well been his intention, his

characterization of San Augustine definitely aids the little narrative about class that he's building around the trial. In all probability, his depiction of San Augustine wasn't one that too many East Texas actors were keen on, since not one of them is featured saying anything about San Augustine at all. Even in the extra scenes that play as the credits roll out, the only actor that ever describes San Augustine is one from Austin, Sonny Davis.¹²

My point in critiquing Linklater's interpretation is not that I disagree with him; in fact, I think he's correct. Bernie's conviction was, no doubt, highly influenced by class conflict. The issue I take is with Linklater's manner of presentation, since the version he offers us is extremely problematic because it skews an accurate depiction of reality in order to sell tickets. And with that in mind, we have to recognize that readings of the film might, likewise, reinforce and replicate incorrect and misunderstood conceptions of rural queer experience. Simply put, Linklater didn't have to characterize the people of San Augustine as outlandish, ignorant bigots in order to map out the impact of class conflict on the case. A more considerate and nuanced presentation of the jury would have actually done more justice to Bernie's experience by providing us with a study that did not require an in-depth analysis of cultural misrepresentation.

To conclude this section, I want to examine the interrogation scene between McConaughey and Black. For the remainder of this discussion, I'll refer to them by

¹² I'm including Davis's interview that's featured in the final credits because it is perhaps the most offensive of the trio: "Talking about what wine to drink with fish. I mean, those people, you know, drink warm beer with fried mudcat. And you trying to say. I took one look at that jury, and I said ought-oh. Scrappy, you ain't gonna do it, buddy. I mean, you ain't gonna do it. You don't have enough equipment to bring these people out of their dang hovels over there. Jesus, he's my daddy, he's my cousin. It's like some of them people shouldn't be allowed out of the county, and we took the whole damn trial over there, you know? What are they asking for? I don't get it. I don't get the legal system."

the names of the characters they are playing, Davidson and Bernie. While I think Linklater's claim about class conflict is spot-on, I want to complicate his argument by suggesting that the class conflict results from Bernie's identification with stereotypical gay male culture. Because stereotypical gay male culture celebrates those things typically associated with affluent high culture, Bernie's interests in world-travel, theatre, and food mark him as elitist and upper-class to the San Augustine working-class jury. Davidson sets this realization up by initially focusing on traveling itself and what the specifics of the trip entailed. He starts by asking Bernie if he and Mrs. Nugent flew first class to New York City and then prompts Bernie to explain the experience to him: "Tell us the difference between like the first class seats and the regular old seats in the back of the plane. I've never been up there." Davidson creates a sense of camaraderie between himself and the jury here by depicting himself as their equal, as someone who is also removed from the luxuries reserved for those who are considered first class. This is an effective rhetorical strategy because it scapegoats Bernie and encourages an *us* versus *him* mentality. However, the situation is much more complicated than merely suggesting that Bernie represents himself. In actuality, he's a stand-in for a collective representation of the upper-class.

Bernie seems vaguely cognizant of Davidson's game, so he delivers a brief and reserved description: "I'd say the seats are a little larger maybe. More comfortable." Davidson probes him for more details, offering some of his own just in case Bernie is still reluctant: "Don't they have people waiting on you and stuff, too, you know? I mean, people bringing you fancy food and serving you whatever you

want to drink, and stuff like that?" Bernie, again, offers very little response beyond a confirmation, so Davidson takes a jab and levels a claim at Bernie: "So you like the first class treatment. First class lifestyle, the best that money can buy." Bernie brushes this off by stating that he was merely traveling the way Mrs. Nugent insisted, and the interrogation stalls momentarily. Davidson picks it back up by name-dropping a famous hotel whose proximity to Central Park undoubtedly signals its extravagant expense: "Now on that New York city trip, says here that you and Mrs. Nugent stayed at the Ritz Carlton. That's a fancy hotel near Central Park, isn't it?" Bernie continues with cool, composed responses, until the steam picks up and starts to fluster him. This confusion is brought on by Davidson's purposeful mispronunciation of *Les Miserables*. He states: "Also says here that while you were in New York City, you saw an opera and a Broadway play. I think it's called 'Less Mizerahbles.'" Bernie instinctively corrects him, and Davidson counters with, "That's impressive." He goes on to ask, "So culture is important to you?," to which Bernie questions, "In what way?" Davidson explains his suggestion by noting, "Well, you seem to know all these fancy words and such." And Bernie responds with, "Well that one's not very difficult." The courtroom fills with laughter, presumably from Bernie's supporters; but what Bernie doesn't realize at this moment is that he's given himself away. He may think his honest comment that accidentally spiraled into a potshot at Davidson was humorous, but to the members of the jury, many of whom were probably unfamiliar with the musical and its pronunciation, it's a sideways attack on them as well. Bernie's behavior thus comes off as cocky and

arrogant to them. He seems like someone who lords his cultural knowledge over people that he deems uneducated and ignorant.

Seeing a way in, Davidson rattles Bernie with the question, “You know all about the high-class life, don’t you Bernie?” And then he hammers Bernie with a directive: “Say, for instance, what kind of wine are you supposed to have with fish?” Bernie, of course, answers correctly: “White, usually.” The interrogation climaxes from that point as Davidson suggests that Bernie’s love for the upper class lifestyle meant that he had to have money to support his habit, and the only way he could get that type of money was from the dead Mrs. Nugent. While this last claim may seal the deal in convicting Bernie, the critical points in Davidson’s interrogation—when he starts to turn the jury against Bernie—occur when he mentions the musical and asks what wine one should have with fish. Whereas the New York City questioning was effective insofar as it established that Bernie had experienced and enjoyed certain luxuries that many of the jurors would never experience, it faltered when Bernie stated that he was only traveling according to Mrs. Nugent’s standards. What the musical and wine/dish comments exposed to the jury was that Bernie did have his own set of upper-class standards. Bernie wasn’t simply an interloper into the upper-class lifestyle because his elderly companion dragged him along; instead, he was a practitioner of it separate from Mrs. Nugent. And because Davidson is able to establish Bernie’s appreciation for the upper-class lifestyle through the musical and wine/dish comments, he can effectively argue that Bernie needed to manipulate and murder Mrs. Nugent in order to maintain it. The two critical points that render Bernie vulnerable and ultimately damn him are a direct consequence of his

identification with stereotypical gay male culture and not, necessarily, any maniacal drive for affluence and upward social mobility. Many a queer man, regardless of geographic location or class status, would respond like Bernie because their culture would have exposed them to *Les Misérables* and wine/meat pairings. Therefore, it is through Bernie's queerness, that Davidson's class struggle argument succeeds.

Conclusion

Toward the end of the film, there is a scene in which Bernie is having lunch with an elderly woman. Bernie seems visibly distressed; the murder of Mrs. Nugent is haunting him. Linklater has a ghostly apparition of Mrs. Nugent appear at a nearby table. Reacting to his guilty conscious, Bernie asks his lunch partner if she thinks someone is capable of performing an unbelievable act, one that they would never consider or condone doing. The elderly woman, assuming Bernie is feeling gay shame, tells him that one's "personal proclivities" are nobody's business, and that everyone in the town loves him regardless.

This scene effectively sums up Bernie's position in rural, small-town Carthage, Texas. It tells us that there is opportunity to be queer and still be respected in rural areas. It complicates our understanding of the rural as a site of homophobia and violence, and it asks us to consider different ways of queer being in the world. It forces us to recognize that there are different types of queer identities and makes us aware that our current way of theorizing gay identity, which suggests that the only valid gay identity is one that is "out and proud," is problematic. We must strive for a more complex understanding of our diverse queer identities, and

Bernie's personal experience offers us a fruitful study of one that is rural. While an analysis of the film requires that we be aware of how someone else is choosing to represent his story, it, nevertheless, provides insight into rural queer experience. Moreover, a critique of the representation makes us even more aware of how rural queer experience is stereotypically (mis)represented.

In Bernie's case, we learn that class is perhaps of prime importance to rural queers, and we see that his queer way of being (his bottom-feeder politics), which involved his complicit participation in a silence surrounding his queer identity, allowed him to lead a life that he enjoyed. He celebrated mainstream gay male culture through, for example, a love of food, theatre, singing, fashion, and traveling, and he often used these queer interests to his advantage. They gave him a way of creating community and forming strong bonds with many people he encountered. They were a benefit, rather than a detriment, in his rural East Texas town.

CHAPTER III

A QUEER BATTLEAXE: JEANETTE WINTERSON'S

WORKING-CLASS IDENTITY

In an interview published in a British magazine called *Prospect*, Angela Lambert describes one possible reason for Jeanette Winterson's ongoing trouble with the British press: "Few critics, wherever they come from, care to be patronised by a working class lesbian from Accrington." Over the years, Winterson and the British press have developed a love-hate relationship, in which critics center on her personal life, sensationalizing her romantic liaisons and heralding her as one of Britain's "power lesbians." Winterson believes that critics' interest in her sexual orientation and intimate relationships is an invasion of privacy and irrelevant to a complex understanding of her work. Therefore, she has often responded with hostile critiques of journalists and what could, arguably, be considered arrogant remarks concerning her artistic talent.

Commenting on Winterson's inflammatory engagements with the press, Frances Coady, one of Winterson's former editors, clarifies Lambert's point: "She's northern, she's originally working class and she's a lesbian, and so on all those counts she's a sitting duck, an alien species, for all those Oxbridge boys on newspapers." According to Coady, Winterson's subjectivity, her regionality and

class status, in addition to sexual orientation and sex, puts her at odds with the majority of critics, who are presumably affluent, well-educated men. Lambert says as much; however, she fails to specify the predominate subjectivity of Winterson's critics. And Lambert's lack of specificity makes sense, considering that she, too, becomes one of those critics that questions Winterson's lectures about class. As Lambert goes on to explain, Winterson's "belief that coming from a proletarian background is a virtually insurmountable handicap, seems historically naïve, not to mention self-serving." Lambert further notes that when she confronted Winterson about this naïve belief, Winterson became noticeably offended, as "her voice rose and sharpened; her northern accent, usually almost undetectable, became more emphatic." The impassioned response Winterson provided reads as follows:

I really don't accept this. One of the things that annoys me enormously is when middle class people think of themselves as underprivileged, when they have no idea what it means to run out of money on Wednesday and not get paid till Friday and not have a bank account and not have a telephone and not have a car and not know anybody who's got any of these things and not know if you're going to have money to pay the rent and not have money to put into the gas meter—these are the things that really separate people out. When I went to Oxford it was glaringly not true that there really is no difference between middle class life and working class life. It's different in every respect . . . I don't know anybody—anybody—from my background

who has been able or has really wanted to cross the bridge into my kind of life.

Given that Winterson clearly exhibits strong feelings and opinions about class, it would seem likely that literary critics would ask questions about how she handles and depicts class issues in her work. While literary critics, such as Sonya Andermahr, sometimes acknowledge the importance of Winterson's working class background, a critical discussion of class is curiously absent in Winterson scholarship. With *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), winner of the Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel, critics have typically, as Andermahr nicely sums up, focused on "how far [Winterson] can be described as a lesbian-feminist writer, and how far she can be described as a postmodernist" (157 *Jeanette*). Jago Morrison agrees with Andermahr and offers an even more detailed explanation of these two veins of inquiry when he writes,

Winterson began to be recognised in the early to mid-1990s by lesbian feminist critics such as Laura Doan, Gabrielle Griffin and Cath Stowers as a writer who provided new opportunities to pursue debates around gender, sexuality and literary representation. By the end of the decade she was widely regarded as one of our pre-eminent producers of sophisticated, provocative, unruly postmodern-feminist fiction. (169)

The critical scholarship's emphasis on the development of lesbian identity and postmodern narration is a reflection of these issues being at the forefront of the novel's concerns. *Oranges* is, no doubt, a postmodern text that is first and foremost

interested in issues of identity and one that, likewise, spends a significant amount of time depicting the experience of understanding and coming to terms with lesbian identity. As countless critics have noted, it is one of the most important coming-of-age stories in the literary canon, representing a queer amalgam of the *Bildungsroman*, *Künstlerroman* and the coming-out narrative. Nevertheless, I would argue, much to the chagrin of many lesbian-feminist critics, that pigeonholing *Oranges* as only a lesbian narrative and centering singularly on the young protagonist's sexuality simplifies the complexity of Winterson's novel and protagonist. As Merja Makinen, summarizing Gabrielle Griffin, explains, there is a reason, after all, that *Oranges* "speak[s] to an audience beyond the lesbian ghetto" (9). Andermahr suggests that the novel's wide appeal partly stems from its portrayal of "universal themes," such as "family, adolescent love and the conflict between the individual and community" (85 "Reinventing"). While I certainly agree with Andermahr, I also think *Oranges* speaks to queers and non-queers alike because it touches on the various facets of subjectivity: Jeanette, the novel's protagonist, is forced to negotiate not only her sexual orientation, but her religious identity, her identity as a woman, her class status, and her identity in relation to her mother, among a number of other identity issues as well.

In my opinion, this makes *Oranges* an even more significant contribution to queer culture and literature because the novel provides valuable insight into how other aspects of identity affect our queer lived experience. Thus, unlike the previous chapter, which examined how a gay man might lead a queer lifestyle in a rural area and focused primarily on sexual identity, this chapter investigates the reasons for a

rural queer woman's migration to the city and centers on class identity. I want to make clear, however, that I am not intending to place the novel's overt discussion of queer sexuality, or religion for that matter, under erasure. Analyses of these identity issues are necessary and would greatly benefit my overall argument but are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I would like to offer some brief surface level observations about *Oranges*'s portrayal of rural queer experience in order to show that an in-depth study could prove fruitful.

Oranges subverts a couple of stereotypical depictions of rural queer experience by suggesting that rural queers may not exactly lead a life of isolation and that they may not face extreme forms of homophobic prejudice. Consider, for example, the number of queer figures, in addition to Jeanette and her lovers, that populate the text: the couple that owns the sweets shop, Miss Jewsbury, Jane—Doreen's daughter, who is described as suspiciously spending too much time with her schoolmate, Susan—(76) and, contestably, Elsie Norris. Moreover, outside of the religious sect, which the town views as radical and odd, these queer women face, at least it seems, no form of homophobic prejudice. Indeed, we can likely assume that the larger community knows why Jeanette is kicked out of church and home, but its members display no qualms about helping her out, offering her both housing and job opportunities.

I choose to specifically look at class in *Oranges* because, for one, it is a topic that has not been analyzed, but primarily because it serves as an appropriate case study for my larger claim in this chapter. In Chapter Two, I wanted to offer a nuanced analysis of one rural queer way of being in the world, but in this chapter, I

want to complicate the metronormative narrative, which argues that rural queers seek the city in order to lead an openly gay lifestyle and that the city is a place where their dreams and desires are fulfilled. My impetus to examine *Oranges* through the lens of class did not derive from Winterson's comments in interviews, however. Rather, the self-conscious fashioning of a working-class identity in her recently published memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011), prompted me to consider how Winterson might deal with class in *Oranges*. The memoir is particularly revealing because it shows how class status, rather than sexual identity, primarily influenced Winterson's desire for the city. Thus, if critics have often read *Oranges* as a narrative of escape, in which a young lesbian seeks the city in order to lead an openly gay lifestyle (the stereotypical metronormative narrative), then the memoir asks us to question how issues of class might figure in that need for escape as well.

In terms of complicating the metronormative narrative, I have different aims with each text. Whereas the memoir establishes class as being Winterson's foremost reason for geographic relocation, the novel explicitly describes the rural queer protagonist's dissatisfaction with the city. Beginning with the memoir, then, I initially trace out Winterson's understanding of her subjectivity and show how her working-class identity is intimately influenced by rurality. I then discuss the ways in which she develops a working-class identity in the text. I focus, in particular, on her emphasis on poverty, how, for example, her family and many of the people that she knew were affected by improper nutrition, lack of education, and family violence, and demonstrate that her desire to overcome those conditions is what prompted

her application to Oxford. I finalize my argument by examining Winterson's journey to the city in order to show that her working-class identity served as a source of insecurity. Following my analysis of the memoir, I look at the novel's fictional representation of Winterson's experience and consider how its young protagonist observes and interprets issues of class through her interactions with her mother, fellow townsfolk, and lovers. Lastly, I explore the novel's portrayal of the metronormative narrative, which is depicted through a mixture of two strands of narratives running throughout *Oranges*, semi-autobiography and fantasy, and ask how they code a desire for upward social mobility and dissatisfaction with the city. Combined, the memoir and novel suggest that Winterson's and Jeanette's bottom-feeder politics, or their way of navigating and understanding the world as rural queers, involves a migration to the city in order to achieve upward social mobility and a recognition that the urban/rural binary, with its valuation of the former over the latter, is not as black and white as it seems.

We Were the Working-Class

"Where you are born—what you are born into, the place, the history of the place, how that history mates with your own—stamps who you are, whatever the pundits of globalisation have to say."—Jeanette Winterson, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

A little over halfway through the memoir, Winterson states how she identified herself in her youth: "I was a woman. I was a working-class woman. I was a woman who wanted to love other women without guilt or ridicule. Those three

things formed the basis of my politics” (133). While we can certainly read this statement as Winterson’s prioritization of identities (she identifies first as a woman, second as working-class, and lastly as queer), it is more intriguing to ask how she arrives at it. That is, the process by which she comes to this conclusion reveals how one’s subjectivity is made up of several identity categories that impinge upon and influence one another. For Winterson, the gender roles that she is expected to perform as a woman are dictated by a working-class lifestyle that is, likewise, determined by ruralism. Let me clarify by explicating the writing that precedes her statement.

Winterson begins by describing how ruralism left many women she knew without a conceptualization of a feminist critique: “We were not sophisticated. We were northerners. We didn’t live in a big city like Manchester, and feminism seemed not to have reached us. ‘Battleaxe’ has always been a word used both for and against the strong northern working-class woman. That cleaver image split our identity too” (132). Winterson goes on to explain the specifics of this problematic identity by detailing the dichotomous social position that northern working-class women were expected to occupy. On the one hand, both the immediate community and popular cultural productions envisioned northern working-class women as “tough” mothers and lovers who kept their men and households in-check (132). On the other, these same women held “no economic clout” and were asked to defer to their men financially, even if they were the primary breadwinners of their household (132). What Winterson’s commentary outlines for us, then, is that being from a northern rural area affected social expectations of how working-class women were supposed

to behave and perform their gender. Presumably, if one were a working-class woman in a northern city or the south, then social expectations were different. Similarly, if a rural northern woman occupied another class status, then her social expectations might not be exactly the same as those of the working-class—she might, in fact, have more leeway in financial decisions or at least not be forced into a social position that encouraged a problematic conception of empowerment.

Nevertheless, what makes northern working-class women's situation even more tragic, according to Winterson, is that ruralism seriously hindered their capability to understand and take issue with their unfair social situation. These women's inability to see or unwillingness to critique the social injustice leveled at them led some women to pretend that their businesses were actually their "husband's enterprise" (133). Winterson takes particular offense at this pretense, and pretending is what similarly bothers her about the two lesbians who own the sweets shop. While Winterson admires these women's refusal to "pretend socially" and their decision to live "the life they wanted" by securing financial independence, she notes that they had to "pretend sexually," or act as if they weren't gay, because "people laughed at them" (133). As with the northern working-class women, Winterson's opinion about the lesbian shop-owners suggests that their rural, small-town location influenced the queer lifestyle that they chose to lead as well. More importantly, however, these final comments, which lead into Winterson's statement of identity politics, offer us important insight into how she understood her subjectivity. That is, if one's subjectivity is composed of an interrelation of identity categories, then Winterson's conceptualization of what it meant to be a woman or

lesbian was one inherently tied to ruralism. Had Winterson grown up down the road in Manchester, her understanding of being a woman or a lesbian would likely have been dictated by a similar, yet nonetheless different, set of social constructions. Therefore, when Winterson wanted to defend her queer working-class female subjectivity, her drive was informed by a critique of the social constraints placed upon women and lesbians leading a working-class lifestyle in a rural area.

Winterson felt most trapped by the social limitations placed upon her as a northern working-class woman. While she does briefly touch upon sexual identity in the passage, she devotes much more time to discussing her sex and class status. This focus on class status over sexual identity is, likewise, mirrored in the memoir as a whole. More specifically, Winterson spends the first half of the memoir—which ends with her final goodbye to her adoptive mother Constance Winterson—fashioning a working-class identity and experience that serve as the primary reason for her escape. With that being said, let's take an in-depth look at how Winterson communicates that class status, rather than sexual identity, played the key role in her move to the city.

Throughout the memoir, Winterson is at pains to situate herself within a working-class genealogy. She does this on a large scale by offering a concise history of the development of Manchester's working-class, and she does this on a smaller, more personal scale by sharing the working-class backgrounds of her real and adoptive parents. In the beginning of the second chapter, Winterson explains how her birth city, Manchester, gave rise to the brutal working-class lifestyle that was a consequence of industrialization:

Men and women, ill-clad, exhausted, drunken and sickly, worked twelve-hour shifts six days a week, went deaf, clogged their lungs, saw no daylight, took their children to crawl under the terrifying clatter of the working looms, picking up fluff, sweeping, losing hands, arms, legs, small children, weak children, uneducated and often unwanted, the women working as hard as the men, and they also bore the burden of the house. (15)

She goes on to magnify the impact that these living conditions would have on the world at large by noting that Engels's *The Condition of the English Working Class in England* (1844) and Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) were direct responses to them: "These men were theorists made activists by their time in a city that had no time for thinking, that was all the frenzy of doing " (16). Having been born into Manchester's working-class, Winterson envisions herself as an inheritor of this history, of this tradition. And so she traces its lasting effects upon her parents' lives and hers as well. In doing so, Winterson points out the sheer willpower and luck it takes to overcome the conditions of the working-class.

Although Winterson shares her birth mother's experience much later in the memoir (after they've been reunited), she primarily uses her adoptive father's working-class experience to mark the similarities and differences between their childhoods and adult lives. With her father, Winterson shows how the "neglect and poverty" that he experienced in his childhood home significantly affected his ability to rise above his circumstances (48). She explains that his father was an alcoholic who often forgot about him and left him sleeping in the doorways of pubs after

drinking all night. And she explicitly states that, collectively, his parents “forgot to look after him at all” (48). Winterson suggests that the only means by which her father could have achieved upward social gains was through education, but with unsupportive and struggling parents at home, he had no other choice but to join the work force as his mother and father had done before him. As Winterson details, “no one had bothered to read to him” before the age of twelve, and it was at this same age that he quit school to work in the Liverpool docks (27). This forced decision to join the workforce at the expense of his education would haunt and damn him to the working-class for the rest of his life. Winterson writes that he remained illiterate—“My [adoptive] father had never really learned to read—he could manage slowly, with his finger on the line” (27)—and that his life consisted of struggle with little luxury:

My adoptive father laboured as a road mender, then shoveled coal at the power station on shift work. He worked ten hours at a stretch, did overtime when he could, saved the bus fare by biking six miles each way, and never had enough money for meat more than twice a week or anything more exotic than one week a year at the seaside. (16)

For Winterson, her father’s experience represented everything she didn’t want to be: “I didn’t want to be in the teeming mass of the working class. I wanted to work, but not like him. I didn’t want to disappear. I didn’t want to live and die in the same place with only a week at the seaside in between. I dreamed of escape . . . I just wanted to get out” (17). And in the memoir, she depicts in detail what it meant to be a recipient of his working-class legacy. She highlights, in particular, the effects

of poverty and the family violence that all too often accompanies it. For example, she frequently comments on the scarcity of food and how their economic situation made a proper, healthy diet impossible: “My mother refused to be means-tested, and so I didn’t qualify for free school meals, but we had no money to buy the meals either. I usually took a couple of slices of white bread and a bit of cheese, just like that, in my bag. Nobody thought it unusual—and it wasn’t. There were plenty of kids who didn’t get fed properly” (56). Notice how Winterson describes her personal experience as common and not extraordinary. This is an important move because it draws attention away from Winterson and asks the reader to sympathize not only with her, but also with the larger working-class community that she is a part of.

Expanding on their impoverished diet, Winterson writes:

Thursday nights were always boiled onions or boiled potatoes from the allotment. Dad got paid Fridays and by Thursday there was no money left. In winter, the gas and electricity meters ran out on Thursdays too, and so the onions and potatoes weren’t quite boiled enough and we ate them in the dark of the paraffin lamp.

Everybody in the street was the same. Blackout Thursdays were common. We had no car, no phone, and no central heating. In winter the windows froze on the inside. We were usually cold but I don’t remember being upset by it [...] (56)

Here, Winterson describes a lack of modern appliances and dependable utilities, which results from the financial limitations of their class status. Once again, however, Winterson makes sure to depict these blackouts as a collective experience

and not one that is singularly her own. This is the same case in her discussion of family violence and the physical abuse that she suffered at the hands of her adoptive parents. Initially, she notes that she was often locked in the coal-hole or left to sleep outside on the doorstep at night (45). Then she details the specifics of her beatings: “My mother never beat me. She waited until my father came home and told him how many strokes and what with . . . the plastic cane, the belt, or just his hand” (45). Following this reflection on her own experience, Winterson offers a passage about family violence among the northern working-class in general: “The working-class north of England was a routinely brutal world. Men hit women—or as D.H. Lawrence called it, gave them ‘a dab’—to keep them in their place. Less often, but not unknown, women hit men . . . Kids were slapped most days but beatings were less common. Kids fought all the time . . . and I grew up not caring much about physical pain” (46).

In addition to pairing her personal experiences with those of her fellow working-class, Winterson also repeatedly uses statements with the collective ‘we’ to emphasize a shared impoverishment. She uses this technique near the end of the blackout passage I quoted above, but numerous instances occur throughout the text. For example, she writes, “We always walked. We had no car and no bus money” (2). Similarly, in a passage about religion and church members, she notes, “We had no bank accounts, no phones, no cars, no inside toilets, often no carpets, no job security and very little money” (69). Sometimes Winterson uses “we” to refer to the working-class community that she grew up in, and other times she uses it to reference her family. But regardless of whether she’s speaking of community or family, these

collective ‘we’ statements, along with her coupling of personal and general working-class experiences, allow Winterson to communicate a bleak understanding of working-class life: it’s a vicious cycle passed down from one generation to the next with little hope or possibility of breaking it. This idea is compounded by the fact that, as readers, we know that Winterson has achieved upward social mobility. Therefore, in marking her working-class experience as not extraordinary, but as similar to those of her father and “the teeming mass of working-class,” Winterson implies that her particular case of overcoming those conditions is uncommon and rare. For in constantly referring back to her father and working-class community, Winterson reminds us that although she found a way out, her father and numerous others never did.

Get Thee to Oxford

“I wasn’t ever going to be a nobody with no money.”—Jeanette Winterson, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

Toward the end of the memoir, Winterson recalls a scene in a Manchester bar much later in her life (after having established her career). She describes it as a posh atmosphere with overpriced drinks, while noting that she herself was decked out in expensive designer clothing. It is at this moment, Winterson tells us, that she came to a realization about herself and class:

I suddenly realised that I would always have been in this bar that night. If I hadn’t found books, if I hadn’t turned my oddness into poetry and the anger into prose, well, I wasn’t ever going to be a

nobody with no money. . . . I'd have gone into property and made a fortune. I'd have had a boob job by now, and be on my second or third husband, and live in a ranch-style house with a Range Rover on the gravel and a hot tub in the garden, and my kids wouldn't be speaking to me. (208)

From what Winterson relates, we can assume that she would have done whatever was necessary—even lead a completely heteronormative lifestyle—in order to escape her class status. Given that her job prospects in Accrington were not conducive to upward social mobility, she decided on a course of action that was highly unexpected for a northern working-class woman: “I decided to apply to read English at the University of Oxford because it was the most impossible thing I could do. I knew no one who had been to university and although clever girls were encouraged to go to teacher training college, or to take their accountancy exams, Oxford and Cambridge were not on the list of things to do before you die” (131). Winterson felt that if she could get into Oxford and leave Accrington, then perhaps not only would she have the opportunity to rise above her class status, but she also wouldn't be limited to the blue-collar jobs of the north that reinforced the gender inequality that she so vehemently despised. So with the help of her English teacher, Mrs. Ratlow, Winterson got an interview at Oxford. But upon arriving on campus, she found herself overwhelmed with feelings of insecurity and self-doubt.

As Winterson explains in the following passage, these feelings stemmed from her rural, working-class background:

I had been given overnight accommodation, and meals were provided in college, but I was too intimidated by the confidence of the other candidates to go in and eat with them. I was unable to speak clearly during my interviews because for the first time in my life I felt that I looked wrong and sounded wrong. Everybody else seemed relaxed, though I am sure that was not true. They certainly had better clothes and different accents. I knew I was not being myself, but I didn't know how to be myself there. I hid the self that I was and had no person to put in its place. (135)

Despite an intense desire to overcome her economic circumstances, Winterson's drive was undermined by an absent sense of self-entitlement. In a city, at a prestigious university, which she had envisioned as a place of personal freedom and opportunity, she found herself, instead, closeting her subjectivity. Afraid of marking herself as working-class because the other candidates "had better clothes" or rural because they had "different accents," Winterson masked her personality because everything about her was "wrong" (135). This sense of shame and the belief that the "self" that she represented didn't belong in or was unwanted by an institution that typically served those of more affluent backgrounds would ultimately work to her detriment, as she initially wasn't offered a place (135).

However, disheartened but undeterred, Winterson eventually landed a second interview, thanks to Mrs. Ratlow. Winterson describes how, once again, she was a nervous wreck, but instead of clamming up and shutting down, this time she rambled her way through a brief synopsis of her background, revealing all the rural,

working-class details that had brought her there: “So there was nothing for it but to explain at Shrek-speed about the Hillman Imp, and the tent, and the market stall where I worked, and a little bit about the Apocalypse and Mrs. Winterson, and English Literature in Prose A-Z ” (136). In the further description that Winterson provides for this interview, we see her longing to flee the rurality of Accrington, due to her sex and class status, explicitly reiterated. When the senior tutor performing the interview asks Winterson if she would like a woman prime minister to be elected, Winterson offers the following internal and verbal response: “Yes . . . in Accrington women couldn’t be anything except wives or teachers or hairdressers or secretaries or do shop work. ‘Well, they can be librarians, and I thought of doing that, but I want to write my own books’ ” (137). The senior tutor prompts Winterson to specify what kind of books she is writing, and Winterson evasively states, “I don’t know. I write all the time” (137). To which the senior tutor replies, “Most young people do” (137). But Winterson counters with, “Not in Accrington they don’t” (137). The first comment about Accrington obviously touches upon the limited job opportunities available to northern working-class women as a consequence of gender roles and class status. But the first comment, along with the second, also hint at educational opportunity and what pursuits of leisure might be available to working-class people in their free time. In other words, the first comment suggests that, besides gender roles, one reason that women are limited to these careers is that their class status hinders the type of education that they receive and can pursue. By receive, I mean that most of these women likely attended under-funded, struggling public schools that put them at an educational disadvantage in

comparison to their more affluent peers. And as a result, their primary and secondary educations influenced not only the type of post-secondary institution that they could attend, but also their personal conceptions of what educational and job opportunities were accessible to them. Of course, their economic situation weighed heavily on their post-secondary educational options as well. Likewise, the second comment implies that young working-class people, who are pupils of these same under-funded public institutions, are probably not receiving an education that encourages creative writing or the arts. Due to lack of funding but also due to the fact that these students are probably working their own jobs and living in cash-strapped households, school curriculum is likely geared more towards what would be considered practical vocational training. At least from Winterson's perspective, it seems that the idea of writing for fun, for creativity, for therapy, would be highly unlikely for most working-class kids in Accrington, where the priorities of survival and meeting one's basic needs greatly outweigh creative pursuits.

What I Want Exists, if I Dare to Find It

"On the top of the hill looking out over the town I wanted to see further than anybody had seen. That wasn't arrogance; it was desire. I was all desire, desire for life."—

Jeanette Winterson, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

"When you climb to the top of the hill and look down you can see everything, just like Jesus on the pinnacle except it's not very tempting."—*Jeanette Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Winterson's second interview was a success and landed her a place at Oxford; however, her fear of being singled out as different, or working-class, would come true on her first day of class: "On our first evening as undergraduates, our tutor turned to me and said, 'You are the working-class experiment'" (142). In the memoir, however, Winterson doesn't seem to take offense or display any insecurity with this naming or labeling. Rather, what her discussion goes on to show is that Oxford was a place where she came to better understand and become more comfortable with her working-class identity. Furthermore, Oxford was a place where she came to recognize the many faces of misogyny and comprehend the complex force of institutionalized patriarchy. But what is critically absent from the memoir is any mention of the university or city—be it Oxford, London, Paris, etc.—as a place of confirmation or celebration of her queer identity. That is, Winterson's telling of her migration from rural town to city doesn't fit part and parcel into the metronormative narrative that J. Jack Halberstam describes.

The metronormative narrative, as I outlined in Chapter One, is a gay cultural narrative that influences queer cultural productions as well as queer academia. It figures the city as a place of tolerance or, essentially, as a gay mecca, where large populations of queers congregate in order to form community. The metronormative narrative thus devalues rural areas, rendering them as sites of violence and homophobia, where the opportunity to lead an open, or personally fulfilling, queer lifestyle is typically denied. As a result, the metronormative narrative suggests that in migrating to the city, rural queers are able to actualize their queer identity and achieve some sense of sexual liberation. I previously explained the number of ways

in which this cultural narrative is problematic. But here, with Winterson's case, we can clearly see that it fails to account for how other aspects of identity, besides sexual orientation, might affect one's reasons for leaving the country and one's personal response to living in the city. Winterson believed that higher education and the city were a means to escape the limitations placed upon her northern working-class female subjectivity. And while her education and the city did, arguably, provide her with the opportunity to overcome her class status, the city did not become the cure-all that she envisioned. The demons of her past and how to cope with her family history still haunted her. One reason for this was that she found herself an outsider in the city as well, since she often felt as if people were unable to understand her because of her subjectivity. She voices this explicitly in the text: "And later, when I was successful, but accused of arrogance, I wanted to drag every journalist who misunderstood to this place, and make them see that for a woman, a working-class woman, to want to be a writer, to want to be a good writer, and to believe that you were good enough, that was not arrogance; that was politics" (138). Here we see a reversal of Winterson's previous behavior at Oxford, where she lacked any sense of self-entitlement in her initial interview at the university. Instead, what Winterson shows us here is that she realized, much later in life, that for a working-class woman to feel entitled, to feel as if she is deserving of recognition and respect, is to challenge those discourses of oppression that argue otherwise.

We see this same dissatisfaction with the city played out in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. In the remainder of this section, then, what I would like to do is use

the memoir as a key to understand how class and the young protagonist's journey from town to city are depicted in the novel. It's important to note, however, that I'm not intending to separate fiction from fact in the novel, with the memoir functioning as my gauge of truth; I fully recognize that the memoir is a crafted tale as well.

Rather, I'm interested in the memoir as another version of Winterson's story, one that allows us insight into how the novel works with class and portrays a rural queer's migration to the city. With that being said, let's start with an analysis of class and move to a discussion of the novel's rendition of the metronormative narrative.

Like the memoir, *Oranges* also depicts Jeanette's personal working-class experiences in addition to those of the general working-class community. And often times, Jeanette's experiences are marked by rurality as well. For example, she describes how she spent a good deal of time on the toilet, which was outside, because it was the most private place in a household that only had one bedroom (16-17). If we recall my discussion of blackouts in the memoir, which included descriptions of unreliable utilities and a dearth of modern appliances, then we see that this is a similar case for Jeanette. Not only is this a working-class experience, insofar as living quarters are cramped, but the absence of modern plumbing is a testament to rural working-class experience. In another example—that isn't a marker of rurality per se—Jeanette explains that she often didn't have bus money, and so she would "[walk] the couple of miles through the cemetery and round the back of the power station" to visit her girlfriend (103). On these excursions, Jeanette admits that she "sometimes" would "steal her a bunch of flowers from the new graves" but "never told her where they came from" (88). Arguably, the flowers from

graves bit is a product of the wry sense of humor that Winterson is attempting to fashion for her narrator; nevertheless, the lack of fiscal means to afford public transportation or a simple bouquet stand-in as signals of class status.

In terms of general working-class experience, Jeanette offers comparable depictions of working-class life in descriptions of the population living near the factory slums and experiences she has with her classmates. Describing the harsh conditions and inescapability of working-class life, Jeanette states: "We walked along the Factory Bottoms to get home. The poorest people of all lived there, tied to the mills. There were hundreds of children and scraggy dogs" (13). Here Jeanette touches on how these people have little hope of overcoming their circumstances, since they are "tied to the mills" (13). Some of the consequences of this way of life include, as Jeanette details, numbers of neglected, unsupervised children left to their own devices amid equally uncared for, and probably starving, animals. The issue of food is, likewise, one of importance in Jeanette's telling of a school fieldtrip to the zoo. As in the memoir, where Winterson notes that she, and many other students, often came to school with meager lunches, here too Jeanette recounts an obsession with the quality and quantity of food. The adventure, as Jeanette describes it, becomes a competition between "who had the cleanest socks and the most impressive sandwiches" (33). But attention is soon turned away from clothing and solely focused on food, as Jeanette immediately follows the former statement with, "Canned drinks were our envy, since most of us had orange squash in Tupperware pots. The Tupperware always heated up, and burnt our mouths" (33). This might initially appear as a typical retelling of a familiar school-lunch scene, where kids

compare and covet their various assortments of food. And it most certainly is that—to an extent. The difference here is that we’re not given a surface-level depiction of this common school-lunch experience. Instead, through the cultural commodity of food, this scene reveals how class status might affect one’s self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. This clearly unfolds as Jeanette discusses how “the inspectorate” moved from one lunch to the next, judging the value of each food and how that value reflects on its consumer: “It’s got bits in it, you vegetarian? I try not to take any notice as my sandwiches are prodded” (33-34). We might suggest that, besides trying to avoid annoyance with the invasion of personal belongings and space, Jeanette might also be trying to ignore “the inspectorate” in order to shield herself from an attack on her self-esteem. This becomes more evident when Jeanette shares a comparison of Susan and Shelley’s respective lunches:

Susan Green had cold fish fingers in hers, because her family were very poor and had to eat leftovers even if they were horrible. Last time she’d only had brown sauce, because there weren’t even any leftovers. The inspectorate decided that Shelley had the best. Bright white rolls stuffed with curried egg and a dash of parsley. And she had a can of lemonade. (34)

For all the kids in-between the spectrum of Susan and Shelley, perhaps this food inspection didn’t fare so badly, since what gets highlighted, in this case, is the best and the worst, the opposite ends of the spectrum. Of course, for Shelley, this attention is all good and well, considering her more valued food—no doubt a reflection of her socioeconomic status—garners her approval from the mass. It

offers her a sense of superiority: she is the best because she has the best. For Susan, however, this attention only compounds a fact that is already explicitly known by her classmates: “her family were very poor” (34). From the background information that Jeanette provides, it doesn’t seem that this is the first time for Susan’s food to be labeled as the worst. Thus, Susan consistently faces the fact that because her socioeconomic status only affords her the least or the worst, she can only serve as a representation, in her classmates’ eyes, of the worst. Or more precisely put, she carries no cultural commodity that allows her to gain any type of acknowledgement or respect from her peers. While we can’t effectively imagine or pin-down the toll that this would take on Susan’s self-esteem, with the memoir, and specifically Winterson’s first interview at Oxford, in mind, we might suggest that this is how any sense of self-entitlement starts to erode. When one’s class status is consistently devalued and is taken as representative of one’s self-worth, then one truly starts to believe that one is not only incapable of having or being the best, due to the limitations of class, but that one is actually undeserving of it. There is nothing of value in the self, so how could that self ever be worthy enough to gain and receive the best?

Undoubtedly in *Oranges*, issues of class are most often revealed through descriptions of and engagements with Jeanette’s mother. Unlike the memoir, in which Winterson uses her father’s working-class history as a frame for discussing her own, *Oranges* uses the mother’s class shame and personal pride to comment on class. There are likely two reasons for the novel’s focus on the mother, and these can be explained through information provided in the memoir. For one, numerous

critics have analyzed the obvious absence of the father in *Oranges*, chalking it up to Winterson challenging gender roles and/or overturning phallogentric logic. But what the memoir shows us is that Winterson's father was physically and emotionally absent insofar as he didn't know how to handle or cope with the overwhelming and demanding personality of his wife. Therefore, when it came to defending Winterson against her mother or the church, he frequently avoided the situation all together by fleeing the house or being complicit, despite often disagreeing with whatever was at play. The father's absence in *Oranges*, then, I would argue, serves as a representation of the psychical and physical absence that Winterson felt her actual father held in the household. So if the novel specifically centers on the mother in order to represent the domineering presence that Constance Winterson had in the household, then it also highlights how the mother conceives of class status, since Constance Winterson, according to her depiction in the memoir, often exhibited class shame. For example, if we recall the memoir's discussion of school lunch, then we remember that Winterson was ineligible to receive free lunches because Constance Winterson "refused to be means-tested" (56). In the memoir, Winterson attributes her mother's class shame to the fact that she married down, despite the protestations of Constance Winterson's father. Winterson goes on to suggest that much of the way she came to understand class shame was through her mother's example: "Mrs Winterson lived in the same house on Water Street from 1947 until her death in 1990. Was it a sanctuary? I don't think so. Was it where she wanted to be? No . . . She hated the small and the mean, and yet that was all she had. I bought a few big houses myself along the way, simply because

I was trying out something for her” (62). As Winterson goes on to explain, she personally enjoys “the small,” but having internalized her mother’s detest for it, she felt as if her upward social mobility demanded that she purchase the large, the extravagant.

Oranges seems to parallel the memoir in that much of Jeanette’s exposure to class issues is through her mother. Moreover, Jeanette characterizes her mother in ways that speak intimately of class. For instance, Jeanette, like Winterson in the memoir, details that her mother married down, along with adding this note: “So she never had enough money and after a while she managed to forget that she’d ever had any at all” (36). This comment seems to smack of sarcasm, since her mother displays a constant distaste for lower-class life throughout the novel. Jeanette makes this evident near the beginning of *Oranges*:

Maxi Ball owned a warehouse, his clothes were cheap but they didn’t last, and they smelt of industrial glue. The desperate, the careless, the poorest, vied with one another on a Saturday morning to pick up what they could, and haggle over the price. My mother would rather not eat than be seen at Maxi Ball’s. She had filled me with a horror of the place. Since so many people we knew went there, it was hardly fair of her but she never was particularly fair; she loved and she hated, and she hated Maxi Ball. (5-6)

This example portrays the mother’s hypocrisy and pride: a recognition that she is working-class but a refusal to lower herself to working-class standards. There are a few characterizations like this one throughout the text, but the mother’s yearning

for and admiration of upper-class life is most prominently and consistently conveyed through a quasi-foil: Mrs. Clifton. We first meet Mrs. Clifton at the market, after Jeanette tells us that her mother “didn’t like talking about money” (78). The entire market scene, with an important dialogue between Jeanette and her mother, lends itself particularly well to understanding the fiscal limitations of their class. But I want to focus on the way Jeanette’s mother engages with the actual Mrs. Clifton and the idea of her. At the moment that Mrs. Clifton appears, Jeanette has just ripped the arm on her raincoat. Jeanette insists that she needs a new one, but her mother tells her “that mac’ll outlast your father” (78). Jeanette’s mother quickly changes her tune, however, once Mrs. Clifton starts asking questions:

‘Is something the matter with Jeanette’s arm?’ she enquired.

‘It’s just her sleeve,’ replied my mother, keeping her ‘H’ as best she could.

‘Oh, but I think she needs a new one, don’t you?’

My mother shifted her shopping bag.

‘No I don’t,’ I piped up, ‘I really like this one.’

She looked at me with distaste.

‘Well, I do think’

‘We’re getting a new one this afternoon,’ said my mother firmly. ‘Goodbye.’ She moved us away, leaving Mrs Clifton alone beside the belly of pork.

‘You’re a disgrace,’ hissed my mother, as soon as she could.

‘What would your granddad say?’

'He's dead.'

'That's not the point.'

'She's stuck up and I don't like her.'

'You be quiet, she has a lovely home.' (78-79)

Throughout this encounter with Mrs. Clifton, Jeanette's mother is clearly worried that she or Jeanette will mark themselves as working-class. We see this in the way that she manipulates her pronunciation of words, her nervous shifting of the shopping bag, and her hasty exit when Jeanette starts to give their identity away. For Jeanette's mother, Mrs. Clifton is respectable singularly due to class status: she has "a lovely home" and does "her shopping at Marks and Spencers" (78). And so it is important to her that she and Jeanette, as Jeanette's grandfather would have wanted, put on airs and act as if they're not working-class. In doing so, they appear as social equals to Mrs. Clifton, rather than the social inferiors that Jeanette's mother believes they are.

The group of women that Jeanette's mother spends time with, however, does not share this belief. On the contrary, these women think that Mrs. Clifton is a "stuck up thing" (122). They view her as someone who lords her class status over people in order to get a reaction, in order to belittle them. Thus the contrast between the opposing views of the group and Jeanette's mother serves to further highlight her class shame. This distinction is especially made clear in a café scene, when a waitress named Betty approaches the group. Betty tells them that Mrs. Clifton visited earlier and then offers her personal opinion of the woman: "'She's a right one, common as muck, but all fancy with it'" (81). Following this statement, Jeanette

details that her “mother blushed” (81). But Betty doesn’t stop there: “I said to her, I said, Doreen, what you pay at Marks and Sparks you get for half price down here But you know what she said back? She said, posh as anything, I like to fill my freezer with things I know are good, Mrs Grimsditch” (81). Throughout Betty’s dialogue, Jeanette describes the other women voicing their agreement with her statements. And as soon as her dialogue ends, they chorus in with critiques of Mrs. Clifton, asking why she couldn’t use Betty’s first name. Jeanette’s mother tries to break-up this attack by saying, “Mrs Grimsditch,” but she is “glowered” at and corrected by Betty, while the other women ignore her plea for help (81). As Jeanette explains, her mother is “visibly distressed” until the waitress offers Jeanette a weekend job (81). Then her “mother brightened up” (81).

Based on the social interaction in this scene, we can gather that these women are well aware that Jeanette’s mother is ashamed of her class. But rather than acknowledge her mimicking and support of Mrs. Clifton’s behavior, they attempt to ignore it and change the subject. For Jeanette’s mother, much of her class shame becomes an issue primarily in social situations. When the demands of their working-class life are kept more in the private or domestic sphere, then she’s not as resistant to or ashamed of it. Jeanette relates a good example of this towards the end of the novel, when she describes the old man that they would buy ice cream from when she was little. Because a horse pulled the ice cream cart, Jeanette’s mother would make her return with not only ice cream, but horseshit as well. And her mother’s particular response to this instruction shows that she had no qualms about it:

“‘Grand’ beamed my mother as I tottered down the lobby trying not to slop. ‘Go and

dig it in to me lettuces” (149). This action, the retrieving of shit in order to fertilize soil, is a resourceful response, on the mother’s part, to the rural working-class conditions that the family was living in.

The novel offers more than a one-sided depiction of Jeanette’s mother as someone whose overweening personal pride made her unbearable to be around. While it’s certainly easy to read Jeanette’s mother this way, and many critics have done so, there is one minor, but nonetheless sympathetic, understanding of the mother’s positionality:

She walked out one night and thought of her life and thought of what was possible. She thought of the things she couldn’t be. Her uncle had been an actor. ‘A very fine Hamlet,’ said the *Chronicle*. But the rags and the ribbons turn to years and then the years are gone. Uncle Will had died a pauper, she was not so young these days and people were not kind. She liked to speak French and to play the piano, but what do these things mean? (9)

I read this passage as Winterson’s way of acknowledging that her mother’s personal desires and goals were partly curbed due to her sex. Coming of age in a society where women were financially dependent on men, Winterson’s mother, from both social narratives and expectations, had good reason to fear the single life or the risk of financial ruin that often accompanies an artistic career. Thus, this short passage seems to be a homage to that specific plight, not necessarily a way of excusing or condoning the mother’s self-righteous behavior, but a way of recognizing and confirming that a part of her anger stemmed from her unequal social situation.

Shifting from an analysis of class, I now want to turn to the novel's representation of Jeanette's migration to the city. One theme that *Oranges* presents is the need to escape via the image of looking over the town from atop a hill. This hillside retreat is a place that Jeanette usually frequents when she's upset and in need of some time for personal reflection. However, there are three particular instances in which her visit involves her noting that the town is place that she would rather leave. The first occurs at the beginning of the novel and merely hints at a dissatisfaction with the town: "When you climb to the top of the hill and look down you can see everything, just like Jesus on the pinnacle except it's not very tempting" (6). By the time we get to the second instance much later in the novel, Jeanette's intentions become more clear: "When I looked over the town, nothing had changed. Tiny figures moved up and down and the mill chimneys puffed out their usual serene smoke signals. On Ellison's Tenement they had started to run the fair. How could it be? I had rather gaze on a new ice age than these familiar things" (101). Jeanette's view of her small world suggests that a change in scenery is necessary. She finds the town dull, a place with little or no excitement or room for possibility. It's a place where one can easily get mired, stuck in a routine that provides no opportunity for dramatic shifts in one's personal life. This depiction of the town as a trap, a weight that would inevitably hold her down, is more refined in a passage that happens when she returns from Oxford: "It's a visitor's privilege to be foolish. Right to the top I climbed, where I could watch the circling snow fill up the town till it blotted it out. All the black blotted out. I could have made a very impressive sermon . . . 'My sins like a cloud hung over me, he blotted them out when he set me

free . . . ' that sort of thing" (170). After having spent a few years away, Jeanette now considers herself a "visitor," and the biblical allusion that she makes implies that her "sins," or the weight of the town, were lifted once she left and was "set . . . free" (170). Her migration "blotted . . . out" the limitations that she faced in the town in the same way that the white snow covers and blots out the architecture of the town (170). But along with this sense of liberation, Jeanette also expresses disappointment in her realization that the city is no panacea; it's not the place where she can create herself anew and easily forget her past. I will return to this idea momentarily, but let's first ask how the novel portrays Jeanette's reasons for seeking the city.

Jeanette's journey to the city is told through a mixture of fantasy and semi-autobiography. It starts with the fantastical tale of Winnet Stonejar, an anagram for Jeanette Winterson, and lays the foundation for Jeanette's journey: it is one based on the desire for knowledge and ability to overcome the limitations of her class status. In the Winnet section on page 153, we are told that Winnet arrives in a forest that is similar to her own but different and is rescued by a woman who takes her to a village and nourishes her back to health. We can read this as code for Jeanette being kicked out of her home and church and receiving work and care from fellow townsfolk. But notice how Winnet is characterized in comparison to the villagers:

The villagers were simple and kind, not questioning the world. They didn't expect Winnet to talk very much. Winnet wanted to talk. She had left her school and her followers far behind, she wanted to talk about the nature of the world, why it was there at all, and what they

were all doing on it. Yet at the same time she knew her old world had much in it that was wrong. If she talked about it, good and bad, they would think her mad, and then she would have no one. She had to pretend she was just like them, and when she made a mistake, they smiled and remembered she was foreign. (153)

If we recall the memoir and read this as a fictional representation of Winterson's personal experience, then clearly Winterson is grateful to those in Accrington who helped her when she was kicked out of church and home: "The villagers were simple and kind" (153). But we also see her frustration with their way of thinking, or as the narrator phrases it, their inability to question the world. And Winterson wanted to do exactly that. Winterson wanted a way to discuss and understand class oppression and misogyny; she wanted a discourse that would enable her to analyze and change her position in the world. Nevertheless, as the narrator explains, Winnet recognized that efforts to discuss these topics with her fellow townsfolk would be in vain, and so she tried to stifle her discontent: "She had to pretend she was just like them, and when she made a mistake, they smiled and remembered she was foreign" (153). We can read the use of "foreign" here as a way for Winterson to mark her Pentecostal upbringing, which made her an outsider in Accrington (153). Or we could, likewise, and perhaps more effectively, read it as Winterson marking her general self—as one who is filled with a desire for knowledge and exhibits a different way of viewing the world—as foreign among the working-class of Accrington. Thus, in order to avoid confrontation or annoyance with people's ignorance, Winterson kept her opinions, like Winnet, to herself in an attempt to pass among the average working-class.

Following this selection, Winnet visions the city as an exotic place to be revered: “Winnett had heard that there was a beautiful city, a long way off, with buildings that ran up to the sky. It was an ancient city, guarded by tigers. No one in her village had been there, but all of them knew about it, and most held it in awe” (153). One reason that the city appeals to Winnet is that the city folk do the opposite of the villagers: “The city dwellers didn’t sow or toil, they thought about the world” (153). Winnet obsesses over what life might be like in the city and believes, “If only she could get there, . . . she’d be safe” (153). Again, we see the city imaged as a place of knowledge, where one might have the opportunity to better understand and analyze the world. This passage thus touches on Winterson’s idea that the city would be a cure-all, an answer to all her troubles. As Andermahr observes, “the depiction in symbolic terms of Oxford” is “defiantly utopian” (59 *Jeanette*). The narrator goes on to detail that the villagers laugh at Winnet’s plan, encouraging her to think more practically. And in a separate section of the Winnet fantasy, the villagers’ discourage her once again: “Some called it nonsense, and told her she’d still be unhappy even if she managed to find it” (158). We might take the villagers’ reactions as commentary on Winterson’s decision to apply to Oxford. As she mentions in the memoir, the idea that a northern working-class woman would apply to a prestigious university was preposterous and not encouraged by her community.

Nevertheless, Winnet, like Winterson, remains determined, evincing Winterson’s drive to succeed at whatever costs. As the narrator explains, Winnet “could think about nothing else, and set her mind to making it happen” (153). By naively figuring the city as “a place where truth mattered” and “no one would betray

her,” Winnet’s “courage grew, and with it her determination” (158). The fantastical narrative is particularly beneficial, in this case, because it allows us to see how immature Winterson’s understanding of the city really was. No doubt, it was necessary for her to idolize and glorify the city in order to feed her determination to escape Accrington. But this type of black-and-white thinking isn’t conducive to a complex understanding of life and often results in major disappointments. Paulina Palmer notes how the fantastical narrative reveals the development and workings of the adolescent psyche: “The interplay of narratives . . . highlights the part which fantasy plays in the construction of the adolescent psyche and give a more complex and multifaceted representation of subjectivity than is usually found in the *Coming Out* novel” (101).

A portion of the semi-autobiographical narrative, which is situated between the two sections of fantastical narrative I quoted above, makes the effectiveness of the fantastical narrative especially clear. Jeanette has quit her jobs at the funeral home and ice cream parlor and is going to work at a mental institution: “It wasn’t something I would have chosen normally, but it had a distinct advantage over other jobs, because I could live in. A room of my own, at least. But I went, nevertheless, comforting myself with my plan” (158). Here we’re not granted access to Jeanette’s naïve conceptualization of the city and what it represents. Instead, we’re offered a much more practical version of her decision: she will do whatever it takes to raise enough money so that she can attend Oxford. At the same time, however, the semi-autobiographical narrative touches upon aspects of reality that are absent in the fantastical narrative. For instance, in the same semi-autobiographical section,

Jeanette engages in the following conversation with Mrs. Jewsbury: “Oh fine, I told her, I can make some money, and I have a plan for next year. She was the first person I’d confided in, apart from Elsie. She seemed pleased, told me it was a good idea, that she should have done it herself. Things get in the way, she said, that’s what’s sad about life . . .” (158). Mrs. Jewsbury is an older lesbian and former church member with whom Jeanette has a brief affair. Her remorse for her failure to attend university and encouragement for Jeanette to do so hints at Winterson’s discussion in the memoir about the limitations placed upon northern working-class women. The “things that get in the way” in life—the lack of funds, being tied to a job, low self-esteem—these are “what’s sad about life” for northern working-class women (158). They’re sad because they offer no way out.

The fantastical narrative concludes by stating the Winnet is fearful of her journey to the city, but that she knows “one thing is” for sure: “she can’t go back” (160). Jeanette, however, does go back but not in the sense of returning to settle down or stay. Rather, Jeanette goes home for Christmas break and finds herself relieved that she did, indeed, flee her hometown. In fact, her labeling of herself as “a visitor” seems to comment upon the defamiliarization that has taken place. This return home is partly troubled because it is the first time that she’s been back. Thus, she’s overwhelmed by the memories of her struggle there and the family dynamics of the household that she’s staying in. But Jeanette is troubled by something else as well: a more mature understanding of the city. She explains how her ill-conceived notion that the city would purge her of her history did not work out as planned: “I thought in this city, a past was precisely that. Past. Why do I have to remember?”

(160). And she describes how the many attractions of the city can be alluring but at the same time deceptive: “This ancient city is made of stone . . . Like paradise it is bounded by rivers, and contains fabulous beasts . . . If you drink from the wells, and there are many, you might live forever, but there is no guarantee that you will live forever as you are. You might mutate. The waters might not agree with you. They don’t tell you this” (160). For Jeanette, the city becomes a place where she endlessly searches for a closure that doesn’t exist: “I climb, and to climb faster and faster, marveling at the design and dreaming of the view from the top. At the top there is a keen wind and everything is so far away it’s impossible to say what is what” (161). And what’s moreover, as an outsider in the city as well, “there is no one to discuss it with” (161). “It” being her subjectivity, her plight, her confusion with the city that she thought had all the answers (161). As she relates, “I came to the city to escape. If the demons lie within they travel with you” (161). So as she walks around Accrington, leading us to the end of the novel, she comes to the realization that her journey in life, her journey to understanding who she is and finding happiness, cannot be determined by a simple move in geographic location. Instead, she’s going to have to learn how to own that which she despises most: her background, her history, her subjectivity—all those things that she originally thought limited her. For Jeanette, this trip home is the “day of reckoning” (161).

Conclusion

In a comparative analysis of the lesbian subjects in *Oranges, Ruby Fruit Jungle*, and *The Color Purple*, Gabrielle Griffin states, “It is not, these texts argue,

possible to be a lesbian *and* to remain in the community in which you grew up. You have to put a space—literally—between you and it. Separation is thus acted out geographically” (88). With respect to *Oranges*, it’s easy to see how Griffin would formulate such a conclusion. Because the majority of scholarship centers on the novel’s portrayal of lesbian subjectivity, it seems natural to suggest that Jeanette’s sexuality forces her migration to the city. Griffin’s analysis is thus a prime example of how the metronormative narrative dominates theorizations of gay identity in gay and lesbian and queer studies. As I hope this chapter has shown, some of the cultural narratives that we’ve created about ourselves are just as limiting and harmful as those of heteronormativity. More specifically, in suggesting that rural queers seek the city simply for sexual freedom and find it only to be a place of liberation, the metronormative narrative diminishes the complexity of rural queer experience and disregards how other important issues, such as sex and class, factor into our ways of queer being.

Placed alongside each other, Winterson’s novel and memoir ask us, much like *Bernie*, to reconsider how we go about documenting and analyzing queer identities. Together, they help us recognize obvious blind spots in gay and lesbian and queer studies. That is, they show us how our field’s overt focus on gender and sexuality alone has worked to the detriment of a more nuanced understanding of queer lived experience. In singling out one or two aspects of identity, we fail to theorize and record how other issues, such as rurality and class, contribute to and influence the development of our personal identities. By approaching the novel and memoir through the lens of bottom-feeder politics, which takes into account the cluster of

aspects that make-up identity, we're able to see how these two rural queer cultural productions advocate for alternative, or subversive, ways of queer being the world. In other words, the novel's depiction of Jeanette's dissatisfaction with the city and the memoir's portrayal of class being Winterson's primary reason for migration to the city defy theorizations of gay identity that have been written by urban queers and understood through a monologic conception of gay identity. Thus, Winterson's experience, whether read through memoir or creative fiction, serves as a good starting point to theorizing, in much more complex terms, why rural queers might seek the city and how they might actually feel about the differences between rural and urban space.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: GOING UP THE COUNTRY

This thesis makes nothing more than a dent in communicating and working through the flood of ideas that hit me once I realized the severe dearth of cultural studies concerned with rural queer experience. Moreover, when I would read articles or studies about queer cultural productions that told the tales of rural queers (*Boys Don't Cry* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, for example), I often found myself aggravated at what I thought were simplistic analyses, which based their arguments in stereotypical understandings of rural queer experience and/or chose to focus singularly on homophobia and violence. These analyses, I felt—and still feel—only worked to affirm the gay imaginary that Kath Weston outlines. In “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” Weston writes, “The gay imaginary is not just a dream of a freedom to be gay that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between urban and rural life” (274). As J. Jack Halberstam explains, “the distinction between the urban and the rural that props up the gay imaginary is a symbolic one,” and this ideology is continually propagated, as Halberstam argues, through queer academia’s analyses of queer life and cultural productions (Ch.2).

Part of the reason for this monologic theorization and understanding of gay identity is, as Halberstam notes, a result of our internalizing the metronormative narrative. However, other issues, such as the small number of rural queers in academia and the types of cultural productions available for analysis, contribute as well. I'm never one to advocate for essentialism, but just as it was once problematic for men to be the primary critics of women's fiction or for white people to be contributing most analyses of African American fiction, we must now recognize that it is also problematic for urban queers to primarily be speaking for rural queers and their narratives. In effect, our voices have been silenced, our stories appropriated and misunderstood. Furthermore, when cultural productions about rural queers almost always tell stories of homophobia and violence and are told by directors and screenplay writers that are either urban queers or straight, we must realize that those performing analyses of the work (probably urban queers) will likely navigate their critiques towards depictions of homophobia and violence and/or the straight eye's misrepresentation of queer experience. A brief glance at *Brokeback Mountain* scholarship confirms this stance.

Moreover, if we consider the most recent and most popular cultural productions about queers, then we see that these narratives propagate the gay imaginary that Weston defines. On the urban side, we have *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk*, which mostly appeal to a queer audience, in addition to *Modern Family* and *The New Normal*, which appeal to both straight and queer audiences in this new age of assimilation and homonormativity. Each of these shows paints the urban as a site of excess and success, where queers can lead openly gay lifestyles and enjoy the spoils

of lucrative careers and business investments. In contrast, the rural narratives, which, interestingly, achieve the most mainstream success, include *Brokeback Mountain* and *Boys Don't Cry*, two tales concerned with the struggles of maintaining queer relationships and experiencing homophobic violence while surviving in the lower-socioeconomic bracket. We have to be aware of these issues when we analyze cultural productions about both urban and rural queers. It's not that these cultural productions don't provide the possibility to theorize about other aspects of rural queer experience than homophobia and violence or other aspects of urban queer experience than "out and proud" success narratives. It's just that these representations blind us, in a sense, to the reality of our lived experience.

Additionally, we have to begin to ask ourselves important questions about why rural queer narratives appeal most widely to mainstream audiences, and why studies of rural queer experiences, like Dorothy Allison's, are largely ignored or underdeveloped, and why other rural queers, like Jeanette Winterson, never get marked as a rural. An interrogation of this kind will reveal much about queer culture in terms of, among other things, sexism and classism. These are questions that I plan to pursue in the future, and I encourage those queer academics who are devoted to an accurate documentation of queer lived experience to, as Canned Heat sings, "go up the country" with me. Trust me, it's a place where queer desire and experience can be just as interesting and intriguing as that in the city. And I'm pretty sure that the more we find out about the bottom-feeder politics of those queers living outside the city, the more we'll realize that there are some bottom-feeder politics thriving in urban locations as well.

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