Southern Gospel Sissies: Evangelical Music, Queer Spirituality, and the Plays of Del Shores

Douglas Harrison

This article explores the paradox of gay men involved in southern (white) gospel music, which might be fairly described as the soundtrack for fundamentalist Christianity in America. The intense antipathy among the majority of fundamentalist Protestant evangelicals in America toward homosexuality is often thought to leave little room for non-normative identities or experiences within evangelicalism. Yet surreptitious but persistent traces of queer experience within the southern gospel tradition suggest that the music and culture of white gospel are vitally connected to the spirituality and sexuality of some gay men who come of age within conservative evangelical Christian traditions. Using the works of Del Shores, particularly his play Southern Baptist Sissies *(2001) (and providing the first sustained critical examination of Shores' writing), I argue that southern gospel music serves as a powerful idiom in which to sublimate a range of homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual feelings or desires that build up within evangelicalism's psychosexually repressive culture.*[1]

The Gay-Gospel Paradox

The origin of this paper is twofold. In the first place, I have for some time now been alternately fascinated and perplexed by the number of gay men—myself included—who enjoy music in the southern, white gospel tradition, which perhaps more than any other could be fairly described as the soundtrack for fundamentalist, evangelical Protestantism in North America. The second catalyst was the appearance in 2006 of an article from *Inside Out Nashville*, a weekly periodical focused on the queer community in Music City. The piece was a vitriolic critique by a local gay writer unaffiliated with gospel music, aimed at a periodic social gathering of gay southern gospel professionals, whom the writer lambasted for the hypocrisy of being gay and working in conservative Christian entertainment. This gay-gospel social gathering, the writer concluded, was as "one of the most cynical and creepy statements of our society" (Derrick, 2006, p. 5). For several years now, I have attended this event, though my association with gospel music goes only so far as an academic interest

and a blog devoted to criticism and commentary on southern gospel music and culture, and the columnist's portrayal of the gathering bore virtually no relationship to what I have encountered there, which might best be described as part religious experience, part cabaret, part family reunion, and—perhaps most important for a group of people whose identity puts them at odds with their spiritual traditions (not to mention their livelihood, in many cases)—unconditional affirmation of both the redemptive promise of evangelical spirituality and gay male sexuality.

The paradox of gay men and gospel music has come to occupy more and more of my scholarly energy as I have undertaken a sustained study of southern gospel music and its cultural function. In addition to the formal analysis of gospel music—its lyrics, musical form, and performances—my scholarly approach to southern gospel situates the music within the broader contexts of contemporary Protestant evangelicalism, particularly evangelicals' struggle to balance their commitment to notionally absolute doctrines against the practical need for theological and cultural flexibility if religion is to remain relevant. In general, my research reveals that the interaction of lyrics, music, and religious experience in southern gospel comprises a heterodox discourse through which evangelicals sustain a surreptitious pluralism within an officially absolutist culture. Evangelicals use white gospel, as I have argued elsewhere, not to diminish experience in this world—the conventional scholarly wisdom about the music's cultural function—but to manage the vicissitudes of psychospiritual life in a way otherwise unavailable in evangelicalism (Harrison, 2008).

But what are the limits of this surreptitious heterodoxy? The answer, it seems increasingly apparent to me, is bound up in negotiations of (homo)sexuality and masculine spirituality (and their discontents) in southern gospel culture. After all, it doesn't get much more heterodox in fundamentalist evangelicalism than homosexuality, and for the many gay men I've met—both from my own experience with southern gospel music as an erstwhile Southern Baptist gospel pianist and from my scholarly research into white gospel music and its culture—fundamentalist evangelicalism's absolute prohibition on homosexuality means that gay males who wish to remain affiliated with evangelical popular culture have learned to be surreptitious about their involvement in white gospel, whether it be as a concert-going fan, a songwriter, producer, performer, promoter, or industry executive.

This surreptitiousness, however, poses a methodological problem. It's one thing to analyze the psychosocial dynamics of a live concert for what they suggest about evangelical culture or to close-read song lyrics for the way they imaginatively construct certain religious identities or make available certain spiritual experiences. It's quite another issue to inquire after a range of experience and feeling that is purposefully effaced and strategically silenced by the dominant cultural forces within southern gospel music. In some quarters of the industry, it's axiomatic that behind every gospel song, there's a gay man somewhere. And even among those who might find such a statement blasphemous, the fact that gay people are involved in almost every aspect of the music's creation, production, and performance constitutes a widely accepted open-secret. But, as one prominent record executive put it in an interview, "in our business, we deal with the market and the ministry. And those two issues have to mesh" (Glock, 2005, p. 168). What he means is that the business side of southern gospel effectively monetizes fundamentalist evangelical biblical

literalism. The southern gospel industry places a symbolic and economic premium on monogamous heterosexual marriage as the ideal expression of Christian identity among southern gospel professionals, while simultaneously and radically devaluing non-heterosexual ways of being. Thus there is a widespread aversion among queer individuals to speak openly about their experience or involvement in evangelical popular culture for fear of reprisals or alienation.[2] Moreover, very few textual or artifactual traces exist to document the extensive role that many gay men play in the industry, much less to support the kind of cultural study of gay men and gospel music that I wish to undertake here.[3]

Such silences and effacements are, as Hubbs (2004) has shown in her study of twentieth-century American composers and the role sexuality played in their artistic vision, powerful expressions of heterocentrism:

> The denial and erasure of queer lives and contributions in historical accounts of twentieth-century U.S. culture reflect that culture's suffusion in homophobia. Homophobic culture provides ample incentive for nonqueer-identified commentators to uphold queer-effacing views, including the dominant myths that assert heterosexuals' exclusive place in cultural and social production and reproduction. (Hubbs, 2004, p. 5)

In southern gospel, this heterosexual exclusivity contributes to an environment in which no prominent southern gospel artists have ever openly identified themselves as gay or lesbian while maintaining a full-time career in the industry. There have been cases in which homosexuality has become an unavoidably prominent issue within the industry. Perhaps most famously, the gospel tenor Kirk Talley was outed in 2003 when the FBI arrested a man who tried to blackmail Talley with indiscrete photographs Talley had shared on a gay chat site (Gay Singer's, 2004). Around the same time, Bill Gaither, arguably the industry's most successful songwriter and performer, and the eponymous impresario of the Homecoming Friends concert tour and video series, was photographed embracing an openly lesbian songwriter (Linscot, 2006). Gaither had featured her music on one of his videos and spoken from the stage about a song she had written in terms that many fans construed to be a tacit endorsement of homosexuality. But even these are the kind of exceptional examples that prove the rule of carefully enforced silence and denial surrounding the discussion of homosexuality in southern gospel: Talley subsequently sought the counsel of a "Restoration Team" comprising conservative evangelical pastors and some prominent male figures from southern gospel (Talley, Testimony). This group supervised a purification rite and a version of "reparative" therapy that concluded with a public statement from the team certifying Talley's fitness to return to the stage, although he has nevertheless largely been shunned as a performer (Glock, 2006, pp. 171-172). In Gaither's case, the outcry over the photograph and his public comments ultimately required him to issue a statement emphatically denouncing the songwriter and lamenting her "sad" life as a lesbian (Bill Gaither, 2006).

In such a highly regulated culture that enforces what Warner first described as "heteronormativity" (1991, p. 9), how does one access the psychospiritual dynamics unique to gay evangelicals when their experience is at best deeply submerged beneath, at worst vigorously effaced by, Protestant fundamentalism's

aggressive antipathy toward homosexuality? Enter the plays of Del Shores. Shores is most well-known for the mainstream film adaptation of his tragicomic play *Sordid Lives* (1998)—a "black comedy," as the film's promotional material puts it, "about white trash" (imdb.com). But the play is only the most famous work from within a larger corpus of texts that explore the problem of nonconformity in the fundamentalist evangelical South in general, and the problematic intersection of homosexuality and conservative Christian culture in particular—dynamics that are largely hidden from view in the everyday life of Southern fundamentalist evangelicalism, or else surface in ways that misrepresent or distort the lived realities of queer identity. Taken together with the prominent role gospel music plays in most of Shores' texts, his works provide one important entry point for an inquiry into the role of gospel music in shaping and maintaining of psychosexual identities at the margins of fundamentalist evangelical culture.[4]

Queer Quartets

My primary focus here will be on *Southern Baptist Sissies* (2001), Shores' most formally sophisticated and aesthetically coherent play about four gay friends growing up and coming out (or not) in a tiny Southern Baptist community in rural Texas during the final decades of the twentieth century. My reading of the play will argue that the crisis of coming out in conservative Christian communities (especially those in the American South) creates seemingly insoluble knots of ideological and psychosexual conflict that dissolve only when Shores' characters undergo affect-centric conversions to mutual tolerance, incipient pluralism, and sometimes even something approaching acceptance. Through ritual exchanges of sentiment in the singing of nostalgic religious songs, especially Baptist hymns in the gospel tradition,[5] Shores' gay characters consecrate imaginative reconciliations with one another and, in some cases, the straight and narrow religious world around them, in dramas that rely on habits of evangelical conversion and spirituality to—paradoxically—fantasize the liberalization of conservative evangelicalism.

One distinguishing feature of the play is its effort to explore fundamentalist evangelicalism's "hate the sin, love the sinner" approach to homosexuality from the perspective of the "sinner." Mark is the play's resident thinker—introspective, defiant, and deeply vulnerable beneath his anger and polemics. He also functions as a cultural tour guide for an audience presumed to be unfamiliar with evangelical fundamentalism and is capable of stopping and starting scenes at will. In these moments, he breaks the fourth wall, steps outside the action and offers commentary on the play's themes and characters. Much of the play's thematic energy centers on Mark's refusal to accept the "sinner" label while also acknowledging an abiding affection for important parts of evangelical culture and life. The closest thing to a primary plot line in the play is Mark's fitful, confused, and doomed romance with TJ. TJ is butch and terrified by the possibility of losing his place within his family and community because of his sexuality; he retreats into orthodox fundamentalism and a straight marriage, projecting his fear and self-loathing on to others—especially Mark. Their friend Andrew is as scared as TJ, but not as successful in convincing himself that he can pray the gay away; he ultimately hangs himself with a noose he finds in a multipurpose room at his church. Benny is the play's effeminate sissy who, as the cast notes put it, "escape[s] into the world of drag" (Shores, 2001, p. 6).[6] The

growing network of conflicts between and among the boys (and with some of their families) becomes the driving force of the narrative, which is nonlinear and works by piecing together a set of psychospiritually emblematic scenes.

The play splits time primarily between two settings: a small Baptist church and a gay nightclub that bleeds into a piano/drag bar. Dramaturgically, this division helps structurally reinforce the play's emphasis on the oppositions and splits created by fundamentalism's response to homosexuality. As the "Do This in Remembrance of Me" communion table in the Baptist church setting is repositioned as the stripper's platform during the club scenes, or as the baptistery morphs into a boy's bedroom loft where Mark and TJ have their first, fumbling, post-pubescent sexual encounter, Shores' play suggests both that the sacred and the (homo)sexual are inextricably bound together for the queer evangelical, and that there is nevertheless no easily identifiable or functionally inhabitable middle ground between the two on which these misfits can build a life—at least not as things now stand. The four main characters regularly speak directly to the audience during meta-narrative moments that Shores may be using to imagine an alternative, out-of-time position for his gay characters to exist in, between the existential extremes represented by the church and the bar. From this in-between space, the sissies confront themselves and their desires, fears, and ambivalences about being gay and evangelical without worrying about being rejected by the church, or about losing connections to their rural families and Bible-Belt traditions in an escape to urbanized gay life. But in these soliloquies, the characters consistently struggle—and fail—to overcome self-embattlement on their own, and in their isolation they return to their place in the play's narrative, immobilized with grief, consumed by self-righteousness, paralyzed with rage, incapacitated by alienation.

Here is Mark near the middle of Act II, finally coming into half-sighted realizations about the relationship between his angry defiance as a gay adult and his fundamentalist childhood:

> If someone asks me, 'What is your type" Well I just say—needy, fucked-up, sometimes unemployed, most of the time with no car or a place to live. But always really, really cute. A young combination of Elvis and Jesus. *(Pause, serious.)* What's that about? I mean, here I've spent my life working on myself. Defending to the world who I am after the Baptists fucked me up. Oops, correction. After I allowed the Baptists to fuck me up. See, I've had a little therapy. And sometimes … sometimes I think Benny's right. *(A look to BENNY.)* Just live your life, and let them live theirs—and shut the fuck up. But I can't *(Chokes up, BROTHER CHAFFEY enters and starts softly playing "Pass Me Not, Oh Gentle Savior".)* (Shores, 2001, p. 60)

In this soliloquy, Mark considers embracing a live-and-let-live detachment from the world, except that such a pose would mean abandoning the affective structures and emotional logic of Protestant evangelicalism as the framework for understanding psychosexual identity. His reluctance to surrender this familiar idiom (even if in service of an incipient gay activism) coincides with Brother Chaffey's appearance on stage and the opening strains of the plaintive gospel hymn, "Pass Me Not, Oh Gentle Savior." For the first time, Mark begins to evince an awareness of the deeper

significance of his angry defiance, not as a rejection of all that is familiar, but as a desire for self-transcending integration of the dissonant parts of his identity. Mark's mention of Elvis and Jesus recalls the point Warner (1997) makes in his autobiographical essay about evangelicalism, sex, and gay male identity that "Jesus was my first boyfriend. He loved me, personally, and he told me I was his own. This was very thrilling, especially when he was portrayed by Jeffrey Hunter" (p. 228). What Warner seems to be aiming at here (besides some comic relief) is that habits of evangelical conversion and piety impress themselves deeply into the psychospiritual character of the adolescents whose formative years are spent under the shaping pressure of fundamentalist idioms and imagery.

For gay men who come of age within southern evangelical culture, certain experiential symmetries may emerge between the struggle to come to terms with sexuality and evangelical salvation experiences as a religious rite of passage. Each involves deep-set and even more deeply felt shifts in identity, accompanied by public statements of personal transformation (so-called professions of faith), suggesting that the phenomena might well serve similar psychosocial functions. And in both coming-out and salvation experiences, identity is (re)constructed simultaneously in the public renunciation of an earlier way of living and in the embrace of new narratives and norms that help disambiguate an individuality in flux and integrate it into a community of support and understanding. In effect, evangelical religion can supply for some gay men what Warner terms "a language of ecstasy, a horizon of significance within which transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries of the self *can be seen as good things*" (1997, p. 229; author's emphasis).

Shores adds to this general dynamic the particularly powerful role music plays in activating the complex of feelings and spiritual intuitions that are key to transformative religious experiences. As Mark's soliloquy ends and "Pass Me Not" continues to build, the scene concludes:

> BENNY [singing]. "Savior, Savior …" (he rises and begins to exit.)
> BENNY/ANDREW [both singing]. "Hear my humble cry …"
> *(ANDREW rises and follows BENNY.)*
> BENNY/ANDREW/TJ. "While on others thou art calling …"
> BENNY/ANDREW/TJ/MARK [all singing]. "Do not pass me by." (Shores, 2001, pp. 60-61)

On the surface, this image of Shores' four sissies voicing their feelings of pain and isolation through the singing of a standard Baptist hymn in the gospel tradition would appear to critique evangelical fundamentalism through a quasi-Butlerian queering of hegemonic discourse. This camp-as-critique reading is reinforced by Shores' own activist vision of himself as a gay playwright. In a 2006 commentary published in *The Advocate* he declared, "I will not shut up until I breathe my last. I will not soften my position … I will scream loudly and counter the religious right's hypocrisy by exposing it." The article's title poses the question, "Do We Hate?" Shores' answer: "yeah, maybe" (2006, p. 50). In this context, Mark's angry soliloquy sounds like a re-voicing of Shores' own outrage at the way anti-gay evangelicalism not only rejects the homosexual, but also dispossesses him of the intellectual and

emotional resources needed to redirect the evangelistic impulse into a more humane reform agenda. But the deeper significance of the scene seems to be Mark's realization of the objectlessness of his anguish. As each boy tentatively joins his voice with the others', they form a queer quartet that transforms the vicissitudes of individual suffering into a basis for belonging in community, but this community cannot emerge without the surrender of the individual's aggrieved self-righteousness. This scene is representative of the play's treatment of music as a spiritual stimulus that converts otherwise insoluble cultural conflicts into moments of reconciliation and unconditional acceptance—a kind of gay grace—created in the mingling of sentiment and song. Or, as one of the alcoholic, depressive, backslidden Baptist barflies puts it early on in the play, "Yeah! Those Baptists know how to sing, that's for dang sure. There was that feelin' that I got there … Safe in the arms of Jesus, you know?" (2001, p. 20).

In Shores' plays, these sorts of incongruous lines—an alcohol-sodden, loud-mouthed tramp holding forth with her effeminate, homosexual drinking buddy about Jesus and church music in a gay bar—often get good laughs from the audience, but while Shores is well-known for a trademark brand of bawdy, white-trash Christian camp, there's no indication in the text that he intends these sorts of statements to be dismissed as only so much trailer-park theology or shrugged off as drunken philosophizing. In a note atop the text of his play *Daddy's Dyin', Who's Got the Will?* (1987), Shores provided directions that could be applied to all his works: "These people are real, not cartoons. It's easy to go for laughs, it's harder to strive for truth" (p. 7). Shores reinforced the tragicomic aims of his work in a later interview: "I choose a subject that is pretty serious and write a comedy about it … The funniest characters are the most tragic" (2000, pp. 2-3). As the film adaption of *Sordid Lives* (1998) illustrated, Shores' notion of his plays as "seriocomedy" does not always translate well into mainstream entertainment (2000, p. 3). The mass-market demand for an easily digestible cinema product resulted in the tragic element in *Sordid Lives* being sheared away in the adaptation of the play to film, undercutting the more trenchant elements of the drama and leaving a series of Southernized comedic situations that tend to reinforce over-simple stereotypes of the American South and give (sub)urban audiences permission to laugh dismissively at lower-class, rural Christians in the Bible Belt. In *Daddy's Dyin'*, a dysfunctional family of siblings and in-laws warring over their dying father's farm and money rely on the power and pathos of singing gospel music together to discover a tolerance for one another's divergent lifestyles as adults. Harmonizing their voices in song metaphorizes a model of mutual respect that allows each voice to be both individual and part of the family ensemble simultaneously, without effacing genuine differences of worldview and life choices. This surreptitious heterodoxy is almost entirely absent from the 1990 film adaption, which treats the musical scenes as sentimental flashbacks of a dying and semi-lucid patriarch fantasizing in his dotage about a lost idyll of Southern, patriarchal pastoralism. Like the "pill-popping, chain-smoking, cement-haired" busybody who anchors the drama in *Sordid Lives* (Peiker, 2008), gospel music and Baptist hymnody function in the film adaption of *Daddy's Dyin'* as pretexts for punch lines or melodrama, rather than as a psychospiritually strategic way for Southern Christians to manage conflicts between private feelings and public expectations of orthodox culture.

As Shores' career as a playwright has progressed, this idea has increasingly come to focus on the twinned crises of sexuality and spirituality in explicitly gay male experience. The most radical nonconformist in *Daddy's Dyin'* (1987), one of Shores' earliest works, is a hippie named Harmony Rhodes and the sluttish, foul-mouthed Evalita Turnover—entertaining but stock characters, both. Five years later, in *Daughters of the Lone Star State* (1992), Shores created an all-female cast of brassy, trashy, flawed, but fundamentally decent women whose commitment to the salvific effects of female community and the restorative power of (mostly) unconditional love reads in retrospect like a writer experimenting with his voice in new registers that, perhaps most innovatively, attempt to imagine a contemporary Southern Christian homosocial sphere. By the end of the decade in *Sordid Lives* (1998), Shores' work was ranging into transvestitism, coming out in conservative culture, and the Southern Christian propensity to pathologize homosexuality. If, as Shores himself has said, he keeps "getting closer to me" in all his plays, then *Sissies* (2001) represents the culmination not only of Shores' nearly two-decades long struggle to come out within a secular artistic and literary world as a gay playwright from a fundamentalist background, but also an authoritative statement on the role of gospel music in the emergence of a more fully self-possessed identity for many gay men from Southern, evangelical backgrounds who want and need some way to retain a sense of their native spirituality as they acknowledge their sexuality. "When I wrote Sissies," Shores has said, "I really believed each of the four boys was an extension of me" (2000, p. 2).

In singing about the soul's plea for salvation, each character in *Sissies* projects into the lyrics and music the particular nature of his experience as a gay man who still longs to retain some affiliation with evangelical culture, but in a way that does not deny the full range of his adult identity. For him to voice the queer struggle for acceptance through a gospel hymn is not only—or even primarily—to critique or satirize evangelicalism, it seems to me, any more than Shores suggests in *Daddy's Dyin'* (1987) that the primary meaning of the family singing gospel music together is the kind nostalgic escape from reality that the film makes it out to be. Shores has spoken publicly about a desire to create work that "shakes people up" (Shores, 2000, p. 1), so it would not be wrong to identify elements of critique, satire, and escapism in his plays' use of music, religious or otherwise. But for Shores, gospel music seems to matter mainly for its ability to help reconcile the queer and spiritual selves, to consecrate the ordeal of coming out (or trying to) in the reassuringly familiar patterns of evangelical feeling and expression as idiomized in gospel music.

Shores seems to have had something similar in mind when speaking in an interview just before the debut of *Sissies* (2001):

> When we were doing *Sordid* [*Lives*] in Fort Worth in 1997, I hung out a lot with Leslie Jordan [who later become nationally famous playing the flamboyant Beverly Leslie on the sitcom Will & Grace] in the gay bars in Dallas, and I was just coming out, having a great time. My friends and I would listen to this gospel group called the Rambos sing in a gay club, and we sang gospel songs all the way back and forth. I started thinking of this collision of sexuality and the music. That made me remember the church, which led to the inspiration for [*Sissies*], set in Dallas. (Shores, 2000, p. 3)[7]

As an attempt to describe the origins of his work, Shores' explanation elides as much as it elucidates. The most important insights and motivations seem to exist beyond language, in between the words describing those moments when "this collision of music and sexuality" catalyzes the discovery of a self in which the disparate components of identity are harmonized in the experience of southern gospel.

Between the Pulpit and the Piano

There is a longstanding link in the literature of conversion between musicality and transformative upwellings of psychospiritual energy going back at least as far as Augustine. In Book VIII of *Confessions* (1986), he describes his religious conversion experience beginning at the sound of a child singing in the garden. The singing voice seemed to be sign from God to turn to scripture as a guide to salvation (1986, p. 177). For Augustine, music collects a set of disaggregated spiritual aspirations into a coherent feeling of epiphany or insight: "take and read," the child's voice sings, "take and read." And "in an instant," Augustine concludes, "it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart" (1986, p. 178). For Shores and his characters, the literal meaning of the doctrine as expressed in lyrics seems to be less important than the feeling of salvation (which is to say, unconditional acceptance and belonging) that emerges in the close harmony of gospel music sung in the ensemble—whether coming home from the gay bars in Dallas, or, as Andrew puts it in *Sissies* (2001), that moment on Sunday morning when "everybody would start to sing, 'Just as I Am' or 'Softly and Tenderly' or 'Pass Me Not.'" And "I'd feel that tug … [that] I didn't quite understand" until "a feeling of peace, of joy and happiness [would] flood through my entire being" (pp. 16-17).

In juxtaposing Augustine and Shores in this way, I wish to highlight both the persistent role music has played in affective religious identity formation and the way that role has evolved over time to serve as a contemporary idiomatic bridge between orthodox doctrine and unorthodox experience for gay people whose lives and identities put them in conflict with dominant culture of conservative Protestant Christianity in the Calvinist tradition. In the evangelical vernacular, the experience Andrew (and Augustine) describes is understood as the conviction of the holy spirit ("that tug") and the work of redemptive grace ("a feeling of peace, of joy and happiness") imparted to the soul that has come to be aware of the lapsarian state imputed to all humankind through original sin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, contemporary evangelicalism commonly locates this so-called age of accountability during the years of childhood leading up to and culminating in puberty. This emphasis on the conversion of adolescent and early teenage children inevitably blends and blurs religious experience and sexuality. For those pubescent religious strivers coming into comprehension of their incipient homosexuality, the crisis of religious awakening can easily also become a crisis of psychosexual identity.

Remembering his own baptism by full immersion—and the experience of seeing TJ naked as they both changed clothes afterward in a small room off to the side of the church baptistery—Mark confesses that "that blend of religion and sexuality was just almost too much for my almost teenage body to deal with. I was supposed to feel different. And I did! But now, in hindsight, on that day, the day of my baptism, my twelve-year-old … body and soul … *(Stares at TJ) ...* fell in love." This

memory is part of a flashback scene in which young Mark and TJ are both welcomed into the communion of Christian fellowship following their baptism. Standing at the front of the church, Mark "walks over and joins TJ, throwing his arm around him," and they sing with the rest of the congregation the chorus to "Revive Us Again": "Hallelujah, thine the glory, hallelujah, amen. Hallelujah, thine the glory, revive us again" (Shores, 2001, p. 43). As with so many of the play's psychospiritually pivotal scenes, this one relies on the presence of some classic gospel hymn or other traditional white gospel song to catalyze an imaginative and emotional resolution of the dichotomies that beset the gay male evangelical caught between psychosexual desire and normative cultural values. The transgressive attraction that Mark feels when looking at TJ's body in the baptismal dressing room is ceremonially sanctified in the experience of hymn singing. A touch that is forbidden in the naked intimacy of the changing room is permitted and encouraged in the public evangelical sphere, which sanctions homosocial bonding as expressions of Christian brotherhood. Mark throws his arm around TJ in a gesture that is not satirical or ironic or blasphemous, but suffused with vectors of identity originating in both religion and sexuality. Under the auspices of evangelical religious cultural practices like baptism and the ceremonial exchange of affection between Christian "brothers," ordinarily conflicting impulses of gay evangelical identity are momentarily and wonderfully harmonized through the experience of the gospel music that texturizes these rituals.

From this point of view, the link between gay men and gospel music begins to make sense as an experiential context in which to feel the queer, evangelical equivalent of what James referred to in the *Varieties of Religious of Experience* as "the high-water mark of his spiritual capacity" (1997, p. 191). That this experience should emerge within such an openly homophobic environment presents a paradox, to be sure, but one that is nevertheless consistent with the structure of feeling and desire found in strictly patriarchal societies. Indeed Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985) study of homosociality in "male-dominated kinship systems" has shown "the tendency toward important correspondences and similarities between the most sanctioned forms of male-homosocial bonding"—sports, politics—"and the most reprobated expressions of male homosexual sociality"—cabarets, drag shows, gay strip clubs (pp. 3, 89).

Take, for instance, the all-male quartets who spend long stretches of time on the road in the necessary intimacy of a custom coach bus (the preferred mode of travel in southern gospel). Unaware of the pious explanations of southern gospel music as a high calling and an evangelistic ministry, one might observe this dynamic as an outsider and easily draw far different conclusions from the sight of four comely (or at least highly coifed) men spending most days and nights together in a confined living space they share for the purposes of eating, sleeping, bathing, and passing most of their waking hours between concerts. For their part, many gospel singers speak of the bonds they form with other singers as akin to brotherhood, strongly suggesting that a great deal of intimacy inevitably builds up between men who not only live this closely together for (often) years at time, but also join their voices night after night in close harmony to sing of the soul's striving after grace and salvation. "I count it an honor," the manager of one of the most prominent southern gospel all-male quartets said in a statement referring to the group's lead singer, "to stand beside this man night after night. He is not only the finest lead singer in Gospel

Music, but he has a passion for this music and the message it delivers. I love him like a brother and thank God for his friendship" (Jonathan Wilburn, 2006).

I do not mean to suggest that such dynamics are necessarily manifestations of repressed or hidden same-sex attractions. But these networks of religious camaraderie and spiritual intimacy can nevertheless combine with the rhetoric and experiential force of southern gospel to serve as a powerful idiom through which those involved at any stage of the music's creation and consumption may sublimate a range of homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual feelings or desires that build up within evangelicalism's psychosexually repressive culture. A few years after being outed by the arrest of the man who tried to blackmail him, the gospel singer Kirk Talley wrote and recorded a song titled "Intimacy with Jesus" (Talley, 2005b). In the song, the singer describes his desire to touch Christ's face daily and be near enough to feel the Savior's heartbeat "as I completely lay upon your chest" (Talley, 2005b). It is not uncommon for southern gospel songs to rely on images and rhetoric of physical or romantic intimacy to dramatize evangelicalism's ideal relationship with the divine (see, for instance, the recently popular song "Hold Me While I Cry" by Karen Peck and New River), but the New Testament's prominent descriptions of Christians as the bride of Christ (*King James Bible*, Eph. 5. 25) and Jesus as a bridegroom (Matt. 25.10) provide a scriptural rationale for desexualized interpretations of such imagery as purely metaphorical. Read in light of Talley's ordeal and the very public way he subsequently discussed having "wrestled and dealt with same-sex attraction" for many years (Talley, 2005a), "Intimacy with Jesus" is notable for collapsing the traditional distance between the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor. The song's explicitly homoerotic imagery transparently displaces homosexual desire onto evangelical religious experience. As a culturally authorized language in which to speak of deep feelings of the heart and intuitions of the soul, southern gospel negotiates between unorthodox identity and orthodox culture.

Talley himself has come very close to acknowledging as much. In the same interview in which he discussed his same-sex attractions, he said that while "people are just now finding out" about his sexuality because of the criminal case he was caught up in, "all my life I put myself and my personal struggles in my songs," which are a "transparent look into my real life" (Talley, 2005a). If we take Talley's words seriously (and I think we should), then one function of southern gospel music may indeed be to redirect culturally forbidden desires of the gay male—on either side of the footlights, whether out, repressed, closeted, or questioning—into pathways of expression that are both psychospiritually familiar and culturally acceptable.

In matters of the spirit, soul, and identities in transition, we deal in penumbras just beyond our focal distance; in evidences felt, not seen; in substances hoped for, but never fully grasped. When I have observed—and felt for myself—the self-authenticating force of gospel music at its best (what Don Cusic [1990] has so aptly called "the sound of light" in his history of Christian music), the experience has been as authoritative and affecting in the moment as it has proved difficult to explain or describe after the psychospritual comedown.[8]

This indescribability is, I think, part of the reason such moments in Shores' plays sometimes inadvertently teeter on the verge of farce or melodrama. In trying to render such experiences, he seems to be attempting not only to translate an unfamiliar subculture and set of spiritual customs to popular audiences beyond the

American South, but also to explain to himself reasons for his and his characters' continued attachment to a culture that rejects them so strongly. But these reasons remain partially comprehended at best. Gospel music raises the alluring possibility that the outcast might find a single psychospiritual language in which both the desires of the heart and habits of the soul can merge. The queer evangelical is drawn back by this prospect to the mysteries of Protestant grace and Christic redemption, even as the limits of contemporary evangelicalism's homophobia obstructs strivers' progress and turns them away. The play visualizes this tension in the opening scene, in which the four boys are first seen singing together while positioned between the pulpit (a dramaturgical symbol of evangelical orthodoxy) and the piano (the one object that endures most visibly from the cabaret and gay nightclub scenes). The existential implications represented by the characters' location between the pulpit and the piano visually metaphorizes the dilemma facing the Southern Baptist (and southern gospel) sissy and his struggle to hold the self in better psychospiritual balance, to inhabit the space between.

What, if anything, is to be done? The play's conclusion meditates on this question for some time. The final scene of *Sissies* (2001) stages an evangelical affirmation of queer identity underscored by gospel music. The scene opens at Andrews's funeral in the church, where Brother Chaffey is playing the Baptist funeral-favorite, "In the Garden" (Shores, 2001, p. 85). While the preacher's funeral sermon expounds on Andrew's suicide as the wages of sin, Mark—in his meta-narrative role—starts to annotate the preacher's remarks with increasing hostility until finally Mark's rage and frustration halt the funeral scene entirely.

> MARK. *(Overlap [with PREACHER])*. Shut the fuck up!!!! *(Music has built and abruptly stops, a minory* [sic] *feel. Church lights transition to include the God light when music stops.)*
>
> MARK. *(Manic)* Sometimes I close my eyes …. And I create a perfect world. A world of acceptance and understanding and love. A world where there's hope. Even if the hope is just whispered. I hear it.
>
> BENNY. *(A capella.)* "Soft as a voice of any angel, Breathing a lesson unheard, Hope with a gentle persuasion, Whispers her comforting word." (Shores, 2001, pp. 86-87)

With Benny's introduction of the opening lines to the gospel classic "Whispering Hope," Andrew rises, Christ-like, from the dead, and describes heaven as waking up in the arms of a faithful lover, while Mark continues to annotate the scene in a manner that suggests he is literally calling into being the better, hopeful world that he has only longed for up to this point: In this world, the preacher suddenly speaks of love, not judgment; the play's two barflies, Odette and Peanut, unburden themselves of guilt and shame for their misspent lives; TJ and Mark profess love for one another and "turn towards the pulpit, holding hands, standing there for a moment like a groom and groom" (Shores, 2001, p. 89). Ultimately, Andrew's pious mother and the rest of the cast join in singing the final bars of the song: "Whispering hope, O how welcome they voice, Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice" (Shores, 2001, p. 90).

As the resolution to a work of dramatic literature, the scene remains firmly in the realm of prolonged wish fulfillment. But I understand the play's drift from psychosocial realism into queer fantasy as a residual effect of the cognitive and emotional dissonances the text attempts to overcome. As both a meditation on, and at one important level a product of, evangelicalism's monochromatic worldview, *Sissies* (2001) struggles to escape fundamentalism's oppositional way of thinking and responding, as well as evangelicalism's reliance on effusions of sentiment and nostalgia to mask the rejection of non-normative subjectivities. Neither Shores nor Mark seems able to decide if he wants to eradicate evangelical hatefulness or force evangelicalism to accept him. Indeed, Mark's have-it-both-ways relationship to evangelicalism is, in its own way, every bit as fundamentalist as the preacher or Andrew's ultra-conservative mother. Here is Mark in Act II, contemplating leaving the church: "I'm gonna miss it. The music. The hymns. The sweet old ladies. The covered dish fellowships. That feeling … *(Pats his heart, emotional)* … I get right here. … But how do you embrace something that doesn't embrace you?" (Shores, 2001, p. 72). Without a rational language in which to translate "that feeling" into terms that do not circumscribe him within orthodox evangelicalism's punitive view of homosexuality, Mark assumes he has to surrender his spiritual identity in order to affirm his sexuality. But Mark's parenthetical, nonverbal gesture signifying the intensity of emotion he has in mind suggests whatever structure of feeling is being described here exists—like Shores' description of *Sissies*' origins—beyond the limits of language, between orthodox evangelicalism and secular gay culture, in a space where certain types of religious songs ("The music. The hymns") take on the underlying character of participants' psychospiritual desires for belonging ("the sweet old ladies") and the fellowship of community ("the covered dishes") and, by externalizing the feelings in song, legitimize them.

At its most affecting, then, white gospel music exceeds the limits of orthodox culture to control what it means or to put limits on the reach of the psychospiritual work it accomplishes. Throughout the play, gospel music that originates in church scenes is held over into, or reappears as part of, bar/club scenes (never the other way around). In Act I, when the two barflies, both lapsed evangelicals, begin talking about growing up in church, the bar's piano player begins an unsolicited rendition of the altar-call hymn "Softly and Tenderly" (Shores, 2001, p. 20). Late in Act II, one of the barflies—Peanut, a short, middle-aged gay man who pays for sex from hustlers ever since his self-image was destroyed in his twenties by "two evil queens" who very publicly humiliated him (Shores, 2001, p. 32)—approaches Andrew on the street to speak a word of cautionary encouragement to him, and "Pass Me Not" begins to filter out of the piano bar. Theater reviewer Les Spindle has written that Shores uses music in his plays "to comment on the story," and this is true so far as it goes (Shores, 2001, p. 13). But this assessment fails to comprehend the deeper function of gospel music implied by the play. Shores deploys gospel hymns in ways suggesting that certain affective styles of white Christian music, unlike other conventions of evangelical culture, have psychospiritual relevance far beyond the confines of the church.

To this transcultural aspect of gospel music, the final funeral scene adds the transformative power to integrate disparate components of the hybrid self's identity—in this case, evangelical spirituality and non-heterosexual sexuality. The

conclusion's force is somewhat scattered by the fantastical transformation of Mark into a herald of gay liberation theology, telegraphed most directly in the plays final words: "I always wake up," Mark says (as he "looks up, right hand outstretched to heavens, smiles," according to the stage directions), "but now … with hope!" (Shores, 2001, p. 90). Nevertheless, the ending remains a significant achievement as a culmination of the play's persistent suggestion of a post-fundamentalist possibility for queer evangelical identity formation, one that frees the queer self from the false oppositions between religious affections and non-normative sexuality by staging the resolution of conflictual energy in the experience of gospel music. In this, southern gospel emerges as a psychodynamic varietal of the "strategies for integration" of gay and Christian identities that Walton (2006) has discussed in his study of evangelicals and homosexuality (p. 5).

One of southern gospel's most distinctive features is its emphasis on the ultimate return of harmonic symmetry in familiar and deeply satisfying triumphs of musical consonance and beauty over dissonance and incongruence. McManus (2004) has written that the centrality in southern gospel of this dissonance-to-consonance harmonic movement "forms a musical metaphorical parallel with the extreme 'rightness' and 'wrongness'" of evangelical theology (p. 73). Shores' play (especially the conclusion's prolonged fantasy of reconciliation) suggests, however, that the frisson of resolution—the thrilling, momentary fusion of typically opposing energies into a single experience of redemptive, liberating totality—can be at least as psychodynamically significant as the fixed poles of possibility (rightness/wrongness, saved/lost, sinner/saint, gay/straight) implied by musical dissonance and harmonic consonance.

Gospel Music's "Place for Us"

Finding effective language to describe ineffable moments of spiritual transcendence is difficult enough in the main. No less gifted an evangelical divine than Jonathan Edwards complained in his 1743 treatise on *Religious Affections* about "spiritual things being invisible, and not things that can be pointed forth with the finger," so that "we are forced to use figurative expressions in speaking of them, and to borrow names from external and sensible objects to signify them by" (1962, p. 243). This problem is especially acute for those hybridized strivers seeking affirmation of their spiritual experience *and* minority identities within the idioms of evangelical Protestantism. What little language does exist in the anti-modern environment of contemporary evangelicalism is aimed at forcing separations between spirituality and non-normative identities of all kinds. As a result, attempts to integrate the two create complicated constellations of emotion shot through with contradiction and elisions—not least of all, a nagging feeling that to be gay and to enjoy gospel music is to implicate oneself in Protestant fundamentalism's anti-gay attitudes and praxis.

To those (like the author of the *Inside Out Nashville* article) who are unfamiliar with, or unreceptive to, the many varieties of evangelical religious experience, Shores' imperfectly realized vision of gospel hymns as a meaningful language of psychospiritual transformation must look like just another kind of closet, with music. But such a dismissive view simply substitutes one set of moral dogmas for another and overlooks both the experiential richness of the gospel tradition and the polyvalence of queer individuality. The lyrical and stylistic tendencies of gospel

music have historically emphasized the felt human struggle of trying and failing to live up to impossible goals of official doctrine (Harrison 2008, pp. 34-35). At the same time, American literature that explores the gospel-music experience—most notably, Harry Crews's *The Gospel Singer* (1968), but also important parts of Harold Frederic's *Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* (1926), and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993)—variously demonstrates the inextricable link between singing about Jesus and living like the Devil. To ignore this persistent linkage is to close off entire quadrants of evangelical life.

In describing southern gospel music as a vehicle for implicitly expressing queer experience, I have attempted to demonstrate how queer subjectivity within the context of, and entangled with, evangelical Christianity makes a particular kind of complex sociopolitical statement that moves beyond exclusivity of sexuality and religious identities. However, even as I place emphasis on the diversity of psychospiritual experience that southern gospel music allows within fundamentalist evangelical culture, I am also mindful of the risks associated with any discourse of religious pluralism. As Hulsether (2008) has shown in his study of religion, culture, and politics, emphasizing a plurality of religious experiences can inadvertently mask concentrations of hegemony and the operations of dominant cultural power that shape contemporary religious life, especially marginal and minority identities (pp. 16-17). In speaking of southern gospel's surreptitious heterodoxy, one must emphasize the surreptitiousness—its invisibility and the burden of self-regulation that falls to the nonconforming individual who wishes to forge a religious identity beyond what orthodoxy strictly allows—as much as the heterodox nature of that experience.

Taken together, then, the evidence from beneath the pious surface of evangelical life—behind the gospel-music stage, from the back of the bus, beyond the reach of the footlights—tells an alternative story about southern gospel music and its cultural function that doesn't (yet) definitively disrupt orthodox power structures or discredit orthodox accounts of the music's purpose, but complicates them considerably in ways that call to mind Hubbs' observation about "music's function as a redeemer—or regulator—of twentieth-century homosexuals" (2004, p. 4). Indeed, rightly understood, the history of southern gospel might well be described as the record of misfits, outcasts, non-conformists, and strugglers searching for, hearing, finding, or longing after the right key in which the soul can sing.

Thus, perhaps the real paradox at the intersection of homosexuality and gospel music would be if gay men from the fundamentalist evangelical tradition *weren't* drawn to southern gospel and its tantalizing promise of accessing an alternative language in which to find (by imagining) something like what Miller (1998) calls in the title of his essay on Broadway and homosexuality a "place for us." For Miller, mid-century Broadway showtunes operate by suppressing the "Open Secret" of homosexuality, and so possess "a loquacity of prohibition that establishes, shapes, and sharpens the very desire lying beneath it" (1998, p. 94).[9] For several generations of gay men who grew up in the rural evangelical American South, gospel music functions as what might be thought of as southern, Christian showtunes. The outsized, flamboyant sentimentality of southern gospel merges a network of desires—for transcendence, for affirmation, for the salvation of acceptance without

the surrender of self—that are only intensified by the difficulty of ever fully realizing them for more than a few fleeting moments of gospel music harmony.

References

Augustine. (1986). *Confessions*. New York: Penguin.

Bill Gaither issues statement regarding misrepresentation. (2006, May 4). *SingingNews.com*. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from http://www.singingnews.com/southern-gospel-news/11592497/.

Cohan, S. (2005). *Incongruous entertainment: Camp, cultural value, and the MGM musical*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Cusic, D. (1990). *The sound of light: A history of gospel music*. Madison, WI: Popular Press.

Darden, R. (2004). *People get read: A new history of black gospel music*. New York: Continuum.

Derrick, T. L. (2006, April 10). Thinking out loud: The gospel truth. *Inside Out Nashville*, 5.

Edwards, J. (1962). *Selections* (C. H. Faust & T.H. Johnson, Eds). New York: Hill & Wang.

Gay singer's blackmailer bets prison. (2004, August 6). *Rainbow Network News.* Retrieved March 20, 2009, from http://www.rainbownetwork.com/UserPortal/Article/Print.aspx?ID=14441&sid=27.

Glock, A. (2005, August). Out of the lord's closet. *GQ*, 132-135, 167-68, 171-72.

Harrison, D. (2008). Why southern gospel music matters. *Religion and American culture: A journal of interpretation,* 18(1), 27-58.

Hubbs, N. (2004). *The queer composition of America's sound: Gay modernists, American music, and national identity.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hulsether, M. (2008). *Religion, culture, and politics in the twentieth-century United States.* New York: Columbia University Press.

IMDB.com. *Sordid lives*. Retrieved March 20, 2008, from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0204640/.

Kosofsky Sedgwick, E. (1985). *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.

James, W. (1997). *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Touchstone.

Jonathan Wilburn celebrates 10 years with Gold City. (2006, June 14). *Sogospelnews.com*. Retrieved March 30, 2009 http://sogospelnews.com/index/content/articles/jonathan-wilburn-celebrates-10-years-with-gold-city/.

The King James Bible. (1998). Nashville: Broadman & Holman.

Linscot, G. (2006, May 7). Gaither addresses lesbian endorsement allegations. Retrieved March 24, 2009, from http://www.sharperiron.org/category/christianity/protestantism/evangelicalism/bill-gaither/.

McManus, R. (2004). Southern gospel music vs. contemporary Christian music: Competing for the souls of evangelicalism. In M. Graves & D. Fillingim (Eds.),

More than precious memories: The rhetoric of southern gospel music (pp. 57-87). Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
Miller, D. A. (1998). *Place for us: Essay on the Broadway musical*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
Peiker, M. (2008, July 14). Dirty southern laundry: Del Shores' cult class movie "Sordid Lives" now a hilarious LOGO TV series. *New York Press*. Retrieved March 24, 2009, from http://www.nypress.com/blog-1843-dirty-southern-laundry-del-shores%5C-cult-classic-mo.html.
Sholock, A. (2007). Queer theory in the first person: Academic autobiography and the authoritative contingencies of visibility. *Cultural Critique*, 66, 127-152.
Shores, D. (1987). *Daddy's dyin'. Who's got the will? A comedy in two acts*. New York: Samuel French.
——. (1992). *Daughters of the lone star state: A comedy in two acts*. New York: Samuel French.
——. (2006, March 14). Do we hate back? This gay ex-Baptist rejects moderation and advises a simple strategy against the far right: Stay angry. *The Advocate*, 50.
——. (1998). *Sordid lives: A comedy in four chapters*. New York: Samuel French.
——. (2000, October 19). Driving out demons. Interview with Les Spindle. *Back Stage West*, 14.
——. (2001). *Southern Baptist sissies: A play in two acts*. New York: Samuel French.
Spindle, L. (2003, April 3). Review of *Trials and tribulations of at trailer trash wife*, by Del Shores. *Back Stage West*, 13.
Talley, K. (2005a., August 4). Interview with Pamela Furr. *Loyalears.com*. Retrieved March 31, 2009 http://podcast.loyalears.com/midwest.php.
——. (2005b.). Intimacy with Jesus. *Live at the River: My Story, My Song*.
——. Testimony of Kirk Talley. *Restorationnet.com*. Retrieved March 24, 2009, from http://www.restorationnet.org/12.html.
Walton, G. (2006). "Fag church": Men who integrate gay and Christian identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51(2), 1-17.
Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a queer planet. *Social Text*, 9(4), 3-17.
——. (1997). Tongues untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal boyhood. In G. Comstock & S. Henking (Eds.), *Que(e)rying religion: A critical anthology* (pp. 223-231). New York: Continuum.
Werner, C. H. (1994). *Playing the changes: From afro-modernism to the jazz impulse*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Notes

[1] Portions of this essay were presented at the 2008 Midwest Modern Language Association standing panel on Religion and Literature. I am grateful to Meredith Neumann, Jay Twomey, Jessica Lott, Joe Wisdom, Brad Busbee, Felicia Lawrence, Mickey Gamble, Margaret Cavin, Katherine Hale, Judith Linville, and the anonymous reviewers for *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* for their feedback about and contributions to this project at various stages. I also wish to acknowledge the readers of www.averyfineline.com, whose regular responses to my writing about southern gospel music and culture have helped clarify my thinking about southern gospel in general and the problem of evangelical non-conformism in particular.

[2] For this reason, the utility of human-subject studies of the sort Walton (2006) productively conducted within more progressive sectors of Protestant Christianity is severely limited.

[3] This essay's focus on queer identity within southern, white gospel music reflects the socio-historically distinct trajectories along which white (southern) and black gospel developed in the twentieth century. However, there are enough stylistic and experiential overlaps in the two traditions to strongly suggest that some black gay men find implicit affirmation through black gospel in ways not wholly dissimilar from the white gospel dynamics I am interested in exploring here. In any event, further research is clearly needed into the extent to which race variously mediates the experience of gay men in gospel music among the black and white gospel traditions. For more on the history of black gospel, see Darden (2004). For more on the psychosocial differences between black and white gospel musical performance, see Harrison (2008). For a discussion of the black "gospel impulse" at work in the literature and music of afro-modernism, see Werner (1994).

[4] Though fundamentalist evangelicalism is not exclusively anchored within Protestantism, the most familiar and powerful intersections of sexuality and religious fundamentalism in America occur within Protestant evangelical fundamentalist contexts. Indeed, a useful line of inquiry might compare the way Protestant and non-Protestant fundamentalisms respond to non-heterosexuality as a component of religious identity. However, my use of the term "evangelical" and its varietals hereafter in this essay should be understood to include the modifier "Protestant" when not explicitly deployed.

[5] For more on the difference between hymns and gospel songs, see Harrison (2008, pp. 34-35). Though hymnody and white gospel are distinct traditions with discrete stylistic and cultural functions, they share many features, especially in fundamentalist Protestant religious communities. In referring to hymns in the gospel tradition here, I mean to designate the way the lyrics and musical style of certain classic hymns used in the play borrow more heavily from and rely primarily on conventions of white gospel than traditional hymnody.

[6] This and all quotes from the works of Del Shores reprinted with permission by the author, to whom I am grateful for the support he has shown this study of his work.

[7] In a more recent email exchange, Del Shores clarified to me that he and his friends were listening to the Rambos music being played on their way to the gay club, but that the Rambo family singers themselves were not present at the club.

[8]In addition to the reasons for this phenomenon that I outline above, the difficulty I describe may also be related to a particular quandary facing the queer critic, what Sholock has described as the complicated "relation between one's sexual identity and one's scholarship" and the way that in academic discourse "homosexuality (as both subject of inquiry and as an identity claim) is [often] deemed *excessively personal* in a way that heterosexuality in its normativity is not" (Sholock, 2007, 134).

[9] For more on the American musical and homosexuality, see also Cohan (2005).

Douglas Harrison, Department of Language and Literature
Florida Gulf Coast University
10501 FGCU Blvd, S., Fort Myers, FL 33965-6565/USA
e: dharriso@fgcu.edu