When the Utopian Impulse “Fails”: Queer Spatialities of Traumatic Cultural Memory in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*

**Pekka Kilpeläinen**

**Abstract**

Adopting a Utopian Studies perspective, this essay maps the ways in which the cultural memory of slavery underlies the conflicts and their attempted negotiations in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989). The central dilemma in the novel is the irredeemable divide between same-sex desire and patriarchal heteronormativity, the roots of which reside in the demeaning definitions of African American sexuality established during slavery, perpetuated in its aftermaths, and transmitted through generations via cultural memory. This problematic position is what Horace, an African American teenager, struggles with in his Black southern community. This conflict is understood as an ideological closure that the narrative seeks to open up and resolve by generating a Queer utopian impulse, a desire to imagine alternative futures to the oppressive status quo. This becomes visible particularly in terms of spatiality, as Horace revisits the central places of his life, where the heteronormativity of the community and the underlying traumatic cultural memory of slavery intertwine with Horace’s personal memories and same-sex desire. While the novel envisions the ways in which Horace’s Queer presence disrupts the heteronormative order and seeks to assert agency, his tragic demise facilitates a consideration of the limits of oppressive social and cultural structures and of the possibility of envisioning alternatives to the status quo. The utopian impulse offers merely fleeting glimpses of the horizon of alternative futures through moments of resistance and belonging that fail to make a lasting impact. Despite this failure within the world of the novel, the text becomes a significant literary intervention that has played a role in calling attention to the problems faced by nonnormative sexualities and underlying the rise of Black Queer Studies.

**Keywords:** African American literature; Utopian Studies; Black Queer Studies; cultural memory; Randall Kenan

**Introduction: Queering the Utopian Impulse**

Memory assumes a central position in Randall Kenan’s novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), which traces the trouble-laden cultural spaces and boundaries of Blackness and nonnormative sexuality in the Southern United States. This entails both personal and collective modes of remembering, as the protagonist, Horace, an African American teenager, attempts to map his traumatizing position between his same-sex desire and the fixed racial, sexual, and gender identities that his southern rural
community seeks to adhere to. Underlying this main conflict is the traumatic cultural memory of slavery, understood in this essay in accordance with Ron Eyerman’s definition of cultural trauma as “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (2). The Black community of Tims Creek is desperately clinging to the illusion of wholeness and cohesion in an attempt to negotiate the memory of slavery and its destructive effects and aftermaths. This endeavor highlights the inability of the community to accommodate difference, particularly as far as nonnormative sexualities are concerned.

Acknowledging the ways in which Black Queer theory has problematized allegedly simple dichotomies such as Queer versus straight is crucial when talking about these issues. For instance, Cathy J. Cohen questions and destabilizes the “reductive categories of straight and queer” and argues for an intersectional point of view (42). Another important notion is the Black Queer diaspora, which transcends the confines of national contexts in favor of a transnational point of view. Rinaldo Walcott’s essay “Outside in Black Studies” (2005) is paramount in this respect, as it confronts homogenizing understandings of community and dismantles the traditional nationalist stance of Black Studies. The question of Queer agency is underscored by E. Patrick Johnson, whose ethnographic study of southern Black gay men, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008), seeks “to debunk the common myth that the South is a place where it is more difficult to be a black gay man, in part because—according to another common myth—black folks, in general, are more homophobic than whites, southern or otherwise” (6). According to the stories of southern Black gay men, Johnson contends, “many black communities around the South, and especially those in rural towns, accommodated sexual dissidents in ways unimaginable” (6). Despite the fact that homophobia has been common in southern communities—White and Black—people of nonnormative sexualities have found ways of coping and establishing meaningful personal and communal relationships.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that as the position of nonnormative sexualities within Western modernity has typically been defined against heteronormative patriarchy, Black Queer subjects have existed in unaccommodating and often hostile social and communal contexts. It is exactly this oppressed and repressed position that *A Visitation of Spirits* acutely highlights. The novel depicts a social context that appears to be hostile to the Black Queer subject, which, in the end, renders the novel devoid of any hope of belonging for Horace. Published in 1989, the novel predates many of what Johnson refers to as “cultural and societal shifts in beliefs and values about Queers, in addition to the policy changes enacted” in the United States (3). This is one of the reasons for the air of hopelessness, nostalgia, and melancholy that largely governs the novel. Kenan’s portrayal of Horace’s in-betweenness appears to ignore or repress the fact that Black Queers have not always
been invisible in or excluded from Black southern communities. As Johnson points out,

black gay southerners have co-existed in communities throughout the region for as long as there has been a “South.” [...] Indeed, black queers are a part of the patchwork quilt that is the diverse (and perverse) social fabric of southern living. And contrary to popular belief, not all southern homosexuals are silent about their sexual orientation. In fact, in some cases the more flamboyant one is about his sexuality, the more respect he garners. (1-2)

He also argues that “[d]espite the South’s history of racial segregation and religious fundamentalism, black gay men have carved out a space in which to live productive and fulfilling lives” (2). In *A Visitation of Spirits*, in contrast, Horace is ultimately incapable of performing his Black Queer identity in this manner and of finding meaningful ways of belonging. As his Black southern community seeks to perpetuate the nostalgic, illusionary idea of cultural homogeneity, there is no room for the kind of fluidity and multiplicity that Horace’s nonnormative sexual identity represents. From a larger sociohistorical and cultural perspective, however, the novel becomes an intervention that calls attention to the hardships faced by nonnormative sexualities in heteronormative communities in general and to the positions of Black Queer subjects in particular. Read in this light, the dark and gruesome narrative gains a radical sociopolitical significance and may be grasped as one of the fictional texts that underlie the eventual rise of Black Queer Studies.

In my reading of the central conflict in *A Visitation of Spirits*, the persistence of heteronormativity in Horace’s Black community is understood not as a straightforward result of the traumatizing experience and legacy of slavery and its collective memory, but rather as part of a larger context of what I call the history of intersectional oppression of people of African origin. Based on Paul Gilroy’s notion of the memory of slavery as the common denominator of the Black diaspora (39), I argue that this traumatic cultural memory, primarily understood through the optic of race, lingers on from generation to generation and is mediated into different forms of oppression, particularly in terms of sexuality and gender.² This is manifested in *A Visitation of Spirits* in the persistence of homophobia and sexism in the Black community of Tims Creek. It is crucial to keep in mind that racial subjugation in the institution of slavery has always existed in conjunction with oppression in terms of gender and sexuality. In other words, the traumatic cultural memory of slavery is inherently intersectional. This is what I, following Fredric Jameson’s famous concept (*Political Unconscious* 77-80), read as a *political unconscious* in contemporary African American literature, epitomized here in Kenan’s debut novel.

The normative ideal of fixed identities may be grasped as the central ideological closure in the novel, which the narrative attempts to open up and resolve. In other words, the text generates a utopian impulse or desire
in order to challenge the intolerable status quo and to imagine alternative futures. In this sense, my thinking builds on Karl Mannheim’s theory of ideology as ideas that seek to maintain the status quo and utopia as a counterforce that tends toward change (40). As Phillip E. Wegner puts it, utopia becomes “a progressive counterblast to the essential conservatism of ideology” (18). This aligns with what Jameson has called the dialectic of utopia and ideology (Political Unconscious 296). It is important to note that the utopian impulse does not automatically succeed in resolving the ideological closure. Indeed, as will become evident in this reading of A Visitation of Spirits, the utopian impulse may fail to change the status quo or even to imagine viable alternatives to it within a literary text. This does not, however, necessarily prevent the literary work from playing a significant role in the world as a socially symbolic act (Jameson, Unconscious 79) by providing an impetus toward a more profound recognition of the dilemma and toward social and cultural change.

A Visitation of Spirits depicts Horace’s desperate attempts to come to terms with the conflict, to resolve the ideological closure. His struggle for a sense of belonging may be read in accordance with Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping, a process of making sense of time and space, in which a subject attempts to negotiate its position in the totality of its social context (Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping” 353; Kellner 35). To quote Colin MacCabe’s preface to Jameson’s The Geopolitical Aesthetic (1992), this process occurs at the “intersection of the personal and the social” (xiv), which also ties in with the notions of personal and cultural memory. At first, Horace tries to repress and deny his Queerness by seeking to pass as “straight” and thereby comply with the demands of the heteronormative community. Later, having acknowledged that he would not be capable of such repression in the long run, he seeks to resolve the conflict and facilitate a change in himself by resorting to the supernatural, that is, to African and Native American mythology, Black magic, and sorcery. He performs an arcane ritual in order to transform himself into a red-tailed hawk, a bird of prey often regarded as a spiritual messenger in Native American mythologies. This convergence of African and Native American mythologies is an important point, as it highlights the comparative analogy between the plight of the African American slaves and the colonized Native Americans. The novel takes this convergence further by intertwining it with nonnormative sexualities, as suggested in passing by Paulina Palmer, according to whom Keinan underpins his “focus on male gay oppression with reference to the haunting of the country by memories of slavery and the massacre of the indigenous peoples” (184). This opens a view that reaches beyond nationalist perspectives and even beyond the Black Queer diaspora, toward a larger understanding of minority positions.

The ritual and its repercussions foreground the questions of spatiality in the narrative, as the mundane places of Tims Creek are revisited both through Horace’s memories and on his hallucinatory haunted tour.
through the town. Some of these places are rigidly ideological and exclusionary, such as the church, while some of them are invested with a tinge of a utopian promise of belonging. In all of these spaces, Horace’s personal memories converge with the oppressive ideologies of his community, which carry the traumatic cultural memory of slavery and its destructive conditions and repercussions. As a result, the places that Horace revisits are provisionally transformed into imaginary Queer spaces where idealized heteronormativity, and, by extension, the ideology of fixed identities, is disrupted by the Queer presence. This resonates with José E. Muñoz’s notion of Queer utopia, according to which “[q]ueerness is the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (1). The tragic outcome of Horace’s failed endeavor to map his position within his community, or any community available to him, encourages a consideration of the limits of exclusionary social and cultural structures and the possibility of envisioning and implementing alternatives to the status quo.

The Ideological Closure of Fixed Identities

The juxtaposition of the ideological closure of fixed identities and transgressive Queer desire forms the point of departure for the narrative, as Lindsey Tucker articulates: “Possessed of a world view that is basically fundamentalist and separatist, the community has attributed its survival to the rigid maintenance of patriarchal family structures, stable racial identities, and normative sexual desires” (306). Robert McRuer defines the ideological climate of Tims Creek as a “regime of sameness” that seeks to exclude difference: “in none of the locations in which Horace finds himself is he able to be comfortable with ‘sameness.’ The compulsion to be ‘the same,’ even as it is reproduced within the cultural category ‘black gay,’ invalidates any of Horace’s attempts to come to terms with his own identity” (The Queer Renaissance 55). Indications of this closure are evident at various points in the text, sometimes expressed explicitly and at other times through implication and allegory. This results in the narrative construction of the intolerable situation that Horace is caught in, trapped between the demands and regulations of his community and his nonnormative identity.

It is crucial to emphasize, however, that this essay categorically opposes the views according to which the rigid and regressive attitudes that dominate the Black community of Tims Creek would in any way be seen as characteristic of and exclusive to Black communities in the United States or in the entire Black diaspora. This is a central concern in Walcott’s “Outside in Black Studies,” which argues against any accounts advocating the alleged superiority of the Great Free North as far as “the possibility for queer life” is concerned (95-96). Instead of demonizing any particular communities, he contends that oppressive exclusion of difference in any community must be called into question (94-95). This
aligns with Marlon T. Riggs’s denouncement of “[a]ll terms denoting an ideological frame of reference that enforces a rigorous exclusion of certain kinds of difference, that erects stifling enclosures around a whole range of necessary debates, or, alternately, confines them within an easily recognizable—and controllable—psychosocial arena” (101). *A Visitation of Spirits* highlights these concerns by depicting a rigid, exclusionary community incapable of accommodating Queer desire.

There are noteworthy allegorical sections in the novel that depict Horace’s plight in the sociohistorical context of normative essentialist identities: “ADVENT (or The Beginning of the End),” which functions as a prologue, and “REQUIEM FOR TOBACCO,” the epilogue of the novel. “ADVENT” depicts a ritualistic hog killing, a once-important communal endeavor that has largely disappeared from everyday life in Tims Creek by the mid-1980s. This section reveals some fundamental aspects of this rural community and the social roles inscribed therein. The narrative details the process of slaughtering a pig and preparing food. What becomes crucial here is the rigid way in which gender roles are assigned and passed on from one generation to another: Men teach young boys how to shoot the pig, while women teach girls to prepare the food. As far as boys are concerned, this clearly appears as an initiation rite toward manhood, involving triumphing over one’s fear of killing a living creature and suppressing one’s feelings of pity in order to be qualified as a man: “Some older man will give a young boy a gun, perhaps, and instruct him not to be afraid, to take his time, to aim straight. The men will all look at one another and the boy with a sense of mutual pride” (8; emphasis added). This passage exposes the normative values of the patriarchal order in this rural community, underlined by the word “straight,” which reads as an allusion to heteronormative sexual identity.

The strictly gendered division of labor and the concomitant disproportionate distribution of social status between male and female domains is highlighted by the tasks assigned to each of these domains. In accordance with the fixed gender roles that the patriarchal community endorses, women’s tasks tend to be dirtier and arguably less valued than men’s work. In “ADVENT,” men take care of the slaughtering, while women do the dirtiest work of washing the intestines and preparing the other parts of the body for cooking and preservation:

> They stand about the hole the men dug the day before, a hole as deep and as wide as a grave. The women stand there at its edge: one holds a huge intestine that looks more like a monstrous, hairless caterpillar. […] She sloshes the gut gently back and forth, back and forth like a balloon full of water, until she finally slings the nasty grey water into the reeking hole in the ground. All the while they talk, their faces placid, their fingers deft, their aprons splattered with fecal matter, the hole sending steam up into the air like a huge cooking pot, reeking, stinking. (7)

In a similar fashion, “REQUIEM FOR TOBACCO” depicts the procedures involved in planting, harvesting, and processing tobacco, which
used to be an important source of income for the community. Again, gender roles appear to be strictly delineated in terms of men’s work and women’s work. The gendered distribution of work in these sections is a token of the patriarchal order of the community. What is at stake is the continuity of hegemonic masculinity and the preservation of the patriarchal status quo and the concomitant gender roles.

Remarkably, the narrative establishes an analogy between Horace and animal subjects. Firstly, the actual killing of the hog is narrated in a way that seems to humanize the animal and thereby evoke empathy: “The hog, a rusty, rough-hided, brown hog, shambles out into the yard and trips over a plank, letting out an all-too-human, fat sigh as its belly hits the ground. [...] It circles the fence, eyeing the standing men with something less than suspicion” (8-9). The text adopts an ambivalent stance toward this ritualistic practice by emphasizing the nostalgic sense of communality while simultaneously drawing attention to the cruelty and violence involved. The novel also includes a graphic description of the killing of a chicken, which highlights the same issues, presenting the chicken’s futile struggle in human terms: “I remember the way the chicken made a high-pitched kind of purring in the back of her throat and scratched at me in an annoyed sort of way [...] It would run and run fast, in a kind of womanish strut, as if somebody had told it some bad news and it was trying to run away and not hear it” (245). Through these anthropomorphic descriptions that project human emotions and thoughts onto nonhuman animals, the text underscores the cultural significance of nonhuman animals and invites the reader to empathize with them.

It is, however, important to notice that anthropomorphism generally has a negative ring within posthumanist thinking, and, as Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman point out, it has been systematically discredited in the sciences (3). Although the hog and the chicken are brutally bereft of any form of agency, the tone of the text resonates with the endeavor to reassess the human-animal relationship critically, which is one of the central concerns of critical posthumanism. As Jodey Castricano suggests, critical posthumanist scholars question the premises of Cultural Studies and the humanities “by calling into question the boundaries that divide the animal kingdom from humanity and by exploring the medical, biological, cultural, philosophical, psychological and ethical connections between nonhuman animals and ourselves” (1-2). In doing so, she contends, they seek to “destabilize[e] essentialist notions of the subject that continue to rely on the hegemonic marginalization of the nonhuman” (2-3). Cary Wolfe points out that the issue of speciesism—that is, the “systematic discrimination against an other based solely on [...] species”—must claim its place alongside such central concerns of the humanities and social sciences as racism, sexism, and classism (Animal Rites 1). A Visitation of Spirits joins these posthumanist endeavors by drawing parallels between Horace’s death and the killings of nonhuman...
animals by depicting their deaths in a similar clinically detailed way. The central point is that within the patriarchal order of Tims Creek, nonhuman animals and Horace are intertwined in an intersectionally defined oppressed position on the grounds of speciesism, heterosexism, and racism.

These sections play a significant part in fleshing out the heteronormative context of Horace’s life and his transgressive sexuality. Although hog killing and tobacco farming belong primarily in a time irretrievably past, the value system of that time still largely prevails in the Tims Creek that Horace knows, as articulated by his cousin, Reverend Jimmy: “But the ghosts of those times are stubborn; and though the hog stalls are empty, a herd can be heard, trampling the grasses and flowers and fancy bushes, trampling the foreign trees of the new families, living in their new homes. A ghostly herd waiting to be butchered” (10). These ghosts of memory live and breathe in the narrative in various ways. They are present in the form of the supernatural creatures that accompany Horace on his nocturnal, phantasmagorical journey through the town on the night preceding his suicide. They lurk behind the striking similarity between the graphic and gruesome descriptions of Horace’s suicide and the ritualistic butchering of the pig (see 253-54; 9). They can be detected in the gendered, stereotypical depiction of high-school students: “the girls lost in their gossip, the boys bragging and arm-wrestling” (16). Finally, they are also present in the way in which Horace’s memory haunts Jimmy, traumatized by his memory of witnessing Horace’s suicide. The continual presence of these ghosts may be read as representing the persistence of the values of the agricultural culture of Tims Creek, the normativity in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class identities.

A conspicuous instance of the intersectionality of race and sexuality is presented in the scene in which Horace arrives late to the family dinner at Thanksgiving with his newly acquired ear piercing. The majority of the family members regard such body modifications as a sign of either femininity, aberrant sexuality, or Whiteness and, therefore, as irredeemably out of place for Horace: “No better sense than to go on and follow whatever them white fools do. You’d follow them to hell, wouldn’t you? […] He just pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts” (184; emphasis in original). This exemplifies what Stefanie K. Dunning regards as “mainstream black discourse,” which “defines black queer identity as untenable to a normalized black identity while at the same time pathologizing it (aligning it with drug addiction and criminality) and connecting it to interracial desire and to whiteness” (4). Due to his intelligence and success at school, Horace has been named “the Great Black Hope,” the “Straight-A Kid,” and “the Chosen Nigger” (13; emphasis added), that is, the emblem and embodiment of the future of the family and the whole Black community. Again, notice the word “straight.” The way in which Horace is subjected to the pressure of continuing the straight family line resonates with Sara Ahmed’s
point about the requirement of straightness: “It is the presumption that the child must follow the heterosexual line,” given as a gift to the child, which he or she is obliged to return (85-86). When Horace diverges from the fixed, strictly delineated image of what is expected of him, he refuses or fails to return the gift. Reading the ear-piercing as a potential token of Queerness, the members of the family react in ways that betray their desperate attempt to hang on to the illusion of wholeness and uniformity that they regard as the foundation of their family history and their demand that Horace take his inherited place in this continuum.

Underlying all of this is the history of intersectional oppression in America in its different guises and the consequent incredulity toward all things regarded as “White” that seems to haunt the Black community of Tims Creek. This is visible in the attitudes of the older generation toward White people in general and Horace’s White friends in particular: “After all the white man’s done to us, you done take up behind him and do everything he tells you to do”; “[a]nd those [white] friends of yours. This group. No more. You understand me? You’re to leave them alone and they’re to leave you be” (186, 185). The attitudes that implicitly connect nonnormative sexualities with Whiteness resonate with David Shane Wallace’s argument that “the black community’s heterosexism is a direct result of the racialized rhetoric of sexuality in general. What is seldom noted in this racialized rhetoric, however, is the way in which the system of slavery made impossible the ‘normal’ family structures among enslaved blacks” (98). As Thelathia Nikki Young suggests, the difficulty African Americans experienced in complying with the normative idea of family and in accessing the privileges attached to it led into the formation of the Black politics of respectability, which aimed at the assimilation of African Americans into American society (6). These issues are clearly visible in the Cross family’s inflexible ideals of propriety, which may be understood as having been mediated by the traumatic cultural memory of slavery. Horace inevitably fails to comply with these ideals of proper Black masculinity that the community endorses. Despite his excellent grades at school, Horace is still not a “Straight-A Kid,” not the strong, heterosexual man fit to continue the family lineage and the traditions of the community. The knowledge that his nonnormative sexuality would be considered an abomination by his family and the whole community renders Horace incapable of asserting any sense of agency and leads him to his tragic end.

**Geographies of the Utopian Impulse**

The utopian impulse that the novel poses against the oppressive status quo becomes manifest in terms of cognitive mapping, as Horace attempts to negotiate his identity and his relation to his community and the larger social totality. According to Robert T. Tally, “[f]undamental to the concept of cognitive mapping is the perceived split between
the individual subject’s lived experience and the structural totality that affects, undergirds, and ultimately gives meaning to that experience” (Fredric Jameson 101). For Horace, this split is between his nonnormative sexuality and the rigid, heteronormative patriarchy of his Black southern community. It is evident that the meaning assigned to Horace’s individual lived experience by the structural totality of his community is demeaning, condemnatory, and, in the end, destructive. Regarding the functioning of the utopian impulse in literary texts, Tally suggests that Jameson’s cognitive mapping also “provides a tool by which the world may be changed or other worlds imagined” (Spatiality 48). Horace attempts to understand his place in the world but fails to come to terms with it, which also precludes him from effectively imagining other worlds or facilitating any profound social or cultural change.

After his failed attempts to become “normal,” to sublimate his same-sex desire and adopt the normative masculine lifestyle, a mixing and confusion of the levels of reality and fantasy gradually emerges in Horace’s mind. Sensing his powerlessness to fight the normative ideological climate of his community and his inability to sublimate his transgressive desire, he turns to what he thinks of as higher powers for a solution. This is where the element of the supernatural enters the narrative as a counterforce to the homophobic tenets of the Black Christian community of Tims Creek. Horace becomes convinced that he can escape this intolerable ideological closure only through the use of black magic and conjuring. To be more specific, he aspires to transform himself into a red-tailed hawk:

But now he was buoyed by the realization that he knew how he would spend the rest of his appointed time on this earth. Not as a tortured human, but as a bird free to swoop and dive, to dip and swerve over the cornfields and tobacco patches he had slaved in for what already seemed decades to his sixteen years. No longer would he be bound by human laws and human rules that he had constantly tripped over and frowned at. (12; emphasis added)

It is important to notice the term “slaved” in this passage, as it places the cultural memory of slavery in focus and implies its ultimate significance for the oppressive ideological climate of Tims Creek. Horace’s aspiration to transform himself into a red-tailed hawk is part of the utopian desire in the text and reads as an attempt to open up this ideological closure.

As Horace performs the ritual, the boundaries between the real and the imaginary begin to blur in the narrative. He hears a voice in his head, identified as a demonic presence that the omniscient third-person narrator describes as “what men despise. Or think they despise. Themselves” (252). As an embodiment of contempt and, significantly, self-loathing, the demon represents Queer desire, despised and demonized by Horace’s Black community, even though it is undoubtedly a part of the community not merely through Horace, but also through his cousin,
Jimmy, and potentially many others. As Éva Tettenborn points out, the
demon’s role is filled with contradictions, as it offers Horace “the clarity
and guidance he never received from his environment” and forces him
to drop his façade of passing for heterosexual, but also eventually drives
him to his tragic death (256).

Led by the voice, Horace traverses the town, joined by a cavalcade
of perversion that reads as an allegory of his demonized Queer desire.

[H]e marched, surrounded by hobgoblins and sprites and evil faeries and
wargs—aberrations like himself, [...] surrounded by fiends who quaffed
strong ales as they marched along through the fields, who danced about on
the tree limbs and on the surfaces of streams all by the light of the crescent
moon and fornicated and let blood from one another in bouts more violent
than cockfights, smearing excrement on one another, jerking and touching
and biting, shouting profanity and blasphemies, all with cheers and loud
laughter, and he smiled and joined in for this was his salvation, the way to
final peace. (28)

While same-sex desire is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, it
has typically been stigmatized as a cluster of immoral perversions that
subsumes various forms of sexual and nonsexual debauchery in many
social contexts. This epitomizes the logic according to which homosex-
uality has frequently been associated with other socially stigmatized,
unwanted, and dangerous qualities and ideologies, such as treason and
communism during the Lavender Scare in the postwar United States.
As Gert Hekma argues, Queers have often been regarded as “weird
people to whom many sexual and social ills could be attributed” (83).
Horace eventually visits, or revisits, various places in town, all of which
have played a significant role in his life. Importantly, all of these places
evoke traumatic memories of his lived experiences of the conflict be-
tween heteronormativity and his transgressive Queer desire. This may
be understood as an attempt at cognitive mapping, as Horace’s desperate
endeavor to negotiate his position in the community and, in a politically
and historically expanded sense, in the cultural memory of the Black
diaspora.

The first of these sites is the church, which has been a central com-
munal and ideological cornerstone for Horace’s family for generations.
The church is filled with people, most of whom are dead, represent-
ing the longevity of the community and its traditions and ideologies.
Importantly, they may be read as ghostly embodiments of the memo-
ry of slavery and its aftermaths. Reverend Barden’s sermon proclaims
and supports some of the ideological cornerstones of the community,
that is, heteronormativity and homophobia. He quotes one of the anti-
homosexual passages from Paul’s letter to the Romans and expresses
his disgust at a television series depicting “men and women, men and
men, women and women—help me, Jesus—living together in sin. Like
it wont nothing. Normal. Tolerable. Righteous. Lord, yes, it was on TV
in between ‘Little House on the Prairie’ and ‘The Waltons’” (78). Placed
between two archetypal depictions of American nuclear families, the series that depicts same-sex desire assumes an enhanced polemical and political impetus. Toward the end of the sermon, Horace no longer hears Reverend Barden’s words, “but he knew the pastor was praying, that his supplication was for all God’s children, to deliver them from sin. Horace did not have to hear, he knew that everyone within the sound of Reverend Barden’s voice heard, but he did not have to hear to know he was excluded” (82).

This is how Horace’s personal traumatic memory of being excluded from the prayers of the community becomes articulated in terms of space. The space of the church becomes an enclave of homophobia. The narrative oscillates between the real and the imaginary, between the empty, dark building and the heteronormative place occupied by a congregation of ghosts. On the imaginary level, Reverend Barden is beheaded in the middle of his homophobic rant by “a tall figure clad in dull black, hooded and carrying a gleaming silver scimitar” (81), which reads as a symbolic act, a disruption of the heteronormative religious tradition of the community. What enhances this symbolic act is that the figure in black turns out to be Horace himself, or a personification of a bitter, violent part of him. Even after being severed from the body, the Reverend’s head continues preaching: “The head hit the carpet with a dull thud before Horace, the eyes staring, and Horace heard one word from those brown lips: Unclean” (82). What the text seems to suggest is that the elimination of one individual cannot silence the normative voice of the tradition. This point is supported by the emergence of a condemning multitude of voices:

Wicked. Wicked.
Abomination.
Man lover!
Child molester!
Sissy!
Greyboy!
Old men, little girls, widows and workers, he saw no faces, knew no names, but the voices, the voices…
Unclean bastard!
Be ashamed of yourself!
Filthy knob polisher!
And they grew louder and the shadows changed patterns more swiftly.
Cocksucker.
Oreo. […]
Homo-suck-shual!
Ashamed. Be ashamed.
Faggot!
Son of a—. (86-87)

The condemning voices attest to the intersectionality of race and sexuality by mixing homophobic insults, such as “knob polisher,” “cocksucker,” and “faggot,” with racially invested remarks, especially “greyboy” and
“oreo.” Read in the context of the traumatic cultural memory of slavery, this phantasmagorical choir articulates the fundamental depths of Horace’s in-betweenness, trapped in the irreconcilable conflict between his Blackness and his nonnormative sexuality.

Although Horace’s presence queers the space of the church and interrupts the heteronormativity it encapsulates, this is merely temporary. On the level of what the text indicates as reality, Horace is alone in the church and queers the heteronormative place provisionally in a symbolic sense, but there is no indication that he would leave any lasting mark and manage to profoundly disrupt the heteronormative ideology contained in the church. On the level of the imaginary, Horace is overwhelmed by his realization that he cannot undermine the power of prejudice and homophobia in the Black Christian community of Tims Creek. Horace’s entry into the ideological space of the church resonates with Ahmed’s analysis of Queer spatiality, which builds on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of the dynamics of space and bodies. Merleau-Ponty suggests that a subject’s relation to space tends to comply with a process of reorientation in which formerly straight objects that have been slanted are eventually perceived as straight (259). As Ahmed points out, “the ‘queer effect’ is overcome and objects in the world no longer appear as if they are ‘off center’ or ‘slantwise’” (65). Similarly, Horace queers the heteronormative space of the church, but the effect is temporary as the process of spatial reorientation follows.

Eventually, Horace rushes out of the church, convinced of his ultimate powerlessness before the normative hegemony of the generations. Unable to conform and take after his grandfather, a straight, righteous man who is chairman of the deacon board, he is destined to be excluded and despised. Outside the church, Horace is met by another multitude of voices: “the magical, malevolent chorus of unholy elves and imps and griffins and werewolves and pale-faced phantoms, and strangely he was relieved” (87). This is a moment of revelation for Horace, the moment when he gives up his struggle against the normativity of the social context in which he lives. He ultimately accepts the reality that his African American Christian community is utterly incapable of welcoming and accommodating his nonnormative sexuality and that all other communities available to him exclude him as well, either because of his race or sexuality. As McRuer suggests, this highlights the in-betweenness of African American queer sexuality, alienated both from Black communities and the predominantly White gay communities (“A Visitation of Difference” 223). In *The Queer Renaissance*, McRuer spells out Horace’s contradictory identities:

> in his own family, as in the church, he is “black,” but not “gay”; at the community theater where he works, he (along with many of the other actors) is openly “gay,” but his “blackness” is rendered invisible (particularly by the production itself, which is about the history of the Cross family—the white Cross family—in North Carolina); with his “alternative” and white high
school friends, he is “smart and black” (237), but he is not “gay,” and he feels his “blackness” is tokenized. (56)

The only community that seems accepting is the herd of the otherworldly, uncanny, aberrant creatures accompanying him in this nocturnal journey, offering him an otherworldly, supernatural sense of belonging.

The hallucinatory journey through space and time leads Horace to the Tims Creek Elementary School, another central, defining site in his life. This is where the memory of slavery comes to the surface of the narrative, as the school is compared to a plantation, which causes Horace to wonder what hell would be like: “Will life there be as harsh as the lives of slaves? Will there be hierarchies and exclusives and differences to battle over? Injustice and greed?” (88). It is exactly these “hierarchies and exclusives and differences” that function as crucial tools of power across the intersectional axes of race, gender, and sexuality in the history of intersectional oppression that hosts the traumatic memory of slavery in the Black diaspora. As a result, the space of the elementary school becomes an intersection of the traumatic cultural memory of the Black diaspora and Horace’s personal plight. Tired of struggling with his community’s fear of difference and bereft of any hope for finding a real sense of belonging, Horace has begun to direct his gaze beyond the horizons of earthly life: to the supernatural, sorcery, and the Christian idea of hell. He seems to be standing, to quote Gilroy, “between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations” (1), that is, at the intersection of the influences of African and Native American folklore and Christianity.

The elementary school is constructed as a site of conflicting impulses, as a central place for Horace’s difficult identity struggle. It stands for his entry into the fascinating world of books and learning, but it is a world marked by racist insults and Horace’s first conscious ideas of and experiments with sexuality. Right from the outset, particularly after masturbating, his thoughts are dominated by the fear and conviction of the wrath of God, “the Old Testament God of Abraham and Isaac and David, who took no foolishness and punished true to his word” (101). What makes things even worse in the eyes of this judgmental God is that, despite Horace’s efforts to conform, his same-sex desire stands out as a defining feature upon his realization that “the thought of a woman failed to arouse him, and the thought of a man did” (101). This results in the irreconcilable conflict between Horace’s nonnormative sexuality and the homophobic attitudes of his community.

The third space that Horace enters is the South York County High School, a repository of traumatic memories of struggle, repression, and self-deception. It hosts his memories of his first homosexual experiments, the associated guilt, and his decision to resist same-sex desire and become “normal.” As he becomes fully aware of his attraction to Gideon, a Black classmate, who was already labeled as Queer in elemen-
tary school, Horace is fascinated and terrified. Admitting his attraction “resulted in such overwhelming guilt, he might as well have crucified himself” (146). Caught in the intersection of conflicting impulses, Horace hesitates but eventually yields to his same-sex desire, and his relationship with Gideon further intensifies his contradictory position: “It was then that he would realize that he was different and vulnerable and that the simple joy of being in love and expressing it with straightforward passion was denied him” (153).

Another issue is Horace’s growing awareness of his responsibilities as a man, and the possibilities of his being a homosexual frightened him beyond reason” (156). The irreconcilable contradiction between his sexuality and the demands of his role as a man—that is, as a link in the Cross family lineage—leads Horace to a desperate attempt to change, to sublimate his nonnormative sexuality by getting into sports and thereby making himself more popular, desirable, and masculine, which decisively enhances his chances to date girls. Temporarily, this attempt to pass as heterosexual elevates his social status and introduces him to new social circles, including “white students known as ‘the beautiful people’” (161). Horace is not, however, able to sustain the repression of his nonnormative sexuality in favor of conventional heterosexuality and the accompanying lifestyle. After a fight with Gideon, whom he has rejected and ignored in his endeavor to become “normal,” Horace is left “with himself, with the smelly ghosts of the men who, for all these months, he had told himself he did not lust after, with the realization that it was a lie and that soon, soon and very soon he would fall, and fall hard” (165).

Toward the end of his nocturnal tour through the important places of his life, Horace finds himself in the Crosstown theater, where he worked in the summer before his senior year in high school. On the stage, he encounters a talking buffalo, who introduces herself as Veronica. She complains about the present moral corruption of people, emphasizing the divide between the nostalgic past and the decadent present. The figure of the nearly extinct American buffalo is, of course, metaphorical, as it represents the plight of the minorities in the United States. In addition, Veronica also highlights the issues of gender. In the same moment, Horace’s presence brings the issue of nonnormative sexuality into this space, again underscoring the intersectionality of these issues.

The theater may be read in terms of spatiality, particularly as a place of otherness, according to Michel Foucault’s seminal theory of heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopias as “real places […] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (“Of Other Spaces” 24). The Crosstown theater complies with this definition, as it offers representations of real sites, events, and histories through the production of the play *Ride the Freedom Star*, written by Philip Cross, the last male of the White Cross family lineage. The play’s conservative,
celebratory depiction of the history of the South is countered by the air of promiscuity and transgressive nonnormative sexualities generated by the group of actors, many of whom openly identified as gay. The theater is the place where Horace dropped his façade and gave in to his same-sex desire, thereby contesting and overturning the heteronormative spatiality of Tims Creek. It comes across as a place of otherness, where the restrictions and boundaries of Horace’s family and community could be transcended. Importantly, nonnormative sexuality in this social context was nothing exceptional; rather, in the predominantly White theater production, Horace stood out because he was Black. This further emphasizes Horace’s inbetween position, excluded from all possible communities.

The theater is also where the memory of slavery explicitly returns to the surface of the narrative. The play *Ride the Freedom Star* sets a crucial backdrop for Horace’s experiences as it becomes a manifestation of the underlying cultural memory of slavery. Patriotic and nostalgic, the play unabashedly romanticizes the South and the institution of plantation slavery by attempting “to create a picture of domestic bliss for the house slaves and of jolly camaraderie for the field workers. Despite the interjection of a speech here or there that reflected the reality of the hard life of the slaves, the blacks were mainly there for buffoonery and hijinks” (213). The play seeks to resolve the fundamental historical dilemma of slavery by trivializing the exploitation and suffering that it entailed and, by extension, repressing its traumatic cultural memory. In other words, the play is ideological in the most negative sense of the term, as it seeks to maintain the status quo of White supremacy. Repression, distortion, and exclusion are exactly what seem to surround Horace and define his life in every communal context that he aspires to belong to.

One of the most striking events on Horace’s nocturnal escapade occurs in the costume barn of the theater, as he meets his doppelgänger, dressed in a clown’s attire, covering his face with white greasepaint and, interestingly, his lips with black ink that does not smear, assigning Blackness to a body part where it does not belong. The doppelgänger’s face therefore, becomes a visual text that contains the contradictions that haunt Horace: “Soon the entire face was obscure, though Horace could recognize the face, the nose folks said to be just like his great-grandfather’s, the lips rumored to be like his grandfather’s, his father’s determined chin, his maternal grandmother’s sad eyes … but all was white now, finished in a white like porcelain, smooth and thick” (220; ellipsis in original). The facial features of his Black family lineage are now covered with white color, which resonates with the negativity with which his family regards his White friends. Crucially, this concerns not merely race, but also sexuality, as spelled out by his family’s earlier remarks on Horace’s ear piercing. The way in which Horace’s family equates Whiteness with perversion, and, by implication, with nonnormative sexuality, intensifies the symbolic significance of covering the
family features with white makeup. The face of Horace’s *doppelgänger* becomes a site where the traumatic cultural memory of slavery and its aftermaths are represented in a polemical convergence of the categories of race and sexuality.

In an intriguing passage, Horace and his *doppelgänger* both look in the mirror simultaneously. The reflection shows Horace his twoness, the divisions within himself, which he is unable to reconcile: “Horace in his brown nakedness, covered with dirt and ash and grass in his hair, a gun in his hand, and the other Horace, white-faced, dressed as a clown” (220). Here the text plays on the Du Boisian concept of double consciousness, referring to the in-betweenness of African American identity. The fact that the *doppelgänger* is dressed as a clown epitomizes Horace’s fear of making a fool of himself in the eyes of his family and community and dishonoring his cultural heritage. The intersection of race and sexuality is again implied as Horace’s *doppelgänger* is referred to as “the perverted image of himself” (221), representing his nonnormative sexuality, demonized by the Black community of Tims Creek.

The mirror episode reads like a play on the Lacanian mirror stage (Lacan 75-81; cf. Murray 98-100). Here, the moment of recognition and identification is profoundly compromised by the multiplied doubleness of the mirror image, also a play on the Du Boisian double consciousness. This moment does not lead to a unified image of his subjectivity for Horace; rather, it becomes a moment of alienation and aggression, which further deepens the divides between the conflicting identities that he grapples with, that is, his Blackness and Queerness, and takes him a decisive step closer to the final tragedy of the novel.

What becomes particularly relevant here is Foucault’s discussion of the mirror as “a sort of mixed, joint experience” (24) that stands between heterotopia and utopia:

>The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. […] The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (“Of Other Spaces” 24)

Understood as a border between physical and abstract space, the mirror emerges as a mediator between the heterotopia of the theater and the utopian possibility that Horace could negotiate and come to terms with the conflict between his nonnormative identity and the heteronormativity of his family and community.

In the mirror, the narrative constructs another heterotopia within the place of otherness of the theater. The text oscillates between hetero-
topia and utopian space, as the mirror projects a succession of images, eventually focusing on a flashback to Horace’s memory of making love with Antonio, his Puerto Rican lover. The description of “the dark walnut skin against the golden amber” (222) emphasizes their different skin colors, which also brings the issues of cultural and racial difference and hybridity into the equation and further underscores the intersectionality of Horace’s transgression against his familial and communal values. Significantly, Horace and Antonio meet regularly in an abandoned house, which reminds Horace “of the haunted houses of his childhood fears” (222). Initially, Horace does not dare to enter the house, read as a spatial metaphor for the fundamental conflict between his transgressive Queer desire and his community’s homophobic judgment. As the house eventually becomes the space of their frequent sexual encounters, it becomes invested with utopian desire, which counters the surrounding, dominant air of heteronormativity. Further, this space undergoes a transformation from a heterotopia, a tangible place of otherness, into what Jameson calls a utopian enclave, an imaginary space where the restrictions of society have been provisionally annulled and where “new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on,” a space that hosts the possibility of alternative futures (Archaeologies of the Future 16). It encompasses a possibility of belonging and provides Horace with one of the few glimpses of utopian spatiality and hope in his process of cognitive mapping.

What tones down this imaginary, utopian resolution, however, is that after having sex with Antonio in the house, Horace “would ponder why he felt unfinished. [...] They were not tender, they were animal, they were not loving, they were lustful; they were not lovers, they were sex partners. [...] Now he wished he had something more than sweat and orgasms” (223-24). Under the enormous burden of his condemning family and community, Horace is unable to find a sense of fulfillment and belonging in any way, not even in the contexts of reciprocal same-sex desire. This lack of fulfillment dilutes the symbolic significance of the haunted house as a utopian enclave. As a result, the horizon of alternative futures, which emerges as a challenge and counterforce to the heteronormative status quo, remains obscure and ephemeral, a mere footnote in the tragic narrative.

Remembering the intoxicated party on the opening night of the play, when he participated in an orgy with the actors at the nearby cemetery, Horace now wanders to the same place. He reminisces about the orgy, devoid of love and affection, described in the text through references to the supernatural and animal analogies:

The pot. The pills. The literal orgy. The strange inevitability of it, for, in a way—like witches in a coven under a full moon, like wild wolves tearing hungrily at one another’s flesh, like hogs wallowing in their own excrement and sin and lonely inarticulateness—they were left to this for expression, this for comfort, this for attention, this for love. (230)
This passage connects with the slaughtering of the hog in the prologue of the novel, placing the deaths of Horace and the hog in parallel, as incidents necessary for the perpetuation of the illusion of monolithic, immutable traditions and values of the community. The text moves from Horace’s recollection of the orgy to his anticipation of “life beneath the ground. He did not wish to die, but the things he had witnessed and remembered this night caused him only more confusion and an ache that led him to wonder: Where will it end? Will it end?” (231; emphasis in original).

Foucault singles out the graveyard as an exemplary heterotopic space, a place of otherness, “a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the city-state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery” (“Of Other Spaces” 25). In A Visitation of Spirits, the cemetery becomes a metaphorical field of force, where several impulses and narratives collide and intersect. This complies with Foucault’s third principle of heterotopia, according to which “[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (“Of Other Spaces” 25). As Horace wanders through the graveyard, he sees the graves of the ancestors, “the first Scots-Irish Crosses, the Englishmen who died here in the early 1700s” (231), and who gave—or, rather, imposed upon—Horace’s family its surname during slavery. As he finds himself becoming part of that historical narrative, he has a strange vision:

[H]e saw what he had led himself to see, the reason, the logic, the point. It was round and square. It was hard and soft, black and white, cold and hot, smooth and rough, young and old. It had depth and was shallow, was bright and dull, took light and gave light, was generous and greedy. Holy and profane. Ignorant and wise. Horace saw it and it saw Horace, like the moon, like the sea, like the mountain—so large he could not miss it, so small he could barely see it. The most simple, the most complex, the most wrong, the most right. Horace saw. (232)

In his account on the novel, McRuer refers to this as a “list of oxymorons” (The Queer Renaissance 57), which it certainly is, but from my perspective, this passage and the breakdown of meaning that these apparent oxymorons signify further confirm the graveyard as a heterotopia. As Foucault argues in The Order of Things (1966), heterotopias “undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’” (xviii; emphasis in original). Further, this passage signifies the potential transformation of the heterotopia of the cemetery into a utopian enclave. This unknown, mysterious “it” becomes the ultimate manifestation of the utopian impulse in the novel and provides a fleeting glimpse of the deconstruction
and transcendence of several fundamental binary oppositions and their essentialist premises. In other words, it offers utopian hope for the exorcism of the ghosts of memory, both personal and cultural, that haunt Horace.

This is also where Horace's confused, painful personal memories connect with the collective mode of remembrance, the traumatic cultural memory of slavery, as the text moves to a depiction of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas:

Men and women hunted by their own kind on the shores of a great land where the sun burns hot and the ground bears up bountifully, fully, It's gonna rain, it's gonna rain, and they are shackled up and loaded onto ships like barrels of syrup and made to sit there crouched in chains, to defecate and urinate and choke on their own vomit, in the heat, in the stench of days and weeks and months, and they will bring forth children who will die, who should die, rather than be born into this wicked world, [...] the chains are not cut, no, and they are given new names, hateful names, and they are examined like cattle, like hogs, like chickens, and sent to the fields, to the mills, to the bowels of the cities, and they toil and sweat and sing songs of sorrow [...]. (232-33; emphasis in original)

The personal and the collective, the past and the present are brought together with this sweeping stream of words that probes into the colonial origins of the memory of slavery and its intersectional effects on the present, thereby offering a context for Horace's cognitive mapping; a distant promise of redemption, understanding, and healing. Conditioned by the years of constant repression and guilt, he is, however, incapable of clutching this straw, of connecting the dots, of reconciling his toxic double consciousness: “Horace saw clearly through a glass darkly and understood where he fit. Understood what was asked of him. Horace shook his head. No. He turned away. No. He turned his heart away. No. This had been Horace's redemption, and Horace said no” (234). Instead, he lifts his grandfather’s gun and shoots his doppelgänger in an act of projected suicide. As Tettenborn points out, Horace metaphorically kills the part of himself that he sees as posing a danger to the wholeness of his community, the transgressive, nonnormative part, with the rifle that epitomizes “the powers attributed to the patriarchal dynasty, powers that end up destroying its youngest member” (262-63). The patriarchal symbolism invested in the gun is spelled out explicitly earlier in the novel, at the beginning of Horace’s possessed excursion through the town: “the gun in his hand like a cool phallus” (28).

The heterotopia of the graveyard merely flashes the possibility of its transformation into a utopian enclave, the possibility of alternative futures. The shot of the rifle snuffs out any prospect of redemption for Horace. This emphasizes the symbolic significance of the gun as a token of patriarchal power and its destructive, crushing burden on those who do not conform. This is ultimately enhanced, as Horace eventually uses the gun to take his own life, literally out of his mind, in front of his
cousin, Reverend Jimmy. Having refused the ultimate possibility of redemption in the form of his doppelgänger and the binary-deconstructing, mysterious “It,” “the reason, the logic, the point” (232), Horace is irredeemably lost beneath the burden of his guilt, tired of struggling, devoid of hope.

**Conclusion: Utopian “Failure” as a Literary Intervention**

The stories that Johnson has gathered in *Sweet Tea* are those of survivors, of Black Queers who have been strong enough to lead meaningful lives in unfavorable social contexts. They are the kind of stories that Horace’s tragic narrative counters by giving voice to a Black Queer teenager who cannot survive in such a social context. As a result, *A Visitation of Spirits* offers merely fleeting flashes of the possibility of alternative futures, as all hope seems to die along with Horace. His attempt at cognitive mapping does not result in a sense of belonging. He does not manage to negotiate his relation to and position in his Black rural community or any other community available to him. Quite the contrary, it leads to a confirmation of the hopelessness of his in-betweenness. As he revisits the familiar sites of Tims Creek, his presence temporarily queers these normative places and thereby disrupts the heteronormative master narrative. But this is merely provisional. He does not really manage to turn these ideologically circumscribed places into hybrid, Queer spaces, where other worlds and alternative futures could be imagined. Instead, he is systematically excluded, and the exclusionary ideologies seem to remain intact. The rigid, inflexible, and unforgiving ideological climate of Tims Creek renders the existence of those who fail to conform to the prevailing norms highly problematic. This is how the community is haunted by the persistent traumatic cultural memory of slavery and its aftermaths, and this may be understood as a failure in collective cognitive mapping, the failure of the community to adapt to larger societal changes and to negotiate the positions of those of its members who do not conform to the strict categories of identity that function as its ideological cornerstones. This is part of the political unconscious of Tims Creek and a manifestation of the longevity of the traumatic cultural memory of slavery in its different guises.

The ultimate repercussions and significance of Horace’s death defy straightforward conclusions, as *A Visitation of Spirits* remains ambiguous in this sense. McRuer argues that Horace’s story does not end in his suicide, but that he becomes “the agent of transformation” (*Queer Renaissance* 63; emphasis in original) and that he “survives to haunt Jimmy and open up the meanings that have hitherto grounded the life of this community” (71). Conversely, Tettenborn contends that while Horace’s death gives the community an opportunity to rethink and question its normativities and exclusions, particularly vis-à-vis same-sex desire, “the novel never offers such hopeful consolidation explicitly and thus
keeps this possibility only in the realm of the hypothetical” (264). Both viewpoints have merit. While I agree with McRuer’s reading of Horace haunting Jimmy, it remains debatable whether the latter’s apparent will to renew the Christian dogmas of the community is a consequence of Horace’s death. In addition, Jimmy finds no way of articulating his aspiration:

How could I communicate that I was not, did not want to be the holy and pious dictator of a pastor […], that my very presence had nothing to do with my condemnation of their way of life […]. There was no way to say: […] I want to introduce a new way of approaching Christian faith, a way of caring for people. I don’t want to be a watchdog of sin, an inquisitor who binds his people with rules and regulations and thou shalt and thou shalt nots. But looking at those eyes so full of past hurt and past rejection and past accusation, I could only smile and let be what was. (110)

As Jimmy’s hypothetical endeavor to transform the Black Christian community to make it more accommodating to difference is the only trace of the utopian impulse, posited against the ideological closure of fixed identities, that survives in the novel, it seems somewhat problematic to regard Horace as a catalyst for change. Undoubtedly, the world is constantly changing, and so is Tims Creek, despite the endeavors to arrest change, but Horace’s role in this transformation remains unarticulated in the novel.

After all, Horace’s suicide does not seem to leave a lasting mark on the Black community of Tims Creek in any direct sense. His tragic end, of course, lives on in the memories of his family, especially Jimmy. Beyond the family circle, however, life in Tims Creek goes on as before, uninterrupted, undisturbed by Horace’s fate, the disruption of the patriarchal, heteronormative narrative of the community that he represented through his sexuality repressed and buried in the collective unconscious: “the day did not halt in its tracks: clocks did not stop. The school buses rolled. The cows mooed. The mothers scolded their children. Plows broke up soil. Trucks were unloaded and loaded up. Dishes were washed. Dogs barked. Old men fished. Beauticians gossiped. Food was eaten. And that night the sun set with the full intention of rising on the morrow” (254). The novel offers no vision or possibility of a radically different world, one that would be open and accommodating to difference.

In the end, the ideological closure of fixed identities appears in the novel as categorical and almost unchangeable, as the Black community of Tims Creek desperately clings to the ideals of a world irretrievably past and lost, a world circumscribed by the tight-knit community, where there seemed to be little need for difference. People were tied together by tradition, stories, chores, and an overdetermined sense of community. The idea of such communal homogeneity is inevitably illusory, imagined, and ideological, but its effects are tangible. In the context of the changing, fragmenting world, under the harsh economic realities of late modernity, the people of Tims Creek may have more freedom than ear-
lier generations, but the community still remains largely incapable of accommodating difference. In other words, the ideological closure of fixed identities remains intact as the Queer utopian impulse that Horace represents ultimately fails to open up the horizons of alternative futures.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that despite the failure of the Queer utopian impulse within the narrative, *A Visitation of Spirits* becomes a significant literary intervention when viewed from a wider political and sociohistorical perspective. It has called attention to the domineering ideological and institutional structures of heteronormative patriarchy and may be regarded as one of the key texts that preceded and inspired the rise of Black Queer Studies in the 1990s. From this perspective, Horace’s tragic fate becomes a socially symbolic act that has had real effects on the world.

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