The Rural South as a Gay Men's Haven in Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* and Jim Grimsley's *Boulevard*

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Abstract

Freed by the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and free of the fears brought by the arrival of AIDS in the early 1980s, the 1970s is a period often celebrated as the golden period of American gay urban areas. At the same time, some writers (writing both in the 1970s and later) point out the gilded rather than golden nature of the milieux, with many characters attempting to leave the urban areas. In this context, novels as diverse as Andrew Holleran's Dancer from the Dance *(1978) and Jim Grimsley's* Boulevard *(2002) offer a surprising image of the rural South as a haven for these gay men running away from urban areas. The present essay analyzes the development of this idea in the two novels.*

Keywords

American literature; gay literature; southern literature; Andrew Holleran; Jim Grimsley; New York in literature; New Orleans in literature; rural South in literature

Same-sex relationships seem to exist in all human cultures, and the American South is no exception. Indeed, as William Mark Poteet remarks, "Everybody in the South has a gay uncle – everybody."[1] But for a long time, the issue of same-sex relationships in southern society and its representation in literature was under-researched. Only since the early 1990s has scholarly attention been paid to the issues of same-sex love in the South. Numerous studies provide historiographic material, including oral histories, of the experience of homosexual men and women. Pioneering research has been carried out by the southern historian James T. Sears (*Growing Up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit*, 1991; *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948–1968*, 1997; *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, 2001). Edited volumes were put together by John Howard (*Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 1997), Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (*Out in the South*, 2001), or Reta Ugena Whitlock (*Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Place*, 2013).

Since the mid-2000s several studies devoted exclusively to sexual otherness and same-sex relationships in literature have appeared. In *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936–1961* (2005) Gary Richards explores the works of Truman Capote, William Goyen, Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Harper Lee, and Carson McCullers. In *Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, & the Construction of Masculinity* (2006) William Mark Poteet focuses on the works of Tennessee Williams, Charles Nelson, and Reynolds Price. In *Cotton's Queer Relationships: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936–1968* (2009) Michael P. Bibler analyzes the fictions of Ernest J. Gaines, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, Katherine Anne Porter, Margaret Walker, William Styron, and Arna Bontemps.

1 William Mark Poteet, *Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, & the Construction of Masculinity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 1.

This brief overview shows that scholars specializing in southern literature like to study authors who are already canonical and the monographs published so far avoid analyses of works by more recent authors which explore the lives of gays and lesbians in gay and lesbian communities, or, as some might say, ghettos. Moreover, some of the works set in gay ghettos, either in the South or other parts of the United States, come from different and diverse sources and some of them present rather a surprising image of the rural South as a gay men's haven. This essay focuses on this motif in two novels, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and Jim Grimsley's *Boulevard* (2002).

Critic Bob Summer was probably the first commentator who noticed remarkable similarities between Jim Grimsley's *Boulevard* and the gay classic, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*.[2] While the novels were published almost a quarter of a century apart, both explore the American gay subculture in the late 1970s. In both novels, their young male protagonists come to large cities (New York in Holleran and New Orleans in Grimsley), where they become immediate stars. Yet both men gradually realize the limits of the gay subculture at the time and one day they simply disappear, much to the confusion of their friends and acquaintances.

There is no question about Jim Grimsley's status as a southern writer. In 1999, after his first four novels had been published, Lisa Howorth acknowledged Grimsley, a native of North Carolina who spent virtually all his life in the South, as an author who was "on the cutting edge of contemporary Southern fiction, where he [had] carved out a place for himself as literary chronicler of the Southern gay experience,"[3] and in 2002 Bob Summer called Grimsley "one of the South's most notable younger writers."[4] Grimsley's canonical status in southern literature was confirmed by Jody Brooks's entry on him in volume 9 (*Literature*, edited by M. Thomas Inge) of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (2008).[5] On the other hand, Andrew Holleran is most frequently associated with the New York literary group of the early 1980s called Violet Quill, and yet he spent a significant part of his life in the South and many of his novels are, at least in some of their episodes, set there, often contrasting the South with gay New York.

Dancer from the Dance, Holleran's first and most famous novel, was a cult novel at one time.[6] It contains a novel-within-a-novel called *Wild Swans*, whose protagonist, Anthony Malone, unaware of his sexual orientation and still a virgin at the age of thirty, comes to New York and, under the mentorship of the drag queen John Sutherland, becomes "a professional faggot,"[7] completely immersed in life in the ghetto. His dissatisfaction with the ghetto gradually grows and he starts to think about leaving for a quiet place elsewhere. He tries to do that at a party, when he enters the sea and swims towards Long Island – no one will ever see him again. The story of Malone is

2 See Bob Summer, "Grimsley's Talents on Parade in 'Boulevard,'" *Orlando Sentinel*, July 21, 2002, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2002–07–21/news/0207190496_1_grimsley-newell-novel.

3 Lisa Howorth, "Jim Grimsley: Tales of Southern Courage," *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 1999: 39.

4 Summer, "Grimsley's Talents on Parade in 'Boulevard.'"

5 See Jody Brooks, "Grimsley, Jim," in *Literature*, ed. M. Thomas Inge, vol. 9 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 295–97.

6 For an analysis of the cult nature of the novel, see Roman Trušník, "Dreams of the Past Gone: Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* Revisited," in *Cult Fiction & Cult Film: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Marcel Arbeit and Roman Trušník (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2008), 87–98.

7 Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), 228.

framed with the correspondence between its fictional author, who, besides being a writer, makes his living as a hustler in New York, and another man, who has left New York for the Deep South, praising its quiet life as opposed to the turmoil of New York.

Boulevard is Jim Grimsley's sixth published novel and perhaps the one that most significantly contributes to Grimsley's position as a literary chronicler of the Southern gay experience. The protagonist of *Boulevard* is Newell, a fresh high-school graduate, who leaves Pastel, Alabama, and moves to the city of his dreams, New Orleans, where he settles down in the very center of gay subculture, in the French Quarter. After a short stint as a busboy in a restaurant, Newell becomes a clerk in an adult bookstore, and at the same time he starts to explore the sexual underworld of the area, including its drug scene. However, after an encounter with a man who beats him during sex, fear overcomes Newell and he disappears, much to the confusion of the community (only Miss Sophia, the drag queen cleaner at the bookstore, sees him leave and knows he has not been killed). Newell returns to his grandmother's trailer in Pastel, Alabama, even though he may not stay there for a long time.

At first sight, the two novels exhibit remarkable similarities, as Bob Summer correctly pointed out.[8] However, these similarities seem to be just a collection of motifs that appear not only in the two novels but are common in other works of gay literature. For example, stories of young men who come from somewhere, preferably somewhere in the Deep South or the Midwest, to gay urban centers are rather commonplace. At the same time, these men often leave the large cities after some time at the heart of a gay subculture, and settle down either in small towns or other countries. Famous novels that make use of this cliché are as diverse as James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) and Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* (1990).[9]

And there are many more common motifs: both Malone and Newell are immediate successes in the community as a result of their great looks and amiable nature. Both Malone and Newell have their mentors, though different types, who help them in their first steps in the city. While Malone is supervised by Sutherland, a drag queen of uncertain age, Newell is helped by Henry, a middle-aged man. Both novels are set in the 1970s, and both also portray the disco subculture of the period, though to a different degree. Last but not least, the style of both novels has been described as "hallucinatory."[10]

Michael Bronski's comment on *Dancer from the Dance* will provide a starting point for further discussion. Bronski says:

> By re-creating, in hallucinatory imagery, New York City's sexual underground and by idealizing Malone as a beautiful lost soul, Holleran managed to invent – and join together – two complimentary mythologies: the jaded, sexual, material world juxtaposed with the reactions and experience of the young, unspoiled innocent.[11]

8 See Summer, "Grimsley's Talents on Parade in 'Boulevard.'"

9 For an analysis of novels portraying escape from gay New York, see, e.g., Roman Trušník, "Escape from New York in Post-Stonewall Gay Fiction," in *New York: Cradle of America's Cultural Plurality*, ed. Michal Peprník and Matthew Sweney (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2007), 111–18.

10 Summer comments on "the crisp beauty of [the novel's] often hallucinatory prose" in Summer, "Grimsley's Talents on Parade in 'Boulevard.'" See the next citation for a comment on Holleran.

11 Michael Bronski, "Holleran, Andrew," in *Gay & Lesbian Literature*, ed. Sharon Malinowski (Detroit: St James Press, 1994), 187.

Both novels can thus be seen as further examples of one of the most important themes in literature, characters' transformation from innocence to experience. However, as gay ghettos in the late 1970s represent a unique situation shortly before the appearance of AIDS – the photographer Alvin Baltrop commented on the period in Joseph Lovett's 2005 documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s* as "the most libertine period that the Western World has ever seen since Rome"[12] – the experience gained from immersion in the ghetto culminates in a state of jadedness and destruction. Both novels show that the only way of avoiding destruction is escape – and, perhaps surprisingly, their protagonists find a haven in the rural South.

While Bronski did not use the expression "jaded," that is, "dulled or sated by continual experience or indulgence" or "tired, worn out,"[13] as a specific term, the idea does have currency in sociological and psychological thought. In his lecture "The Metropolis and Mental Life" the German sociologist Georg Simmel commented on the influence of the stimuli provided by a metropolis on an individual as early as 1904:

> There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as has the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves. From this, the enhancement of metropolitan intellectuality, also, seems originally to stem. Therefore, stupid people who are not intellectually alive in the first place are not exactly blasé. A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all. In the same way, through the rapidity and contradictoriness of their changes, more harmless impressions force such violent responses, tearing the nerves so brutally hither and thither that their last reserves of strength are spent; and if one remains in the same milieu they have no time to gather new strength.[14]

In their summary of Simmel Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein offered alternative terms: "A further emotional distancing is achieved in the blasé attitude toward life, 'burnout' in today's parlance, which proceeds from a sensibility that has been jaded by too much sensory and emotional stimulation."[15] I thus adopt the expression "jadedness" as a term to describe such emotional burnout.

Both Malone and Newell come in a state of innocence, and yet they find themselves at different stages in their lives. Even though Newell is intelligent, before coming to New Orleans his life experience was limited to life in an Alabama trailer. Pastel, the fictional town, does not offer much of culture in any sense of the word – even when trying to get hold of a map of New Orleans, he had to get it by special order from a filling station.[16] Newell comes right out of high school, with the ink still drying on his diploma, and wants to live in the French Quarter. His desire to live there is so strong that he willingly makes many concessions in a situation which many would think repulsive. As the narrator says: "He would get accustomed to this smell of vomit and piss,

12 Quoted in Joseph F. Lovett, dir., *Gay Sex in the 70s*, Lovett Productions, 2005.

13 *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "jaded."

14 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), 413–14.

15 Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein, "Dimensions of Conflict: Georg Simmel on Modern Life," in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, Bernard S. Phillips, and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 347.

16 See Jim Grimsley, *Boulevard* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2002), 3.

he thought, as he headed down the tilted sidewalks."[17] At the same time, his lack of experience of life in any larger city makes it much more difficult for him to find accommodation, which he manages by mere chance.

Malone enters the New York gay underworld much later, at the age of thirty. At the time, he was a lawyer with an elite education and came from an upper-class background, and yet was leading a boring chaste life in the suburbs. At the time, he was "the kind of person who telephoned Citizens for Clean Air if he saw black smoke issuing from a building smokestack on Manhattan longer than the legal limit of ten minutes."[18] His sexual awakening came only when a Puerto Rican message boy appeared in his office, and, seeing Malone's desire and loneliness in his eyes, he kissed him, which for him was "the kiss of life."[19] After this experience, Malone resigned from his job and moved on to "pursue a career in journalism," which was only the official cover for pursuing his "career in love."[20]

Malone spends several years in his search for love, a rather vain effort in the sex- and drug-obsessed discotheque subculture in which he becomes immersed. While he remains good-natured, over the years he becomes more and more aware of the superficial nature of the ghetto and moves towards jadedness, as he is overstimulated and exhausted by his life in the gay underworld when he becomes, like many others, a "full-time fag."[21]

One day, Malone disappears, and nobody knows for sure if he managed to leave the ghetto, as speculation about his whereabouts proliferates among his friends and acquaintances. We never learn if he drowned, or left New York for Asia or another place, all of which are possibilities suggested by other characters.

Moreover, Holleran shows that Malone's feeling of jadedness was much more universal and that people simply disappearing was a relatively common phenomenon when the narrator remarks that "[most of] the faces we had been in love with, . . . whoever they were, had disappeared to farms upstate, California, or the Hamptons."[22] But bracketing Malone's story with the novel's epistolary frame creates a distance from Malone's story, and thus an opportunity for a less involved discussion of the phenomenon; this discussion is between two men who have lived in the ghetto and know it first-hand, including the feeling of jadedness and imminent destruction from which one of the men flees.

In the exchange of letters, the man who stays in New York reports how he started hustling for money and that he knew one of his customers at Choate (an elite boarding school). The man who left New York for the South, on the other hand, extols the pleasures of everyday life in the South, often drawing striking contrasts with his life in New York:

> *Tomorrow Ramon and I are going over to the neighbors to help them install a septic tank. I cannot tell you how happy I am to be helping people install a septic tank, instead of listening to friends who call at*

17 Grimsley, *Boulevard*, 4–5.

18 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 66.

19 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 77.

20 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 77.

21 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 17.

22 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 219.

> *three* A.M. *to tell me they're committing suicide. . . . There are no Suicide Hotlines down here. If they want to end it all, they row out onto the lake, very early in the* A.M. *when the family is asleep, and blow their brains out where only the ducks can hear! Saves so many message units, don't you think?*[23]

Numerous comments like this contrast the pretentious life in New York with the simple pleasures of life in the South. At this point in his life, the man obviously prefers the odor of a septic tank to the implied filth of the city. Even suicide is presented as something simple in the South, as opposed to the hysterical and self-centered bothering of one's surroundings. The description of commonplace, mundane events creates almost a bucolic image of life in the rural South, and, in a way, a return to innocence which the denizens of the New York ghetto had to lose in order to survive in the harsh environment, as another telling quote from the man's letters demonstrates:

> It occurred to me last night as I was bathing Señora Echevarria that the real sadness of gay life is that it cuts us off from experience like this: to be in a shadowed room at dusk on a spring evening, wiping the forehead of an old Cuban lady (who at least does not claim to have come from a Wealthy, Aristocratic Family of Havana, like all those queens in New York) while Ramon spoke to her in Spanish . . . and there was so much LIFE in that room, not the hothouse, artificial, desperate life we led up there in Gotham, but LIFE as it is in all its complexity and richness.[24]

In this sense, Newell's escape from New Orleans and his return to rural Alabama was rather weaker, and yet it seems that if Newell had not left the city just in time, he would have been likely to arrive at the same point of (self-)destruction as many other men. The world was all new for him when he arrived in New Orleans, and he still had his small-town manners. He finds his security in his job in the adult bookstore, in which he is quite successful: he always arrives at work on time, his register never comes short at the end of the shift, he shows a great talent for arranging the material for sale, and his pretty looks attract many customers. Moreover, the number of lovers he has is not in the order of hundreds; they could probably be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Even though he is intelligent, open-minded, and curious, Newell is not able to absorb all the new experiences that come his way. When first introduced to LSD, he is overwhelmed and comments on this in his wondering way: "I've found a new best friend."[25] However, he finds himself in much more dangerous situations than the use of LSD, as his first boyfriend, Mark, introduces him to his friends and acquaintances and a milieu full of power, dominance, and submission emerges in front of Newell. Mark's own family history goes back to the French immigrants, one of whom is said to have seen the Marquis de Sade as he was being taken to a mental institution. One of the friends is Leigh, a scion of an old southern family and a distant relative of Mark's, and Mark, a history student, carries out research into the history of the family. The historical material from Leigh, which Mark goes through and which appears in the novel, includes the journal of a woman who witnessed the release of slaves who had been tortured by their white female owner. One of the tools of torture a black cook was forced to wear was "an iron collar sharpened by the edges."[26]

23 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 11. Holleran's italics.

24 Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, 19–20. Holleran's italics.

25 Grimsley, *Boulevard*, 203.

26 Grimsley, *Boulevard*, 210.

Collars in more benign forms are also a vital part of BDSM paraphernalia,[27] and Newell himself wears one on the job, which makes him extremely popular among the store's customers. Yet he is hardly aware of the cultural connotations of what he perceived as a mere fashion accessory, as Grimsley creates a subtle network of motifs associated with the dominance, submission, perversion, and sex slavery so typical of the New Orleans culture.[28]

Leigh lives with Jack, a handsome man whom Newell finds attractive, yet one with a reputation of "a sordid motherfucker, a sick piece of shit."[29] The men eye each other for some time but their first contact is ill-fated, as Jack takes Newell into a deserted brewery, where he beats him and has sex with him. Newell, hurt and left behind, is not sure if Jack will return and continue the torment. This scares Newell because he is not able to decide whether this was an encounter in which he can trust his partner who stops the beating when asked, or whether he has fallen prey to a real pervert who is able to kill him. The fear and overwhelming experience make Newell decide to leave New Orleans.

While he does lose his innocence, unlike Malone and other characters in *Dancer from the Dance* he never reaches the state of jadedness that can be seen in Holleran's novel. This is partially caused by the significantly lower age of Newell, as well as his much shorter stay in the gay ghetto. Newell is driven out by his strong fear in an attempt to save his life and he finds a place to move to at his grandmother's in Pastel, Alabama, where he returns, taking only his considerable savings and the duffel bag with which he arrived in the city.

However, there is a twist: unlike the man in Holleran's novel, who enjoys the simple life in the rural South and never mentions any plans to return to New York, Newell, when making a phone call to his grandmother announcing his return, would "have to make it clear to her he didn't intend to stay long. There were so many other places to live, now that he had lived in New Orleans."[30]

His short stay in New Orleans actually serves as a rite of passage for Newell, after which he is likely to explore the gay underworld in other parts of the world. After his further explorations of the gay underworld Newell may end up in a state of jadedness similar to Holleran's characters or even experience some form of destruction, and yet in the current phase of his life he is about to enjoy the safety of a trailer parked somewhere in the rural South.

Despite coming from different streams of American literature and despite being published 24 years apart, the two novels portray similar elements of the American gay communities in large cities, whether New York or New Orleans. There is a culture of bars, the discotheques of the 1970s, sex unhindered by the danger of AIDS, a tradition of mentors to younger men, and drag queens.

27 The acronym BDSM is widely used to describe all practices that include any aspect of dominance and submission. As Robin Bauer points out, it "has increasingly replaced the formerly common SM, S/M or S&M within the community, because it does not carry the baggage of the pathological associations and because it stands for a broader range of practices: bondage, discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism." Robin Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

28 This, of course, is not to say that the exploration of these issues is limited to gay literature or to the New Orleans area. For an exploration of submission or sex slavery in lesbian literature set in a different location, see, for example, Michaela Weiss, "Tipping the History: Gender Performances and Costumes That Matter in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*," *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 51–62.

29 Grimsley, *Boulevard*, 250.

30 Grimsley, *Boulevard*, 292.

For many men who arrive in these communities, this is a life-changing transition from innocence to experience. In spite of the differences between the authors, as well as the two novels under analysis, they present life in an urban gay community in the 1970s as one ultimately leading to disillusionment, exhaustion, jadedness, and potential destruction. In various stages of their lives the key characters feel the need to leave the ghetto, and they come to see the South as a viable solution to the treacherous life in gay urban ghettos, either permanent or temporary, yet voluntary, thus perpetuating the rather paradoxical image of the American South as a gay men's haven.

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