GROWING UP GAY IN THE SOUTH

RACE, GENDER, AND JOURNEYS OF THE SPIRIT

JAMES T. SEARS

Growing Up Gay in the South
Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit

"A WONDERFUL BOOK. . . . From one point of view, it is a stirring and, for me, disarming and revelatory look into the anguish that so many young gay people undergo in this society. This alone would make the book important. But, from another point of view, it is a wonderful portrayal of the way all kids grow up—the cliques that form, the sense of pecking order, the fear of being spurned, excluded by the kinds who form the 'in group' in junior high or high school; and this, I think has relevance to almost anyone. . . . So, in this sense, it is a book about conformity and independence on a larger scale than sexuality. . . . It is a critically essential novel about gay youth. But it is also an important portrait of the coming-of-age of all young people in this country. The secret anguish of adolescence has rarely been more meaningfully portrayed."
Jonathan Kozol, Educator and Award Winning Author of *Death at an Early Age* (National Book Award Winner), *Illiterate America,* and *Rachel and Her Children*

"An important contribution to American letters, both as theory and a documentation. I particularly appreciate the wide range of scholarship here as well as the lucidity. The case studies fascinate as do the commentaries, especially the last chapter. A MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT."
Louie Crew, PhD, Rutgers University; Founder of Integrity;
Author of *The Gay Academic*

"Sears has not tried to impose one mold upon the youths he interviewed, but he has allowed them to speak for themselves: female and male, black and white, belle and redneck—all the wondrous diversity that perhaps someday the South will learn to appreciate and value. *Growing Up Gay in the South* should go a long way to overcome educators' silence. . . . PROVIDES MUCH INSIGHT into an understanding of the South in general, not limited to sexual issues."
Walter Williams, Professor of Anthropology, University of Southern California at Los Angeles; Author of *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*

"SETS A NEW STANDARD for gay/lesbian sociology. The synthesis of cultural, regional, and institutional contexts with the narratives of young lesbian and gay South Carolinians creates a richer signification than the narratives alone would carry. Each narrative taps into the experience of countless others; and, while never losing its individual subjectivity, it reads simultaneously as a paradigm. As a result, a regional and generational cross-section of childhood and adolescence is brought palpitatingly alive—joys, confusions, lonelinesses, friendships, and the excitements of sexual awakenings and self-affirmations."
Donald N. Mager, Co-Chair, Gay and Lesbian Caucus for the Modern Languages (GLCML); Assistant Professor, Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, North Carolina

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James T. Sears, PhD

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The 36 Sexual Rebels

Alston
Audrey
Brandon
Brett
Carlton
Cory
Darla
Drew
Elisa
Everetta
Fawn
Franklin
Georgina
Grant
Henry III
Heyward
Irwin
Isaiah
Jackson
Jacob
Kevin
Kimberly
Lenora
'Lizabeth
Malcolm
Marian
Nathaniel
Norma Jean
Obie
Olivia
Phillip
Royce
Steve
Terry
Vince
William

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Foreword

For many lesbian and gay adolescents, high school is a lonely and often frightening place. Ridicule from teachers, violent harassment from fellow students, and other discriminatory school practices interfere with the ability of gay students to learn.

In 1984, while working on my doctoral dissertation in psychology, I surveyed ten of the largest school districts in the United States to determine the degree and nature of services provided for lesbian and gay youngsters, who make up a sizeable and well-defined minority of the adolescent population. Samples in the literature and testimonies from teenagers and advocacy groups indicated that services were, for the most part, non-existent. In order to confirm this, I sent a questionnaire to the head of guidance and counseling in each of the districts. This was followed by a telephone interview. Except for New York City's Harvey Milk School, an alternative school operated in connection with the Institute for the Protection of Gay and Lesbian Youth, services were entirely absent. Additionally the survey revealed a pattern of homophobia in the education system that systematically damages gay and lesbian teenagers, and takes the form of verbal and physical abuse, failure to discipline the abusers, and the perpetuation of a belief system which suggests that homosexuals are in every way morally inferior to heterosexuals. Generally, adolescent homosexuals were treated as invisible or as objects of hate and bigotry in the school.

It was against this background that Project 10, a counseling program for lesbian and gay youth, began at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles. Fairfax High is one of fifty senior high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, second only to New York City as the largest school district in the nation. Fairfax High School is located two blocks south of the city of West Hollywood along Melrose Avenue, a street of "New Wave" and "Punk" specialty shops. It has a student body of approximately 2500 students of

mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although West Hollywood with its large gay population is almost adjacent to the school, Fairfax students are neither more nor less sensitive to the issues of homosexuality than students from other schools in the Eastern part of Los Angeles.

Project 10 started because of an unpleasant incident involving an openly gay male student who had been transferred to Fairfax. From the day he entered he was physically abused by peers and verbally abused by teachers and peers alike. Finally, he dropped out of school entirely and turned to the streets, becoming one more casualty of a system that neither understands nor cares.

This offensive incident was brought to my attention and prompted me to investigate the background of Chris H., age 17, black, male, homosexual. Forcibly ejected from his home at age 14 for admitting that he was gay, Chris had been on the streets for about a year until he was placed in a juvenile detention home and finally a group home for lesbian and gay adolescents. All his teachers described him as "sweet," "nice," and of average intelligence with no particular learning disabilities. The only reason given as to why he encountered so much trouble in school was that he was gay. The story was always the same. He would enter a school and the students would harass him immediately. If he defended himself, either verbally or physically, he was taken to the Dean's office and reprimanded. The adults often added to his torment by their indifference or by making innuendoes or other subtle remarks about his homosexuality.

Chris' story is a metaphor for the dilemmas of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and the way these are played out in the school experience. Here was a young man – still a child in so many ways – who was separated from his family and black culture because he was gay, filled with shame, stigmatized by society, isolated from peers and positive role models, poorly socialized, and forced into dangerous sexual contacts. And in all of this, the educational system stood by blindfolded and mute.

Growing Up Gay in the South gives voice to the extraordinary struggle of lesbian and gay adolescents like Chris as they try to define themselves in a homophobic society. Through the lives of these "sexual rebels," Sears tells stories of courage and triumph in

the face of defeat. *Growing Up Gay in the South* artfully blends the distinctive features of Southern life into the biographies of a young people who must make sense of their sexual identities and struggle in a hostile world. Sears gives visibility to a largely invisible population and in doing so he has made a wonderful contribution to the body of information on gay and lesbian youth. *Growing Up Gay in the South* takes the reader on a journey that few authors have been willing to make. It will make you laugh and cry—but most of all it will grip you with its candid blending of scientific research and matter-of-fact narratives. Although regional in its data, there is a universal quality that makes this book worthwhile for all readers.

Most of all, *Growing Up Gay in the South* is a symbol of the indomitable spirit of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. This book is a validation of them as good and healthy persons worthy of respect and deserving of attention by public educators and other professionals. With its extensive bibliography and data, *Growing Up Gay in the South* is an invaluable addition to the literature on adolescent homosexuality. It is essential reading for professionals working with young people and deserves a prominent place in college and public libraries. *Growing Up Gay in the South* is the quintessential blending of interdisciplinary scholarship, wonderful writing, and provocative thinking. It is a journey which we should all take.

Virginia Uribe, PhD
Founder, Project 10
Los Angeles Unified School District
Los Angeles, California

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Preface

Growing Up Gay in the South is a wonderful book: mature, confident, elegantly written, and very moving. It is a stirring and, for me, disarming and revelatory look into the anguish that so many young gay people undergo in this society. This alone would make the book important. But, from another point of view, it is a wonderful portrayal of the way all kids grow up—the cliques that form, the sense of pecking order, the fear of being spurned, excluded, by the kids who form the "in-group" in junior high or high school; and this, I think, has relevance to almost anyone.

So, in this sense, this is a book about conformity and independence on a larger scale than sexuality. This will speak to everyone and I would hope, therefore, that *Growing Up Gay in the South* would be read by all who knew the longing to rebel against the often thankless norms that were held up to us. There is a rebel spirit in most children. Whether defined by sexuality, by religion, or by some less easily definable aesthetic impulse, it is part of the American grain, and in this respect, *Growing Up Gay in the South* is also very much in the American grain, though written "against" that grain, as most good literature is.

Growing Up Gay in the South is reminiscent of good fiction. It reminds me again and again of Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Its graphic details lend the book its gripping and idiosyncratic veracity—very vivid, sometimes bizarre, even Gothic items of pungent specificity.

I read *Growing Up Gay in the South* almost without interruption. It gripped me from the first page to the last. Although it is presented in the format of a work of sociology, I read it as enormously compelling narratives, filled with the pain and love of all good fiction

and nonfiction. It is a critically essential novel about gay youth. But it is also an important portrait of the coming-of-age of all young people in this country. The secret anguish of adolescence has rarely been more meaningfully portrayed.

Jonathan Kozol
Byfield, MA

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Introduction

In 1986 I returned to Georgia for the first time in many years. I came back home to attend the twentieth reunion of my high school graduation. My former classmates of Cross Keys High were clearly feeling confused by my presence. I had been a leader in my high school days (captain of the debate team, president of this and that, student council, etc., etc.). They might have remembered that I was the student speaker at the graduation ceremony, and a few might have recalled my editorial in the school newspaper attacking our DeKalb County School System's segregation.

Given my prominence, perhaps they were not surprised that—twenty years later—I also seemed to be the most prominent person among our number. From my biographical blurb in the *Class of 1966 Reunion Booklet*, they learned that I had received my PhD at age 24, and was now a professor at a major university. One ex-classmate, who did not recognize me, asked if I knew that one of our classmates had published four books. When I explained that I was that person, his mouth literally fell open.

Another classmate, hearing that I now live in Los Angeles, asked "How can you stand it out there, with all those weirdos and liberals?" "Easy," I replied, "I am one." With that, I opened the *Reunion Booklet* to my blurb and handed it to her. I had made sure to include in there the fact that I was president of the board of directors of the International Gay and Lesbian Archives, and had been a chairperson of the American Historical Association's Committee on Lesbian and Gay History, as well as an officer of a gay rights political organization. By the time that she read that I taught a Gay Studies course at my university, and was author of an award-winning book on the social acceptance of homosexuality in many American Indian cultures, her eyes were practically popping out. The only word that seeped through her pursed lips was a quiet

"Oh." She shortly afterward mumbled an excuse to get something, and I never saw her after that.

Others of the students (mostly the ones who were now living outside the South) reacted in the other extreme, practically throwing themselves at me, in order to let me know that my being gay was fine with them. That was quite nice of them, though I had to gently explain to a few that I was there to have a good time rather than to explain what it was like growing up as a homosexual. I think I was the first openly-gay person some of these people had ever met.

Yet, other students were decidedly cool toward me, and I figured out that it was not due to the bright Hawaiian flower-print shirt I was wearing. They were uncomfortable, it was clear, with me. Here I was, confounding all their stereotypes (well, maybe not all), in a decidedly confusing manner. Not only are gay people supposed to slink around in the shadows, but they are also (as countless fundamentalist preachers reiterate) supposed to be "anti-family." Yet, I arrived for this reunion with my mother and father, who had come down from their current home in North Carolina to meet me for this visit in our former hometown. I could see my classmates' questioning looks, as they pondered my parents happily interacting with their openly-gay son.

Sexual liberationist activism, homosexual Indian, Gay Studies, proud parents—I'm sure all this was more than some of these people could handle. It was precisely for this experience that I had made the return trip to Georgia.

I wanted to talk with those who had loudly told fag jokes in our school lunchroom, to the great delight of students and teachers. I wanted to see the reactions of those who in tenth grade had asked me why I "walked like a girl," and why my good friend Barbara (she preferred to be called Barb) acted "like a man." I wanted to see Mike Hitt (appropriately named), who had beaten me up on more than one occasion because I did not fit his notion of masculinity. Unfortunately, he was not there—I was told he had committed suicide a decade before.

One person I was lucky enough to meet was my favorite teacher. He let me know how proud he was of my accomplishments. Later, he telephoned me to tell me that he himself is gay. He said he recognized, even when I was his student, that I would be gay. A

long silence passed after he said this. Then I told him, "Do you realize how many years of self-searching struggle I could have avoided, if you had told me this twenty years ago?" I explained to him how much I needed a gay role model, a person who could provide me with a sense of pride and a sense of how it might be possible to structure my life course as a gay man. No matter how loving and supportive my parents might be, this was a role that they would never be able to provide me.

I had known that this teacher was a bachelor, and I knew he always attended our high school football games with another unmarried male teacher. I was sexually attracted to both of them, but it had never—never—occurred to me that they were homosexual. I had absolutely no role model, no real person to connect me with reality. All I had were the statements of homophobic preachers and silly fag-bashing adolescents.

Though I had received a very good education at Cross Keys High, in this one respect that school had dismally failed me. It had failed to prepare me for the reality of my life. Those lessons had to come later, and at greater cost.

When I confronted this teacher with my regrets about all the missed opportunities, he responded, "I would have liked to have been honest with you, but if this had become known I would have lost my job." I knew that. Still, I resented his compliance with a system that forces us to hide our positive contributions to society, while only bringing up homosexuality when there is a scandal. I resented my similar compliances in my own past. I resented the way the gay and lesbian movement has been intimidated by the radical Right—from Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign to the ravings of North Carolina's Senator Jesse Helms. I resented the way we had been slow to provide assistance to lesbian and gay youth, by insisting upon and supporting openly-gay projects in the schools, through scholarship programs, media campaigns, radio shows, telephone counseling lines, and rescue missions for oppressed gay and lesbian youths who all too often spend their adolescence suffering in isolated silence.

With all this in mind, I wrote a letter to the principal of Cross Keys High, offering to fly out at my expense, to address the school's student body. I explained that I would forego my usual

speaking fee because of my sense of commitment to students who might be in precisely the same spot as I was twenty years before. I never even received a reply.

That principal could not reply, because Southern polite society has not yet faced the fact that lesbian and gay youth exist. Because it is so necessary that this reality be accepted, this volume is extremely important. Jim Sears has not tried to impose one mold upon the youths he interviewed, but has allowed them to speak for themselves. He has included female and male, black and white, belle and redneck, in all the wondrous diversity that perhaps someday the South will learn to appreciate and value.

What this book shows is that, despite the gains of the gay rights movement, growing up gay in the South is still as terrifying as ever. The three institutions that most affect children—the family, the church, and the school—have been the major sources of oppression for lesbian and gay youth. Perhaps the most tragic failure has been the schools' unwillingness to address homosexuality as a subject for education. With educators' silence, youths are left with no beacon of light by which to question their prejudices. Homophobia flourishes, and many talented youngsters who might have contributed to the South's progress are either stifled or exiled.

Professor Sears' book should go a long way to help overcome this silence. His commentaries show a wide reading in the new scholarship on sexual variance and gender studies. His analysis provides much insight into an understanding of the South in general, not limited to sexual issues. The quotes from the gay and lesbian youths themselves provide moving portraits of those who, despite all the obstacles they have had to face, have survived. They are survivors, who have much to teach us all.

When I was growing up in the South, from the small town in North Carolina where I was born, past the time when I took my first job working at Georgia's Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial State Park, to the time when I studied Southern history and culture at the University of North Carolina, it was popular to blame the striving for black people's civil rights on "outside agitators." What this book proves is that this new generation of Southern lesbian and gay youth are not outsiders at all. They are no more outside their culture than are the previous generations of gay Southerners, from

Tennessee Williams to George Washington Carver, from Bessie Smith to Rita Mae Brown. Some of us have left the region, fleeing the intolerance that is as thick as the mosquitos. But whether we have left or not, we always carry our Southernness with us. We are not outside, but integrally inside. We are the sons and daughters of the South, descendents of the slaves who broke the red Georgia clay and brought forth a Cotton Kingdom, descendents of the Mississippi Confederate soldiers who brought the region to its knees in a futile struggle to retain that Kingdom. We are a reflection of the South's strengths and tragedies, we are the inheritors of the Southern inclination to rebel.

We are in fact the South's new rebels, and in some respects our rebellion is just as revolutionary as our Confederate and civil rights foreparents. It is revolutionary because almost every Southern family—if they will just be honest with themselves—has at least one lesbian or gay relative. Our rebel message is so revolutionary because it is so banal. That message is simply acceptance: acceptance of our human diversity, and recognition of the reality that some of us are just "that way." For aiding in this effort of understanding and acceptance, Professor Sears and each of the youths interviewed in this book deserve out heartfelt thanks and deep respect.

Walter L. Williams, PhD
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

Chapter 1

Peering Through Prisms of Sexual Rebels

(T)he meaning of any beautiful thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it.

Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"[1]

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Growing Up Gay in the South is unique. It portrays the childhood and adolescent experiences of 36 Southern lesbians and gay men as they attend school, explore their sexuality, and make meaning of homosexuality.[2] These sexual rebels were not cut from a single mold. Each has journeyed along a different path. You will come to know intimately the thoughts, experiences, and feelings behind 13 of these voices. You will come to recognize Vince's easy going manner crowned with a broad smile, Norma Jean's childhood scars hidden behind her pugnacious determination, Cory's cynicism and biting sarcasm masking a desert heart thirsty for love, and Obie's deep-seated resentment of her father complicated by her commitment to family. Thirteen of the book's chapters are biographical portraits of these and other homosexual youth growing up in the countryside, the cities, and the suburbs of South Carolina. Some were tomboys or sissies; many were not. Some are from poor families, a few are from wealthy ones. Some were high school athletes or cheerleaders; others were "brains" or "freaks." Some come from two parent homes and some from single parent families. Most

are from religious families, most usually Southern Baptist, others belong to rival denominations or religious sects, and a few have no religious home at all.

These are white and black children of the much ballyhooed "New South." They were born in the heady years of the New Frontier and the Great Society. They have come of age as voters during the Reagan Revolution. Their childhoods span from the late sixties to mid-seventies. By the time most had been enrolled in first grade, James Earl Ray, Sirhan Sirhan, and Charles Manson had performed their deeds of terror, Neil Armstrong had just walked on the moon, Jackie Kennedy had once again walked down the wedding aisle, and Rita Mae Brown had walked out of the New York NOW office helping to form the Radicalesbians. Woodstock, Czechoslovakia, and Chappaquiddick entered the news terrain of political geography as Fire Island, Provincetown, and Key West were claimed as free territories by their gay patrons. The race riots of Detroit and the blackened churches in Mississippi were still smoldering as slogans such as "black power" and "power to the people" burned in hearts, raising hopes or heightening fears. The "homophile movement" had given way to "gay liberation" as the neurotic homosexual figure portrayed in the successful off-Broadway production of *Boys in the Band* was eclipsed by the militant image of lesbians and gay men clashing with police in the Stonewall Rebellion. Homosexuals were beckoned to "come out of the closet" through the efforts of the newly founded Metropolitan Community Church and *The Advocate*.[3]

During their six years of elementary school, the 36 Southerners who were interviewed for this study would live through the break up of the Beatles, the Olympic tragedy in Munich, and the unrest at Kent, Jackson, and Orangeburg State campuses. They would witness battles: Ali versus Frazier; Taylor versus Burton; Vidal versus Buckley; Agnew versus the press; Spasky versus Fischer. Watergate would banish Nixon, the Jackson Five would supersede Jefferson Airplane, the American Psychological Association would remove homosexuality as a mental disorder, and Jimmy Connors would unseat Arthur Ashe. Disney World opened its doors to the public, China opened its door to the world, and the National Gay Task Force opened doors in Congress. Spurred by the formation of

the gay ghetto and identification of a gay market, magazines like *Blueboy* and *Cruise* began production. As these public events unfolded, these sexual rebels endured private events: loneliness, family strife, childhood sex play, and the meaning of color, incest, and death.

As most of these participants entered adolescence, Jimmy Carter became the first Deep Southerner since the War Between the States to be elected to the presidency, Anita Bryant's *Save the Children* campaign had been launched, and the first Apple microcomputers were shuffling off the assembly line. As these young adults were awakening sexually, the country was startled by the incident at Three Mile Island and homosexual communities were incensed by the assassination of Harvey Milk. During adolescence, their first full decade passed before them. Another decade, the 1980s, would herald a series of firsts: the first woman in space; a major political party adopting the first gay rights plank in its national platform, the first reported case of Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID). As words such as "queer" and "dyke" were assuming more personal and critical meanings for these sexual rebels, theater productions of *La Cage aux Folles* and *Torch Song Trilogy* were receiving critical acclaim. For these homosexual Southerners, adolescence bridged the death of Mao with Reagan's 49 state re-election landslide, the mysterious and much publicized deaths of a handful of citizens from Legionnaire's Disease with the complexities of a less publicized virus felling thousands of young men. During this eight year period marking adolescence, these participants would travel from the Jamaican reggae music of Bob Marley to Michael Jackson's "Victory Tour," from the Olympic feats of Romania's Nadia Commaneci to that of West Virginia born Mary Lou Retton, from the journeys of an African taken slave in *Roots* to Harlem's roaring *Cotton Club*. For most of these adolescents, however, Christopher Street had not become Main Street, AIDS had yet to enter their personal vocabulary, and the contributions of Harvey Milk, Audre Lorde, Harvey Fierstein, Holly Near and many others had yet to be a source for pride.

The young adults portrayed in this book are members of a transitional generation bridging the turmoil and social consciousness of the sixties to the "New Age" and spiritual consciousness of the

nineties. Their lives bind the epoch march on Washington of 1964 with the landmark march on Washington of 1987; their lives blend the dissident chords of "We shall overcome," to the jubilant cheers of "Run, Jessie, Run"; their lives connect the humiliating resignation of Walter Jenkins after his arrest in a men's D.C. washroom to the overwhelming re-election of openly gay Congressman Barney Frank. Their lives are living testimonials of the best and worst of preceding generations. They witnessed the struggle for lesbian and gay rights from the adoption of the model Illinois penal code to the high court ruling on the *Hardwick* case. They lived through the *de facto* segregation of schools and buses to the de jure desegregation of classrooms and neighborhoods. As they lived through these public events and struggled with their private feelings, these participants became sexual rebels.

THE REGIONAL SETTING

As a region of the country, the South is defined by its history and culture. The 11 states of the Confederacy comprise the Old South. South Carolina, the first center of Southern culture (Charles Town), the home of John C. Calhoun (the architect of the nullification crisis of 1832), the first state to secede from the Union, the site of the first Civil War engagement, and the birthplace of the "Dixiecrats," is the site of this study. Because of its prominent role in Southern history and its biracial population (as opposed to Louisiana Cajuns and Texas Hispanics), South Carolina, perhaps more than any other state in the region, epitomizes the Old South. It is not, however, the entire South. Readers living in the hills of Arkansas, the Louisiana bayous, the sprawling cities of Atlanta, Miami, and Houston, or the red-clay towns of Georgia must judge how similar their experiences are to the Carolina Southerners portrayed in this book.

Growing Up Gay in the South is important because the experiences of lesbian and gay-identified Southerners have long been neglected. Researchers, however, have not neglected the South. In their unapologetic devotion to church, community, and family, Southerners most visibly reflect those conservative values that for many define the heartland of America.[4] Social science research has

repeatedly shown the South to be less tolerant than other regions of the country on political and social issues. Racial attitudes, in particular, have distinguished the South from other parts of the country in the public mind.[5] However, in the 1980s, as other regions of the country have become less liberal, the South has become less conservative. For example, Southern youth (under 30), while expressing less political tolerance than their Northern peers, were more tolerant than young Southern adults of the previous decade. On sexual and racial issues as well, young people in the South remained more conservative than their Northern counterparts—but this difference too was narrowing as Northern youth in increasing numbers expressed more conservative attitudes. These and other changes led one social scientist to conclude, "The regions do appear to be becoming more alike, but this trend is the result of Northern change and transformation."[6]

Focusing on the historic gap between North and South, we sometimes overlook the differences within the South: between rich and poor Southerners and among various Southern subcultures.[7] In South Carolina, for example, there has always been an up-country radical populist-agrarian tradition which for generations has been at odds with the mercantile and planter interests of the tidewater region. The South has a long history of electing populist politicians, and social scientists have demonstrated that working class Southerners are more liberal on economic issues than generally assumed.[8] Excluding racial issues, these subcultural differences explain much of the variation between northern and southern attitudes regarding social welfare policy, law and order issues, and minority rights. The most conservative views are held by Southerners from the top of the socio-economic pyramid. Southerners with low incomes or living in rural areas are no more conservative than their Northern counterparts and less conservative than their "high-brow" Southern neighbors.[9] As political scientist Earl Hawkey notes, "Laying a blanket indictment on the South as representative of a distinct conservative political culture generally is not justified. Conservatism is a many splendored thing and does not appear to be confined to one region or to one group of people."[10]

This convergence of Northern attitudes with Southern values and the tendency for people under 30 in both regions to harbor more

conservative views, may mean that the phenomenon of acquiring a lesbian or gay identity in the South may be much more representative of the United States as a whole during the next decade than is the gay and lesbian experience in the nation's coastal and industrial cities.[11] Yet, most studies on lesbian and gay issues have been conducted in metropolitan areas of the industrial North or far West, particularly California. These studies fail to represent the conservative context within which these 36 South Carolinians grew up. And, they will mirror less and less the social reality for homosexual Americans growing up in the nineties.

I began this study with several questions. How do young people, living in the South, view homosexuality and themselves as sexual beings? Did these young men and women experience problems in elementary and secondary school? If so, to what degree were these difficulties associated with coming to terms with their sexual feelings? I began by assuming that growing up in the South differed qualitatively from other regions of the country. After four years of research, I conclude that the Southern experience differs in degrees but not in kind. Racism does not disappear when one travels north of the Mason-Dixon line and neither does heterosexism. Belief in God, the importance of family, and the value of honor are not exclusive virtues of Southerners. The standardization of the school curriculum, the homogenization of American culture through television, transportation, and communication, and the ascendency of the federal government in the everyday lives of its citizenry have *lessened* the differences between growing up in Bamberg, South Carolina and Rochester, New York. The differences, though, have not disappeared—a point made by Chris Mayfield in her wonderfully edited collection of Southern children's voices:

> "Growing up southern" . . . The words evoke a tide of images, both bitter and sweet: overalls and organdy, hot green fields, cool brown creeks, Grandma's front porch, lengthy and complicated family connections, Mama's fried chicken and biscuits and Granddaddy's cane syrup, "colored" water fountains and "white" ones, church, chores, Dixie, and hot dark dangerous summer nights. Today's southern children get their biscuits as often from Hardee's as from Mama. On Saturday

> afternoons they're as likely to cool off in the local shopping mall as in a shady spring-fed swimming hole. But Grandma and Grandpa and Uncle Joe and Cudn Elaine loom large in the lives of today's southern kids, just as they did in those of earlier generations. . . . "colored" and "white" labels are less blatant, but they still constrict the futures of this generation's southern children.[12]

Southern children not only are enveloped in social conservatism but are more likely to confront social ills. South Carolina, like its neighboring states, has made remarkable strides in reducing infant mortality, poor housing, and illiteracy by improving health care, social services, and education. Even so, the gap between the South and other regions of the country has not narrowed and South Carolina is generally near the bottom of state by state quality of life comparisons. The state is second from the bottom in average life expectancy and third from the top in its infant mortality rate; South Carolina is one of the top ten states in the percentage of persons below the poverty level and one of the bottom five in per capita income. One quarter of the South Carolina population is unable to read; the state ranks third in the number of prisoners per 100,000 of the population; and the percentage of South Carolinians who exercise their voting franchise is the second lowest in the United States.[13]

In some respects, the drama of growing up and acquiring a lesbian or gay identity in the South, and particularly the Carolinas, may seem distinctive from that in the rest of the country. But as you will discover, the typical story is familiar in outline: the struggle for identity and self-understanding; the power of oppression and the pain of repression; the presence of fear, triumph, silence, and courage; the absence of forbearance, trust, support, and certainty.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

A five-sided, crystal prism is a useful metaphor for understanding *Growing Up Gay in the South*.[14] Just as the observer's point of reference determines which light a crystal prism reflects, so too does our stance determine what we observe in a prism of a particu-

lar person. *Growing Up Gay in the South* uses five vantage points. These range from the impact of religious values and rituals to the attitudes and reactions of Southern peers and teachers. Each of these points of reference enriches our understanding of the experience of these sexual rebels as they construct a sexual identity.

From the first vantage point we peer into how Southern religious life influenced Vince's and Malcolm's understanding of their emerging homosexual feelings and affected their eventual adoption of homosexual identities. These chapters probe the pervasiveness of fundamental Christian values and beliefs which continue to set the South apart from other regions of the country. For both blacks and whites living in the South, the pulpit and the prayer book have been a critical, albeit taken-for-granted, force in everyday Southern life. The relative lack of cultural diversity has permitted the hegemony of "mainstream" Christian values to touch every segment of Southern life. The belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, the recitation of prayer in some public schools, the reliance on Scripture to justify social policies, and the expectation of regular church attendance defined Vince's and Malcolm's everyday world. Most lesbian and gay youth in this study first viewed their same-sex feelings and behaviors from this religious perspective. And, family and friends often judged these sexual rebels from that same vantage point. Religious experiences, also, spurred the journeys of some, as Vince's musical interest, developed under the tutelage of the *True Tones*, illustrates.

From the second vantage point we peer into the biographical "prisms" of Norma Jean, Royce, and Jacob to observe how race, gender, and social class define sexual perimeters in Southern communities and affect the construction of a sexual identity. These boundaries are, in part, vestiges of the antebellum South and of the changes wrought within the reconstructed South of the twentieth century. The restrictive public boundary between inter-racial dating or marriage is, in part, a manifestation of the long-held image of the sexually virile black male and the defenseless purity of the white woman. Though often these boundaries have been crossed in the steamy darkness of midnight passion, no Southerner thoughtlessly trespasses over them. However, these boundaries are more than historical; they are psychological. These boundaries, simplistically

represented in mental images or social metaphors such as "White Trash," "The Gentleman," or the "Oreo," are reconstructed by each generation of Southerners. These social metaphors are the result of the changing intersections and conceptions of race, gender, and social class in the South. The archetype of the "Southern Belle," for example, with its expectation of female virginity and its origins in securing a suitable beau for the nineteenth century planter's daughter, is celebrated today in highly stylized rituals such as Charleston's exclusive and secretive St. Cecilia Society, whose annual ball introduces daughters of the Confederacy, escorted by Citadel cadets, into South Carolina society.

The portraits of Norma Jean, Royce, and Jacob underscore the degree of elasticity in sexual boundaries that young people of different backgrounds within southern communities experience. Poor and female, Norma Jean represents the antithesis of the "Southern Belle." Her biography illustrates how social class and gender delimit sexual choices and meanings. Royce's portrait illuminates how sufficiently high status in a small Southern community can be enough to silence sexual innuendo and restrain would-be bullies. Jacob's story depicts his conflicts between practicing homosexuality and choosing an African-American identity.

From the third vantage point, the Southern family, we peer into the prisms of two other sexual rebels, Terry and Obie. Within a culture ravaged by pestilence and war, bloodlines are more enduring than money. In the South, perhaps more than in other regions of the country, a primal relationship exists between the land and its people, and among family and kin. Through the family name, land is passed from one generation to the next. Respect is accorded to those town families whose names bear a quiet dignity. Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of family name and family honor. They also noted that concerns about such matters generally surfaced when their *public* reputation was questioned or ritual symbols and gestures were disregarded. The lives of some of these sexual rebels were dominated by such concerns. As a consequence, their inner selves mirrored the appearances which they portrayed.

This division between public and private spheres in the South, however, can liberate as it can imprison. The town hair stylist can rave and banter to *her* heart's content as long as she respects the

sensibilities of the blue-rinse set and preserves family honor and family name. The appearance of wrong-doing rather is more central to Southern family life than the commission of wrongful acts. Obie challenges this accepted form of social hypocrisy within her family. In contrast, Terry celebrates this social ambivalence between the public and private selves seeking to balance his sexual freedom with his relatives' concern for family name and family honor.

The lives of Cory, Alston, and Everetta illustrate the fourth vantage point, childhood feelings and behaviors. These sexual rebels attend different types of schools, confront a variety of family dilemmas, and experience a variety of sexual feelings. They construct different meanings about their childhood experiences, same-sex feelings, and emerging identities.

Many elementary school boys and girls like Cory fit the norms for childhood behavior. Never experiencing sexual harassment, they may occasionally engage in such harassment themselves. These are the "kids." During adolescence, they eventually will come to terms with feeling different—with being queer. Until then, however, these children experience what most teachers, counselors, and parents perceive to be typical Southern childhoods. Beneath these surface appearances, however, lurk sexual feelings and untold experiences that will profoundly affect the manner in which they will cope with "feeling different or being queer" during adolescence. There are also a few "outcasts" found in every elementary school. These children, generally boys, evidence subjection to verbal and physical abuse. Sometimes the abuse continues throughout their schooling experience. Often their behaviors or appearances do not fit the gender-specific norms of their culture and community. Alston is an outcast. Though he did not clearly understand the words used to batter him during childhood, he felt different at a very early age. There are other students like Everetta who do not behave in a fashion suitable for a little girl, yet are *not* the butt of jokes or the target for torment with sexual innuendo. These are "the tomboys." As adolescents or adults, some of these children, like Everetta, will identify themselves as lesbians.

Our fifth vantage point will be the culture of junior and senior high school, as seen through the eyes of Olivia, Phillip, and Brett. These rebels handle their emerging sexual feelings and developing

relationships with others differently. As their heterosexual-identified classmates enjoy the support of their friends, teachers, and parents, Olivia, Phillip, and Brett struggle with their same-sex feelings in an inhospitable and, at times, dangerous school environment. The attitudes and feelings of others make the pilgrimage from childhood to adulthood more difficult than it normally is: Olivia abandons her homosexual relationship with Kris as rumors and innuendoes spread among her friends; Phillip fails to enter into any relationship lest he confirm others' suspicions; associating with homosexual students, Brett finds himself torn between a supportive teacher and gay students pressing for him to proclaim his homosexual identity, on the one hand, and his own reluctance to assume such an identity, on the other.

Stymied by fear and shame, these teens' psychological growth and development languishes. In lunch rooms, adolescent gossip and crude comic stereotypes violate their human dignity. In classrooms, the exceptional teacher expresses concern about their hurt and hardship. With not-so-hidden expectations, the school institutionalizes heterosexism while homophobia exacts a heavy psychological price from Olivia, Phillip, and Brett.

The pervasiveness of fundamental religious beliefs, the acceptance of racial, gender, and class community boundaries, the importance of family name and family honor, the unbending view of appropriate childhood behaviors, and the intensity of adolescent culture constitute the Southern psychic landscape on which these participants sketch their biographies and color their sexual feelings and experiences. From these five vantage points, *Growing Up Gay in the South* unfolds chapter by chapter as lesbians and gay-identified men candidly share their attitudes and feelings about themselves, their families, and their schooling from childhood through adulthood. They speak of private tragedies and public accomplishments; they speak with words of bitterness, determination, and joy; they speak, in the present, of their past and their future.

The concluding chapter explores the paradoxes of homosexual communities, identities, and culture. The chapter places the struggles of these 13 sexual rebels within a broader context of journeys of the spirit in which sexual difference is viewed as a gift as much as a burden.

The 13 women and men highlighted in *Growing Up Gay in the South* were chosen on the basis of their experiences and diverse backgrounds. Consideration was given to their ability to communicate these experiences and to their willingness to invite the reader into their lived worlds. These biographies portray the diversity of people who identify themselves as gay or lesbian and delineate a spectrum of prejudice and problems encountered as sexual rebels. Sexual rebels are disparate youths who have wrestled with tragically disconnected and apparently distorted sexual lives but who no longer hide or ignore the truth of their "moral deformity." *Growing Up Gay in the South* is a cacophony of voices revealing conflicts between public and private worlds in the New South; a series of histories of innocence lost and journeys to selfhood begun; a human testament to the process of social questioning in the search for psychological wholeness.

THE THEORETICAL SETTING

I was born in a Midwestern farming community that had a checkerboard flatness. My world was clearly divided. Adams always followed Jefferson Street; First Avenue never crossed Second. In my town, as in the black-and-white television world of the Andersons, Cleavers, and Nelsons, there were no shades of grey. There were no long-kept secrets. As a white, middle-class male, I learned through my family, my school, and my church how to dress, what to think, and when to repent. I learned that only girls wore dresses and sported stylish, long hair. I learned to write within the broad-lines of my ruled paper as I sat beneath an American flag and a scantily clothed crucified Christ. I learned that God punished sinners but loved the repentant. I learned that homosexuality was sinful; that *I* was a sinner.

The sexual rebels portrayed in this volume are from a different generation and a different region of the country than myself. *Growing Up Gay in the South* is portraits of Southern youth which will be of interest to a variety of readers. For readers struggling with their same-sex feelings, these are journeys into the worlds of others sheathed in sexual mythology and social prejudice. For those in the helping professions these portraits of Southern youth coupled with

scholarly commentaries provide a synoptic and interdisciplinary understanding of homosexuality grounded to personal contexts. Lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men may find *Growing Up Gay in the South* an opportunity to reflect upon, if not relive, their childhood pasts. The challenge to the canons of gay/lesbian liberation orthodoxy will provoke some activists while inspiring others to consider the long-range impact of their strategies. Scholars may use the data presented from these case studies, and accompanied by an extensive bibliography, as a platform for academic debate as well as further inquiry.

Growing Up Gay in the South is not a compilation of "coming out stories." This study explores the various intersections of sexual, gender, racial, and social class identities through the biographies of 13 South Carolinians; it examines the personal and social significance of acquiring a lesbian or gay identity within Southern culture, and describes the journeys of young adults in their search for Self. These 13 portraits, followed by scholarly commentaries, form a mosaic revealing a deceptively simple argument: **Sexual identities are socially constructed.** *Growing Up Gay in the South* develops this argument along five lines.

First, *being* "gay, lesbian or homosexual" is a modern-day phenomenon. Just as "homosexual" is a 19th century, enlightened, medical construction, "gay" and "lesbian" are social artifacts popularized in post-Stonewall America. However, the basic emotional and erotic attraction to members of one's own sex is not a social artifact. As scholars using such diverse methodologies as those of Freud, Dover, and Kinsey have demonstrated, *human beings are diverse sexual creatures*: Our ability to relate emotionally and physically to other human beings is not limited to the opposite gender. Kinsey shocked Americans more than 40 years ago when he reported that nearly half of the adult population engaged in both heterosexual and homosexual activities. Concluding that the world is not divided into sheep and goats, he stated that "patterns of heterosexuality and patterns of homosexuality represented learned behavior which depends, to a considerable degree, upon the mores of the particular culture in which the individual is raised."[15]

Second, *human beings interpret and reinterpret their lived experiences*. Reinterpretation is not a consequence of failed memory but

an attempt to reconcile personal identity with one's past. It represents an ability to reflect upon our many selves and to reconstruct them into a more meaningful Self through the soft light of introspection. It also represents our need for psychological wholeness. It is a response to the cognitive anxiety of confronting conflicting self-images.

Third, the reconstruction of personal identities is not done within a social vacuum. On the contrary, *sexual biographies are integrally related to society*. Society provides the collective cultural history, social scripts, and language that form the foundation for these constructed identities. The personal meanings of our regional, social class, racial, gender, and sexual identities are inextricably woven into a culture in which being from the north or south, upper class or working class, black or white, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual have social significance. While the intersections of region, social class, race, gender, and sexuality vary for each person, their existence and importance within our culture are social facts.

Fourth, the gay and lesbian liberation movement is essentially a political effort to establish legal and social space for homosexual-identified persons. As such, *many gay and lesbian activists work within and build upon the history, scripts, and language of the culture within which the movement was born*. By using history, scripts, and language of the old, they create space within the existing social, political, economic, and spiritual paradigm. Only thus can the practice of sexual minority politics, the creation of lesbian and gay communities, the development of a homosexual-identified economy, art, and religion rest comfortably within the very culture whose history, scripts, and language have defined them as cultural outsiders.

Fifth, homosexual loving and love-making within this culture transforms Southern adolescents into cultural outsiders—sexual rebels. This is a gift as well as a burden since *sexual identities can be as oppressive as they are liberating*. These sexual rebels suffered and eventually rebelled against the straightjacket of compulsory heterosexuality. In the process, most found self-understanding and sexual meaning through adopting a lesbian or gay identity. Yet, such self-identification limits potential sexual experiences, segre-

gates people, splits the spectrum of human sexual capacity into either/or categories, and lessens opportunities for growth of the spirit.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

Can a homosexual scholar study homosexuality? One lesbian researcher states the issue forthrightly:

> As an insider, the lesbian has an important sensitivity to offer, yet she is also more vulnerable than the nonlesbian researcher, both to pressure from the heterosexual world—that her studies conform to previous works and describe the lesbian reality in terms of its relationship with the outside—and to pressure from the inside, from the lesbian community itself—that her studies mirror not the reality of that community but its self-protective ideology.[16]

At the heart of this question is our understanding of social science research and our concept of "objectivity." A century ago, German sociologist Max Weber wrote, "the very recognition of a scientific problem coincides personally with the possession of specifically oriented motives and values."[17] Above all else, social inquiry focuses upon the personal and the person. Before being a researcher, a person is first a member of a particular culture.[18] It is within that culture that the person's view of the world is constructed. Though this world view generally remains unexamined, cultural anthropologists and interpretive sociologists resonate to the phrase, "an unexamined life is not worth living." As the most renowned scholars in these fields—Margaret Meade, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, W. I. Thomas, Robert Redfield—gained a better understanding of other cultures they were better able to appreciate and bracket their own cultural preconceptions. Though I do not claim the expertise or experience of a Meade or a Cooley, I do bear witness to the power of reflexivity that peering into another culture affords. I have thought often about my Midwestern, rural boyhood as I listened, watched, and felt the everyday sounds and experiences of Southerners: black and white, affluent and poverty-strickened, male and female. Through this intra-personal process of observation and reflec-

tion, my understanding of these sexual rebels as well as knowledge about myself has deepened.

But, can a homosexual white male researcher understand and adequately tell the stories of women or persons of color? Those who answer "no" would logically have to demand that the late newscaster Max Robinson only report the news of Black America, that Tennessee Williams or Carson McCullers restrict their insights to people of their own gender, or that Marlee Matlin refrain from assuming roles of non-deaf persons. The test is not one's ability to remain objective but one's capacity to be empathetic. Proper questions for the anchor on the evening news, the playwright, the novelist, the actress, or the social science researcher are, "Have you immersed yourself into the world of the other?", "Have you portrayed its richness and complexity?", and "Have you treated your informants/characters fairly with respect and understanding?"

Social scientists cannot expect to discover The Truth; we can aspire to convey the various truths held by others. Despite this simple fact, our admiration of empiricism reigns unquestioned. Truth, we presume, can be algorithimized into coefficients, probability tables, and regression formulae. Knowledge, we believe, is a simple distillation and ordering of sensory data. Objectivity, we surmise, is the product of precise instrumentation and rigorous controls. These commonly held beliefs ignore the fact that the "instruments themselves (are) elements of this world,"[19] that "knowledge is always, in part, subjective,"[20] and that "if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences."[21] Social science research, at its worst, imposes an order to social phenomenon and labels that construction "reality." At its best, social science research provides an interpretive framework which, at that historical moment, seems to make the most sense.

In *Growing Up Gay in the South*, I have struggled to achieve the latter. This endeavor will be judged a success if the parent of a gay son or bisexual daughter, or the former friend of a gay student or classmate of someone who is simply rumored to be gay can say, "Now, I better understand and can empathize with your struggles." This endeavor will be judged a success if the white gay man closeted in Peoria, the lesbian-feminist active in San Diego, or the black student coping with bisexuality in a Mississippi high school exam-

ines the values, experiences, and behaviors of these 36 Carolinians and thereby gains insight into the richness, the multiple dimensions of human sexual experience.

To facilitate this judgement the book's appendix displays data on each of these sexual rebels in a variety of tables and figures. These data allow the reader-as-researcher the opportunity to test the adequacy of my interpretations, to explore hypotheses which I may not have considered, and to compare their life histories with those portrayed in this book. The appendix also includes a description of the study's methodology and a discussion of related methodological issues.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Wilde, 1972:158.

2. Only a handful of studies have been reported that examine *any* aspect of education and homosexuality vis-à-vis gender, race, or region (e.g., Fischer, 1982; D. Smith, 1985). Given the lack of interest and support within and outside of the education community, this is not surprising. The few monographs which have focused on the childhood and adolescent experiences, attitudes, and concerns of homosexual adults are presented either in statistical form lacking insight into the human condition or in anecdotal extracts absent a theoretical framework (e.g., Alyson, 1980; Baetz, 1980; Bell, Weinberg and Hammersmith, 1981; Harry, 1982; Saghir and Robins, 1973; Glenbard East *Echo*, 1987; Gottlieb, 1977; Heron, 1983; Hite, 1981; Spada, 1979; Stanley and Wolfe, 1980; Trenchard, 1984; Trenchard and Warren, 1984). Further, the principal focus of these studies has been the urban, white homosexual.

3. For a social history of the modern gay rights movement and culture, see; Abbott and Love, 1972; Altman, 1971; Altman, 1982; Bronski, 1984; D'Emillio, 1983b; Humphreys, 1972; Licata, 1980-81; Marotta, 1981.

4. As a philosophy, conservatism views human beings as imperfect creatures who, left to their own selfish interests, would create an anarchic society. Limited government acknowledges the need to preserve public order while recognizing that any government drawn from the hand of humankind is beyond perfectability (Schuettinger, 1970).

5. Corbett, 1982; Hawkey, 1983; Key, 1949; Nunn, Crockett and Williams, 1978; Reed, 1972; Stouffer, 1955.

6. Hawkey, 1983:54.

7. Corbett, 1988; Wallerstein, 1988.

8. Davidson, 1972; Mathews and Prothro, 1966.

9. As the South becomes more industrialized and urbanized, this agrarian-populist tradition is eroded. "As the old South passes away, so do some of its

benefits as well as its drawbacks. The populist-agrarian tradition in the South has been a positive social force not only in the South, but for the entire nation. Its death may well herald an increase in the ideological distinctiveness of the South rather than its reduction" (Hawkey, 1983:70).

10. Hawkey, 1983:67-68.

11. This, of course, is quite opposite to the thesis of the northernization of the South popularized by scholars such as Current, 1983 and Edgerton, 1974.

12. Mayfield, 1981:ix.

13. South Carolina Division of Research and Statistical Services, 1990.

14. I am indebted to Janet Miller (1990) for her suggestive use of the prism metaphor.

15. Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, 1948:660. In his later work (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard, 1953:450), he went on to state: "Exclusive preference of behavior, heterosexual or homosexual, comes only with experience, or as a result of social pressures which tend to force an individual into an exclusive pattern of one or the other sort."

16. Krieger, 1982:108.

17. Weber, 1946:60-61.

18. Gouldner, 1971.

19. Schultz, 1970:54.

20. Morris, 1966:121.

21. Thomas, 1927:576.

VANTAGE POINT ONE

Homosexuality and the Religious South

Protestantism reigns supreme in the South to an extent unmatched in this hemisphere.

Kenneth Bailey,
Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century[1]

The importance of the Protestant religion in everyday life is certainly not unique to Southerners.[2] Americans have a long history of seeing themselves as God's chosen people. While tolerating a diversity of religious beliefs ranging from Judaism to Mormonism, Americans, in general, remain no less committed to belief in God, the specialness of their new Zion, and the righteous certainty of their earthly role to evangelize the world for God and Democracy.[3]

Southerners share these core beliefs with citizens of other regions of the country. Unlike people in other regions, however, Southern Christians often are more orthodox, their reading of the Bible is more literal, and their religious rituals are more flamboyant.[4] Gracing the steeples of most southern churches are Baptist or Methodist crosses. For whites, the dominant denomination is the Southern Baptists and for African-Americans it is the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The power of Southern religion is evident in activities ranging from marches on state capitols protesting racial segregation to marches around health care clinics decrying abortion on demand. The pervasiveness of Southern religion is captured in

literary works such as Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* and Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*. The South has produced such preachers of national prominence as Charles Grandison Finney, Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, Jr., J. Frank Norris, Billy Sunday, and Jimmy Swaggart.

A majority of South Carolinians, black and white, are conservative Christians. They are Southern Baptists and African Methodists, Congregationalists and Jehovah's Witnesses, many subdued by the fear of an Old Testament God, lying prostrate to God's will. Crippled by grief, guilt, and despair, they are fervent believers in rebirth and redemption, the blood of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Ghost, salvation and eternal damnation.

South Carolina is a land set apart by suffering as much as by love. It is a land of tent revivals, cable television preachers, and evangelistic amusement parks. Belief in Scriptural exactitude is impressed upon children's minds, the template of the soul. In Sunday school, girls, clothed in modestly trimmed white cotton dresses, absorb metaphysical absolutes: temptation, original sin, hell, and Satan. Wearing their best J. B. White brown suits, boys learn of the great earthly morality play in which their role is to be a witness for Jesus. South Carolina is a state in which righteousness *is* enforceable as ministers overwhelmingly favor strong laws regulating liquor sales, gambling, pornography, and marijuana.[5] South Carolina is a state in which any discussion of homosexuality is barred by law in sex education for grades K-7, and any discussion of homosexuality beyond grade 7 must be placed in the "context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases."[7] South Carolina churches have contributed to change as well as stability. The moral authority and political framework for the Civil Rights Movement has its origins in the southern black church. The relatively peaceful school desegregation movement of the early seventies owes much to the inter-denominational and inter-racial cooperation of ministers and their congregations.[7]

Not surprisingly, then, religion greatly influenced the formative experiences of many of these 36 lesbian and gay Carolinians. This influence is illustrated in the biographical portraits of Vince and Malcolm. In the words of the great southern writer Flannery O'Connor, they learned that "evil is not simply a problem to be

solved, but a mystery to be endured."[8] Whether on the grooves of an Elvis Presley album or through the effeminate mannerisms of a boy worshipping in a Kingdom Hall, evil is neither something to tolerate nor understand; it is a simple fact of everyday life.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Bailey, 1964:ix.
2. The lineage of Protestantism is represented in the thinking of such diverse groups of men as: Roger Williams, Jonathan Edwards, and Cotton Mather; Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson; Woodrow Wilson and William Jennings Bryan; and Warren Chandler and Josiah Strong. Currency engravings, the rise of the land-grant colleges, the inception of Scouts and the Young Men's (and Women's) Christian Association, and the passage of the 18th Amendment reflect this Protestant vision of America.
3. I have found the work of Bellah, 1975; Lippy and Williams, 1988; Marty, 1970; and Marty, 1981 most useful in reflecting upon the influence of religion on the American consciousness.
4. Religious regionalism has characterized the United States since the 17th century. In order to understand the unique structure, style, ritual and theology of Southern religion, I have found the following works most useful: Baker, Steed and Moreland, 1983; Bolton, 1982; Eighmy, 1972; Harrell, 1981; Hill, 1967; S. Hill, 1972; Hill, 1980; Hill, 1983a; Hill, 1983b; Hill, 1987; Hill, 1988; Issac, 1982; Mathews, 1977; Reed, 1986b; Stark and Glock, 1968; White and Hopkins, 1976; Wilson, 1985; Yance, 1978.
5. Sauds & Guth, 1981.
6. South Carolina Comprehensive Education Health Act, 1988:7.
7. For an insightful analysis of the relationships between the white and black Southern Baptists and their ministers during the years preceding and immediately following the *Brown* decision, see Blackwelder, 1979; Manis, 1987.
8. O'Connor, 1969:209.

Chapter 2

White Churches: The Southern Baptists and the Fundamentalists

VINCE AND THE TRUE TONES

This is not the age of the thinker; it is the age of the doer. If you try to think crossing a highway or street, some fool will run over you.

Bob Jones, Sr., *Gothic Politics in the Deep South*[1]

Vince is an articulate gay man of twenty-three with a broad-rim smile and a Southern twang. Born in the mountains of the Piedmont, his father, Vernon, operated a machine shop outside the house and was the chairman of the deacons for the local Southern Baptist church. Vince's earliest memories are enjoying baths with Vernon at the age of two. "Sometimes through our bathing experience he would let me place my hand on his chest. I loved doing it. I started judging older men: was he someone I wouldn't mind laying my hand on his chest?" Vince's mom, Melba, worked at home and served as the church's assistant music director and secretary. Vince remembers:

> I'd come in for Sunday school. Then we would have worship at eleven o'clock. After church my mom's side of the family would always have get-togethers with lots of food and music to go around. There would always be lots of people. My mother was the youngest of nine children and all of them were horny little devils so they all spread out into a rather large clan.

> Then we'd have training union an hour before the Sunday evening service.

Vince's fascination with music began at a very early age. "Mom was making an album while she was carrying me." At the age of five, he remembers listening to his mother's country and western albums:

> One night we had company over and my mom was playing records—that was real hip to play records for your company. Mom played all her albums saving Jailhouse Rock for last. She knew that I was scared to fuckin' death of that song. At last she put it on. I was in front of the stereo and I let out a yell. I took out the front door and went running for grandma's, stumbled onto her porch, and put my head onto her lap.

At this time, Vince began identifying more with his mother, as his father "started to be the master of the house":

> I was never hit. "Whuppings" is what they called it. I never got one of those although I always wish I had. Instead of hitting me a few times with a belt, which would have caused a few welts and hurt maybe ten minutes, I had to go without television, my stereo, and my drums. I was a very good boy.

When Vince started school he cried every morning as his mother prepared him to leave home. By the end of first grade "David, Sam, and me were the three most popular boys. Darlene, Debra and Margaret were the most popular girls. We were the boy and girl triplets." Throughout elementary school, Vince still remained a bright and likable student. He enjoyed playing little league football on Saturdays, drums for a Gospel group on church nights, and softball with the church team during the summers. He also did well in school. His parents developed an academic reward system: each "A" would earn him ten dollars, and five dollars was given for each "B." Vince recalls, "I was raking up fifty to sixty dollars every time report cards would come around." Vince also began enjoying childhood sex play with his cousin:

> Whenever I would go see my grandparents, I would see Clift. Me and Clift would go fall in the bedroom which was just right off from the living room. We would just close the door, lock it, and go at it. It began as childhood curiosity: show me yours and I'll show you mine. It progressed from there. It felt wonderful. I remember that I always thought that I was going to get pregnant from Clift.

By the time Vince entered sixth grade, he knew he was a "homosexual":

> It is so vivid. I was in the sixth grade. I had just heard the word *homosexual* and I knew what it meant. But, at the time, I didn't know the social stigma that went along with it. We were waiting in line to get on the bus and I told my second cousin, George, "I am a homosexual. I make love to men." Then I forgot about it.

A year later Vince began to understand the social meaning of homosexuality.

> One morning George and I were riding the bus. We were the only ones in junior high on it. George looked across the aisle at me and yelled, "Hey, Vince. Do you 'member that time you said you were a homosexual?" If I could had made myself into melted butter I would have been running all through my seat. Everybody was going "Ahah!" George realized he shouldn't have said what he said because he tried to take it back right then. I learned when I made that one slip with George that I would never slip again.

During junior high school, Vince and his fellow classmates began exchanging "fag jokes":

> That really became a code word for some of the boys on the team. Anybody who was a little different was labelled "fag." We didn't understand what it meant. We had been told a homosexual was some depraved, drooling, old man who went around the park feeling around young kids, seducing young boys, and had the personality of a frog. It was morally repre-

> hensible. It was the ultimate scarlet letter: gay, fag, pansy, queer, sissy, dick-sucker.

Although he was president of his Sunday school class, by eighth grade Vince no longer attended his Southern Baptist church on a regular basis. His father discovered a sexual liaison between Vince's mother and the church's softball coach. "The affair was over when Dad found out. It was just the fact that he could never bring himself to trust her again and that Mom thought Dad should forgive." Vince suffered during this time of emotional upheaval:

> My parents had asked me jokingly, "If we were to divorce, who would you live with?" I would always think to myself, "That will never happen." Then suddenly here I was confronted with it. I was very torn emotionally. My mother got suicidal at the time. I went through a period of about a year where I was almost phobic of the thought of coming home because I didn't know what Mom had planned for the night. One night I sat in the living room with her hands held in mine because she had pills that she was going to take. It was her way of crying out for help because her 18-year marriage was falling apart.

During early adolescence, Vince continued to engage in homosexual activity with one or two close friends, his grades slipped, and he started to write "dark poetry." He also had a heart-to-heart talk with his Sunday school teacher about his homosexual feelings:

> I only told him because I was so damn attracted to him. I had these big fantasies about telling him, "I'm gay" and he'd say, "Me, too. Let's do it!" Of course, that didn't happen. I told him I wanted to talk to him about something that was really bothering me. But I didn't know what to say. So, he started a game of 21 questions. He said, "You haven't got some girl pregnant, have you?" I said, "Far from it." Finally, he asked, "You don't think you're a homosexual do you?" I said, "Yeah." I couldn't bring myself to say, "Yes, Baxter, I am a dick-sucker." He asked me if I had done it with anybody. I lied. We talked. He didn't say, "You damn sinner, get

> on your knees." He said, "Any time you need me just call." I would call twice a week. I was like a fuckin' leach. I think he got tired of it. I finally gave up. He never said he didn't want me to talk about it anymore. I was just smart enough and picked up on the vibes.

Vince continued his sexual exploration, experiencing "my first piece of womanhood." During his parents' separation, Vince was alone in the early evenings. A friend of the family, Carolyn, would sometimes come to stay with him. He and Carolyn, who was a year older, "ended up making it or making an attempt to make it." Vince continues: "I don't know if I got it or not. All I know is that it was so dry, I didn't think I was going to have any skin left." Asked why he even bothered with Carolyn knowing his feelings toward men, he responded, "In the back of my mind I thought maybe if I did it with a girl I would never want to do it with a guy again. I was realizing no matter how you dress it up and try to make it look fancy, it's tough being a fag." Vince's sexual fantasy life was also active. Every day during industrial arts class he would sit, stare at his teacher, and imagine engaging him in sex. "Just the things he said were enough to provoke a sexual response," Vince remembered.

In the turmoil of his parents' breakup and coping with his sexual feelings, Vince changed congregations and became involved with a fundamentalist Gospel musical group, *The True Tones*. "I was saved and baptized when I was six years old. After that, I'd cuss and I didn't read my Bible. Then, in tenth grade, I joined *The True Tones*." The group toured the Southeast in a customized bus and cut records in a private recording studio. Vince considered himself lucky to join the group.

> I said to myself, "I'll be a good ol' boy and straighten my act up now that I'm playing with a good group like this." For the first year I got back into my Bible. I started praying—"If this is so wrong, God, why don't You do something to change me?" But, I still practiced homosexuality. Then, one day we went to a town in North Carolina to sing at an Indian charismatic church. There were people banging their heads against

> windows and doors, dancing up in front of the podium and fainting, and other people coming up and covering them with sheets. I was trying to keep my mind straight and remember what I was playing on the drums. About that time, a little voice inside said "Give up Rock 'n Roll." The next thing I knew I was leaving my drum kit behind and I went up to Billy Rob [the group leader] and said, "I think God wants me to give up my Rock 'n Roll." He let out a yell and said, "Hallelujah!" The whole group got down and prayed with me. That was on Saturday night. The next Friday we had practice. I brought $800 worth of albums and poured paint thinner on them and struck a match. It didn't last but for about two weeks before I was missing my old *Kansas* album. I was depressed. I could have shot myself for doing something that stupid. Personally, I think I was a victim of mental illness that night. It must have been a spontaneous, psychosomatic, neurotic, induced response.

Vincent continued with *The True Tones* for the next two years while clandestinely listening to *Yes*, *Genesis*, *Kansas*, and *Rush* and surreptitiously engaging in homosexual activities.

> I still had the wool pulled over their [the group members'] eyes. But inside I was deeply depressed. There was nowhere I could go when I was in high school to get information about what I was from people of my own. I didn't know anything about rest areas. I couldn't have even gotten to them if I'd wanted to 'cause I didn't have transportation. I couldn't go to a gay bar. Homosexual-oriented material just was not within my grasp.

I reminded Vince that he came across material supportive of being gay when he was about 15. He quickly responded:

> Oh, yeah. There was one book in the school library, but I never had the courage to check it out 'cause it had "GAY" written on it. But, I did sneak a few peaks at it. It was a prize winning novel written by a man about how he felt about his homosexuality. I wanted to check that book out *so* bad. But, I

> didn't. I just knew that whoever the librarian was that stamped my card would look at that book, see that it was about being gay, and automatically say, "Why Vince, you're a faggot, aren't you?" So, I never got to read it—except for the cover.

Throughout high school Vince maintained a "straight image." He was a solid *B* student and a second stringer on the school's football team.

> I played because I liked to. I wasn't playing to prove that I wasn't gay. I just enjoyed it. I also found it enjoyable being in the shower sometimes. It was a nice view. There were quite a few football players that trotted through every now and then.

During high school Vince also edited the high school newspaper, wrote for the school's literary magazine, and had a steady girlfriend, Terri.

> I met Terri in tenth grade. She came to see me play one night. I wasn't ashamed of my classmates coming to see me play although the Vincent that played drums on the stage with this Gospel group was a much different Vince than played football. She started that night to like me. We never had sex, but she was a very beautiful girl. I was always comfortable with her. We talked intimately, not about sex, but I knew personal things that had gone on in her life and I told her personal things that had gone on in my life. We would talk a lot on the phone. She would call every night. Talking was the highlight of our relationship. I could discuss feelings with her that most "macho guys" wouldn't think of doing. You know, guys aren't supposed to be sensitive and wonder about things that aren't of a manly nature. Just recently I met her out at the bar with her female lover. It surprised the hell out of me. We hugged, we laughed, we cried.

Beneath his carefully manicured image "no one had any real idea of what the real Vincent was like."

> Although I didn't do anything in high school, it wasn't because there wasn't time. The only reason I didn't do anything then was because I was so afraid of being found out. If someone in my high school would have gotten caught in an explicit homosexual act, they would have had to leave town. I may have passed up some great opportunities while I was in high school. But, I never wanted to wear the scarlet letter of being a fag.

There were a few students in the school who wore the scarlet letter "not because they were caught sucking anybody off but because people just saw forks in their personalities. They had some kind of feminine characteristic" about them which other students in the school quickly picked up on and ridiculed.

> These people didn't fit the picture of the perfect male. Whenever the top jocks felt threatened they would strike out and call them "fags." Then there were the rednecks. We called them "The Ropers" because they were all alike. They had four-wheel drive trucks. They wore Levi's, plaid shirts, and cowboy boots. Their jeans always had a circular place in the back of their hip pocket where they had their can of Skull chewing tobacco. They thought the sun set on Hank Williams and Alabama. Friday and Saturday nights they were up on Main Street cruising chicks and drinking Budweiser. For them fags were worse than demons and useful only to kick around when their old ladies weren't available.

Though Vince was different he got along with most students. He could stand out in the school hall and talk about Kahlil Gibran or swap fag jokes with his football buddies. He could play an original piano piece at a school assembly or smoke dope with "The Ropers" before going to industrial arts. Though he would have liked school to be different, he played the cards dealt to him and he played them well.

> As far as folks in high school were concerned I had it made. But, you know, your mind is constantly running and *the issue* was always confronting me. Sure, I would like to have gone through high school and tell people who I was and for them to tell me who they were—with no strings attached. But a man knows the difference between something that is realistic and what is not. It's like hoping to find a nickel in your pants' pocket and dreaming about winning the Irish Sweepstakes.

When Vince was a high school junior, he had the opportunity to tell his mother who he really was. As he was cleaning out his closet one Saturday afternoon, Vince came across a scrap of paper in an old pair of jeans. On the faded paper was a list of male classmates he found attractive and the kind of sexual activities he would like to perform with them. Stuffing it in his pocket, he quickly forgot about it. A few days later Melba, his mother, discovered the list while washing clothes.

> I was in the living room playing the piano. She came in and asked, "What's this?" holding that piece of paper in front of me. I said, "Sit down, Mom. I think we have to talk." I went on to feed her the biggest piece of bullshit that you ever heard of in your life. I told her that ever since I had had Carolyn I thought I was a homosexual. But, I told my mom about my new girlfriend, Terri and said, "You know I'm not gay, mom." She wanted to believe it and so she did.

Vince was tempted, though, to tell Melba about an incident which occurred the year before. "Mom met this guy on Thursday night, dated him on Friday night, brought him home on Saturday morning, and I had him Saturday night. The next day he got baptized." But, Vince chose to be discreet.

After Vince completed high school, he felt increasingly uneasy about his participation with *The True Tones*. Criss-crossing the Southeast six days a week, life on the road was hard, the pay was low, and sexual frustration was high. By that time, Vincent had developed a "crush" on Tracks, the lead singer who was separated from his wife. "Again, I went through this mind set that I would tell him I was gay, and even though he was married and had a

young kid, he would admit to me he was gay too." Vince vividly recollects when he finally confided in Tracks about his secret:

> It was the night of the final episode of *MASH*. Mom came in and muttered, "When are you going to start dating girls, Vince?" and stomped out. It was almost like a play. I got to thinking about it while I was watching the show. The 4077th was breaking up and it was pretty fuckin' sad. After it went off I went to my room and started crying. I couldn't stop crying. I left Mom a note on the table telling her that I had to go see Tracks. It was 11:30 but he wasn't home. I sat in the driveway and cried until he returned. I cried when he got out of the car, when we got into the house, and when I talked to him. I was crying until he said, "What's wrong?" I blurted out, "I'm gay!" I stayed with him that night. We prayed. Tracks knew that God would give me strength to overcome this problem. I finally fell asleep on the couch; he slept in his bed.

For the next two months, Tracks acted differently toward Vince. Paula, Tracks' wife, had returned home. She whispered to Vince one night while cooking hamburgers on the grill, "Something is eatin' at Tracks. He's laying awake all night long. He's not sleeping." A short time later, Tracks confronted Vince: "I haven't seen you make any progress in changing what you are." Feeling that Vince should leave *The True Tones* until his problem was resolved, the two agreed to talk to Billie Rob, the group's leader.

> We told Billie Rob and he cried. Oh, that was touching. He couldn't believe his little drummer boy was a fag. They really liked me at that time, since this was after I had given up Rock 'n Roll. I still had the wool pulled over their eyes, but I was really getting into the services. I told him that I drew my strength from being on stage, which was bullshit. I just didn't want to quit playing drums. Billie Rob suggested counseling with Stew Crawford, a fundamentalist minister who was their preacher at the time. I got Billie Rob to let me stay in the group while the preacher was trying to save me from Satan.