CHAPTER 16

HERE'S A LITTLE LAGNIAPPE[1] FOR YOU....

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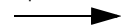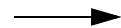
I moved to Louisiana at the end of 1998 to attend Louisiana State University (LSU) as an undergraduate student, and I didn't leave until December of 2006. Having come from Maryland, where I was raised from an early age, I had all the typical prejudices and concerns about my decision to attend a school that was geographically located in "the South." I believed that my decision to pursue my education in Louisiana would be met with blatant racism and homophobia, but also couldn't deny myself an opportunity that I might not have again—to leave the stifling confines of my familiar surroundings at home and to go across country on an adventure. Much to my own shame I was, in no uncertain terms, completely prejudiced against people from the South; I thought that the vast majority was probably illiterate or marginally literate, anti-intellectual, socioeconomically poor and indeed unhappy as a result of these factors. Coming from a well-insulated family in a predominately White, privileged community where my ethnicity was generally rendered meaningless because of my ability to pass as ethnically ambiguous, I had little experience with racism. Indeed, my physiological features as a child and teenager no doubt minimized my experiences, rendering me ignorant of these issues. Because of the position my family held in the community, I was immunized from the regular experiences of racism that typically accompany racial minorities

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(a category that I didn't phenotypically occupy according to the social class practices of where I lived).

But as a young man of color, I have always occupied a space of liminality socially because of my ethnicity. Never White, but of light skin Latino descent, as a child I was often interpreted as a racial "other" but one that was nonthreatening. I attribute this to my tendency to be rather shy and quiet as a child and teenager. Occupying this marginal social position is a complicated matter. I was mainstreamed as an ambiguous other. I was one of those who are phenotypically unidentifiable but are categorized and pigeonholed much like those whose race is easily identifiable, inevitably suffering from very similar types of racism, albeit in subtly different ways. Not only was I rendered invisible but I was also always tangentially on the racial margins of White society, invariably subject to their whims. Never fully White and never fully "Brown" I was (and am) a conundrum for both Whites and other people of color. Of course my social class has always provided a level of immunity from the social dangers of being more recognizably a "racial other," thus granting me ability to invoke my skin privilege of moving through social hierarchies with relative ease (or at least little and infrequent opposition). Indeed that flexibility is both a benefit and a disadvantage that has taken some time to reconcile. That flexibility comes at a psychological cost and with a social price. As Thomas Chatterton Williams describes in his book, *Losing My Cool* making choices about exposing one's self to these risks is at heart a difficult decision not because of the social situations in which one has to answer "what are you" or "where are you from" and similarly humiliating questions (always originating from White lips), but because of the personal consequences such questions may produce about the uncertain, always precarious place where one sees themselves in society. Being a young man of color, and yet being seen as an ambiguous other, always makes one's social position precarious, but also produces complicated questions of racial belonging. Perpetually being on the racial periphery often means being in a no-man's land of society, which often necessitates the adoption of the very mechanisms of social oppression employed against you, in order to speak from that subaltern position. My education, and social class also brought with them the opportunity to navigate the dangerous waters of racial anonymity. My erudition served as a passport of sorts to the spaces and places of White society that other, more recognizably brown people of color might attempt to unsuccessfully pursue.

Of course my queer sexuality complicates the picture further. In much the say ways as Dariek Scott (1994) makes clear, my sexual attraction to White men, as a man of color is fraught with complexities about my own identity in terms of race-related positions of power, sexual commodification and love. These issues become even more complicated when gay men

of color make the decision to move to cities (Higgs, 2002) where both ethnic and queer minorities exist (but not necessarily coexist) in proportionately larger populations. I believed that my decision to leave home and move to a city would ultimately benefit me. Naively, I believed that cities, with their higher density of queer populations might offer me the ability to escape the subtle but potent confines of social inequality at home and join with my queer brethren in unbridled sexual freedom!! Of course this was a utopic dream, but it's a dream that many queer young men believe in, and in that sense retrospectively I find some comfort (Oswin, 2008). The only thing that I was certain of at the time was that everything that I had read, seen or heard told me that moving to a city meant freedom (Streitmatter, 2009). As a queer man of color, I was unaware that such a change would prove far more complicated than I had initially believed. My naive belief that my color would be rendered meaningless within the broader context of living amongst other (sexual) minorities belied the factual reality that the very opposite is true (Han, 2007). But at the time I had none of the experience which would have led me to these truths. I had no inkling that simply being around other gay people did not eradicate racial inequality. I had no idea that living, loving, and celebrating my life amongst large populations of queer people did not mean second class citizenship, much less lead to a form of geographic containment often as a result of defensive practices against more systematic homophobia. I certainly had no idea that my participation in the secluded "gay world" known colloquially as "the scene" meant that I was participating and legitimating that system of containment with every "pink dollar" that I might spend (Hennessy, 2000) (Gorman-Murray, 2006).

Nevertheless as young gay man (of color outside of the safety of my own community), I instinctively knew that I would possibly be subjected to the racial and homophobic discrimination prevalent in the larger world to which I would soon be exposed if I undertook my journey to Louisiana to continue my undergraduate education. I instinctively knew that I would be sacrificing much of the socioeconomic privileges that I had at home were I to undertake this relocation. I also knew that the fluidity with which I moved through White spaces and places at home would come to an abrupt end, and that I might be confronted with the reality that I *was not* who I had been told myself to be. These concerns gave me pause. As a young queer man of color, I had become accustom to accessing the privileges available to me, where and when necessary in order to survive. But leaving would necessitate abandoning these social advantages and placing myself in the most precarious of circumstances. I was particularly concerned about what life might be like for me, and how I was going to negotiate a much more hostile world without these advantages. I had grown up with the knowledge that my place in the world was always subject to the

scrutiny of others; not fully occupying an easily recognizable racial identity meant having to deal with the disciplinary forces of dominant White society while also simultaneously suffering the arm's length skepticism by people of color. Of course how these forces worked was perpetually unanticipated and varied from moment to moment (and indeed still do). But it was because of this knowledge that I had ultimately concluded that the best way to truly challenge my own beliefs about my racial and social identity would be to leave home. The only question in my mind was the destination. I was firmly convinced that leaving home was *exactly* the type of change that I needed. I felt that I needed to challenge the comfort that I found and the costs that comfort required of me if I were to ever grow up and live in the larger world where I would inevitably have to face these realities of life. I had little direction in my life, having recently left the United States Air Force, and my thoughts quickly returned to continuing my bachelor's degree. A friend of mine made a similar decision and had already preceded my move by about a year. He, a queer Lumbee Indian from South Carolina, was perhaps more equipped to make the transition given his familiarity with Southern culture. And in terms of physical characteristics and phenotype, he was close in complexion and appearance to myself, so I considered his words carefully. Of course his decision was in some ways easier than my own. He was much more familiar with Southern culture and the racial and social forces which are implicated by moving to Louisiana. I was much more hesitant, because I was not only unfamiliar with those forces, but my own lengthy reliance on the socioeconomic and skin privileges that I had enjoyed at home would be completely changed, relocated, inverted and eradicated. And yet, the challenge of experiencing exactly those changes which would challenge the firmness of my own identity was unavoidably enticing. I wanted to solidify in my mind, exactly who I thought I was and who I "really" was and what better, more challenging environment to undertake that objective than in a place that would, by its very foreign nature, make the effort and its result unambiguously meaningful?

Over time, I became much more attentive to my friend's repeated and regularly positive reports about his experiences in New Orleans and in Louisiana generally. I was highly skeptical but after talking with him repeatedly over the course of a few months and having conducted only a cursory investigation of the institution, I quickly made the decision to follow him. I trusted him and thus trusted in his judgment and put aside (if only for the moment) my prejudices and listened carefully to his advice. Over those few months much of what he told me wildly contradicted my beliefs about people from Louisiana. The stereotypes that I had grown up with, according to him, were simply wrong and in fact, according to him there was little racism to be found. More important to me was my concern

about moving to and living in a hostile, homophobic environment, and on this point he repeatedly reassured me that the vast majority of people at least tolerated if not openly celebrated gay men and lesbians. He made clear however, that his observations extended only to New Orleans and Baton Rouge, the two major cities where he had visited with any degree of depth. I took his advice to heart and I committed to packing all my worldly possessions, leaving the anesthetizingly comfortable confines of my apartment and crossed the country. That decision was equally frightening and exhilarating! Knowing no one (except my friend) and having never visited the state, I was in for an adventure that would last twice as long as I initially planned.

This personal narrative argues that life experiences not only shape our perception of the world, but also contribute to the process of social adaptation that equips us with the tools to survive in the rapidly shrinking social circles of contemporary society, in which most of us find ourselves enmeshed. The methods by which my experiences influenced my outlook on the world, as a queer man (and a queer man of color), have had an indelible mark on how I approach the people who populate the landscape of my future that often look, sound, behave and react differently from me. Self-reflexively contemplating my experiences have yielded benefits in developing those tools that enable my participation in the dominant culture, despite my subaltern status. My time in Louisiana was eye opening in many ways. The 8 years that I lived there was filled with a variety of contradictory experiences. And in that time I made and lost many friends, had two of three serious long-term relationships, and learned many lessons about the parameters of racial and sexual identity discrimination.

Au: In APA style, use numerals when talking about time: 4 decades, 1 year, 2 centuries, 4 months, 6 weeks, 4 days, 17 hr, 3 min, 5 s, 0.22 ms.

I do not recall much happening during my flight, but my first and most significant recollection upon my arrival in the New Orleans airport occurred while picking up my luggage. I distinctly remember seeing many more brown bodies of all shades surround me, and this was shockingly unexpected. I wasn't certain what to think about this particular change in circumstance and realized quite quickly how sheltered my life in Maryland had truly been. Nevertheless, I did feel an ever so subtle sense of satisfaction, though tellingly I subsequently noticed that all the airport employees in supervisory positions were White. Baggage claim officials, law enforcement officers of various types, pilots, co-pilots, and virtually every ticket clerk were all White, despite the overwhelming, palpable presence of brown bodies traveling here and there around me. It was at that point that I had the first, but ever so slight feeling of something being strangely different, although I couldn't at the time define what exactly it was that I felt. Caught up in the hustle and bustle of traveling and attempting to secure ground transportation to LSU, I dismissively continued collecting my things and walked towards the exit. My

second and in some ways more profound revelation occurred on my way out of the airport. As I slowly walked towards the sliding glass doors of the airport, I saw that my view was obscured by what appeared to be rainwater cascading down the outside of the doors. Having just gotten off the plane from Maryland, this being early August, I was dressed in long sleeve shirt, pants and a jacket. As I walked through those sliding glass doors, a powerful wave of oppressive heat and unbelievable humidity hit me. Instantly I realized that what I had taken to be rain was actually condensation pouring down the outside of those glass doors. I have never, and still have yet to experience humidity like that of southern Louisiana, especially during the end of summer which in August is at its peak.

I arrived in Baton Rouge at LSU later that evening and proceeded to familiarize myself with the truly impressive landscape and architectural beauty of the institution. My first year was a culture shock. I quickly found that despite the rich diversity of the state's population, I nevertheless was a minority on LSU's campus. And yet, there was a distinctly different range of attitudes concerning my ethnicity that I experienced during that first year, which set the tone for the rest of my time in the state. While taking classes, going to dinner in the cafeteria or simply walking from building to building on a daily basis, I quickly realized that the parameters of race relations as far as I knew, fell along a well-defined and rigidly imposed hierarchical spectrum. At one end was the very real, but rarely seen, visceral White supremacist hatred towards any person of color while at the other end was a cautiously tentative, frequently subtle acceptance of racial difference. You see, southern Louisiana and New Orleans in particular is a complex geography whose historical past continues to manifest itself in a plethora of unique but oh so subtle ways on the issue of race. Louisiana was a slave state and that legacy for better or worse, lingers on in both subtle and overt social practices that characterize the parameters of acceptable daily interactions between everyone who lives there. The city of New Orleans was always a metropolitan location where cultural diversity was valued and where racial relationships were stunningly complex, but frequently possessed limited degrees of freedom due to the city's sophisticated, multiethnic nature (Campanella, 2006). Yet New Orleans was not altogether free from regularly occurring discriminatory acts of racial violence or segregation, despite its superficial appearance of financial opportunity for people of all colors and its social cosmopolitanism towards people of color (on whom, ironically, the back of its tourist industry survives). That historical legacy of limited freedom, cultural diversity and heritage, combined with the contradictory and competing structural forces of racial discrimination and power continue today. So in many ways, the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans in particular, are quite distinct from the rest of the state, and a

world away (culturally and pragmatically) in terms of race relations, to central and northern Louisiana cities.

In the 8 years I lived in southern Louisiana, I never experienced any explicitly violent, racial antagonism. Although that, in and of itself, is not and should not be interpreted to be praiseworthy. The norm as I experienced it was more frequently peppered with a wide variety of what Psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, MD, in the 1970s called "racial microaggressions," and they tended to occur in the city of Baton Rouge where I attended LSU. Expanding on Dr. Pierce's original theory, Derald Wing Sue explains that microaggressions consist of "hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color," yet Sue also poignantly notes that the "perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). The subtle public smirks of White superiority often became a familiar insult that I regularly encountered, at least until I opened my mouth where my diction and elocution exposed my education. That frequently resulted in an immediate and noticeable change in the dynamic of my public experiences with White people who were, by and large unaccustomed to educated people, especially if they suspected them to be of color (like myself) or obviously saw them as racial minorities.

Most frequently, either by virtue of my being a freshman or because of my youth, I quickly found myself relegated to the regular indignities of racial slights, unpleasant interactions with university staff or officials, as well as on off-campus business establishments. Describing the characteristics of these events, Sue et al. (2007) notes that

> Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. (p. 273)

Indeed these were daily fare during my residency in Baton Rouge and inexplicably, my default reaction was one that dismissed those insults as simply a byproduct of being in the South. My attitudes, beliefs and biases about Southern culture created the expectation that this type of behavior was not only the norm, but should be expected from a primarily un(der)educated demographic in the geography where I chose to pursue my education. Nevertheless, finding myself in these situations was a new and deeply uncomfortable source of anxiety and depression. They were a painful reminder of both my racial and sexual difference. And that difference was unambiguously interpellated as possessing an inherently lower

social value than my White, heterosexual friends, colleagues, and fellow citizens around me.

Over time, however, I began to realize that these experiences seemed to occur in *very specific* circumstances. Invariably, whenever I found myself being ignored while standing in line, or having a White person served first before me in a restaurant, I noticed that these events always took place in public settings where White people were in positions of authority or leadership. Tellingly, those same individuals uniformly tended to occupy an older demographic of the population, and Baton Rouge and its surrounding suburbs was always the location where these events took place. My interactions with men and woman of my own age, were completely was devoid of the overt "symbolic" racist[2] (Sears, 1988) behaviors their older counterparts expressed. It seemed to me that the perpetrators found safety in numbers and that their behavior, while obvious to me (and on more than one occasion, visibly obvious to others), always went unpunished.

The discriminatory behavior of people off campus was of course, in my mind one thing, but the presence of this type of thing in the classroom was something that I was *completely* unprepared for. I frequently noticed that I would rarely be called on in class or when I was called on in class, my contributions were either minimized or were always comparatively undervalued next to comments offered by White students. Although these experienced often went unnoticed by my White counterparts, I quickly realized why other students of color in class so infrequently spoke. Concerned, I asked an African American student with whom I shared a class with what his thoughts were, to which he said,

"Man, are you kidding me? I don't even know why you bother. Don't you know where you are yet?" and somewhat taken aback, I said "of course I do, but does that mean I should give up trying?" to which he responded

> you can do whatever you want, but believe me it's a waste of time, he [the professor] doesn't give a fuck about any of us [people of color in the class]…. You're lucky that you and [an Asian female student] are the right shade, at least you get to ask questions, the rest of us [African American students in the class] are screwed" after which he immediately walked away.

I had not known the silent oppressive circumstances under which other students of color struggled. The historical influence of Louisiana's tripartite racial codes is well known and its subtle distinctions between Black, Mulatto, and White have not yet been fully eradicated. An altogether different event served to solidify my place in the social and cultural milieu in which I lived later that semester, during the fall of my first year at LSU.

One day, I happened to need some medication for a cold. My doctor telephoned my prescription to Walgreens, where I went to pick it up. There I found a short line in the pharmacy, consisting primarily of older

African American men and women who were waiting to be called for their prescriptions. I, at the end of the line, began to read a book from class and not more than a moment had passed when I hear the clerk say, "Hey you, you there, can I help you?" I looked up and astonishingly realized that he was speaking to me. Now, at the time I was a 6' 180 lb young man with a very light tan complexion but with straight, jet black hair and clean-shaven except for a mustache, wearing glasses. I proceeded to walk to the counter and ask for my prescription, to which he smiled and said, "Certainly, I'll be right back." What seemed to me to be an agonizing betrayal of the people behind me seemed to take an hour, though I'm sure not more than a minute passed before his return. I paid for my medicine and quickly escaped, with a degree of humiliation that I will never forget. The privilege of being a lighter shade and possessing more preferential characteristics of Whiteness through my hair, dress, and general appearance of socioeconomic advantage was inextricably linked to my social superiority.

But what was equally more distressing to me was that the racial climate in which I was enmeshed seemed to extend farther than I could assess and farther than I had naively believed it could from the comfortable confines of my home in Maryland when I applied to LSU. The lack of students of color in positions of leadership; the prominent absence of faculty of color; the absence of explicit curricular requirements for education about people of color and racism combined with no actual support for underprivileged students of color in the retention and graduation (based on statistics that I later investigated) all contributed to an unfavorable climate at the institution. And all of these criticisms are components of what Daniel Solorzano (2000) describes as important to the undergraduate experience for students of color (p. 67). Collectively these events expose the myriad ways in which racial difference and discrimination manifested themselves in my experiences living in southern Louisiana.

Not all my experiences were negative; and they were always conditioned on context, especially in terms of geography. I made and have kept quite a few friends from my life in Baton Rouge, and indeed many of my experiences with individuals were positive. It was only my life in public social settings where racially insensitive comments or behaviors happened. Many of my (all White) male and female friends were highly sensitive to, cognitively understood and respected the onerous burden of racial disparity present in the highly regimented geographies of southern Louisiana, and I came to rely upon their knowledge for explanation and guidance. They served as an important resource in during my first years in Baton Rouge, and during the years to come when I learned how to navigate the treacherous waters of Louisiana's complex racial history and its sociocultural legacy of race relations. And for their help, I am deeply

indebted and eternally grateful. I never would have survived beyond my first two semesters were it not for their practical help, emotional support and direct advocacy on my behalf in many difficult situations. Interestingly, most of my White friends were born and raised in Southern culture, and were highly educated in the complexities of race relations, despite our uniform lack of formal education as college freshman. Ranging from small towns like Vidalia and Ferriday; Natchez, Mississippi to large suburbs like Greenwell Springs and Metaire, they served as a vital resource that over time provided me with the coping mechanisms with which I could confront problems where they arose. Their informal education about Louisiana's Southern history proved invaluable because through them, I became equipped with the knowledge about people's motivations and belief systems that was so necessary to my survival. Their explicit acceptance of my racial otherness and my queer sexuality was a refreshing surprise, not because we shared the same age group, but because my *public* experiences contrasted so drastically with my *private* moments with them. This public/private dichotomy became a reoccurring theme later.

In terms of my sexual identity, I lived a vigorously open identity on campus, and I found my activist attitudes surprisingly supported. I do not doubt that there might have been some silent, unexpressed thoughts of disapproval. Only once did I experience outright homophobia. I attribute my providence to the in your face, take no prisoners, no holds barred, attitude that I expressed on campus. I regularly wore t-shirts emblazoned with phrases like "Queer As Fuck" across campus, and I often heard supportive comments from total strangers. One day, as I walked out of class wearing that same t-shirt, I heard someone behind me say "Go Pedro Zamora!"[1] in my direction. I turned and silently smiled my thanks though I couldn't identify whom it was that said it. Days like that validated my aggressively public queer identity, and affirmed for me my right to attend LSU, no matter the price I had to pay later.

And while most of my life on campus was positive in this regard, there was one incident that I will never forget which happened partially, as a result of the naiveté that all of my publicly supportive experiences created. Living in Kirby Smith, a 16 floor all male dormitory, was quite *the* experience. While I can't comprehensively describe the many great times I had there within the limitations of these pages, the one actually *dangerous* event I had, happen to occur on the very hallway where my suite was located. For me, this event reinforced the powerful dynamism of public/private contexts, and how sociocultural forces work in tandem with homophobia.

One day, I happened to inadvertently mention to my suitemates (both of whom were African American) that I found another light-complexioned Creole guy attractive. Now my suitemates were both supportive and

accepting of my sexuality. And I believe that they, teasingly believed that mentioning this fact to the object of my affection would be a way to "find me a man" to resolve what they concluded was my lack of a sex life. Unfortunately, their lack of foresight proved extremely dangerous. The object of my affection happened to be a very muscular guy, although about a foot shorter than myself, with gorgeous short jet-black curls, brown eyes and a beautifully narrow face, who possessed (as I was soon to learn) an especially potent homophobia. About a week passed after that conversation and my suitemates, with an obviously fake casualness inquired about my continued attraction to this young man. I responded that nothing had changed but that I, for (what I thought were) obvious reasons would never approach him. They asked why, to which I responded, "well he's obviously straight," and they then informed me that they had told him of my interest. I immediately lost it and proceeded to ask they what would have motivated them to do so and did they realize the danger that their decision put me in. They responded with incredulity and naively asked why I would think I'd ever be in danger. I sat on the foot of my bed exasperatingly staring at them, aghast at how I would ever see this guy again (who I regularly ran into walking across campus between our dorm and the adjacent cafeteria). Despite me being "their first gay," I was livid at their presumption but also at their ignorance about my own social and physical vulnerability. It of course, never entered into either of their minds that I, simply by virtue of being male, might not be capable of defending myself. Their construction of masculinity didn't foresee physical vulnerability or comprehend timidity. Because I did not conform to their notions of hegemonic masculinity; my adamant rejection of physical violence was incomprehensible (and perhaps indefensible) to their way of thinking.

Two days later, while waiting for the elevator in my dorm lobby, the object of my affection walked up to me, along with another African American friend of his. I immediately looked away, but they decided to follow me in an elevator car alone. Nervous I proceeded to press the button to my floor in eager anticipation of leaving the elevator as soon as possible. He asked me, if what my suitemates said was accurate to which I unconvincingly responded, "I don't know what you're talking about." We rode on in silence and I arrived at my floor and quickly exited. Later that evening when walking down the hall to my suite, he, his African American girlfriend, and his male friend cornered me on an empty hallway on the same floor of my suite. They began to argue with me and harass me. His girlfriend seemed particularly protective of him and perhaps what she saw in me was a threat. I'll never know for certain, but I do vividly recall her glaring eyes, though what she was thinking behind those vicious brown eyes I could only speculate. He began to criticize me for my "perverted" interests in him and increasingly

threaten me while his girlfriend hurled the most vile insults my way. His friend grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me against the wall, and were it not for a neighbor opening the door during my cry out for help (which distracted them for a moment during which I wretched myself free and escaped), I was certain I would have been beaten mercilessly. Running to my suite, I called the police who met me in the lobby and took a report. The White officer took a report, all the while expressing shock that I had "put myself in this situation." Humiliated, I returned to my suite and to the best of my knowledge, no disciplinary or legal action was ever taken against any of them.

Again, the consequences of the public/private dichotomy reared their ugly head. I have no doubts that the assault that I experienced would never have happened under the scrutiny of public eyes, and yet violence perpetrated against me by another person of color still happened. Nonetheless this event, is glaringly contrasted to all the positive experiences I had throughout my time in academic environments and in public social spaces across campus in terms of acceptance (or at least silent tolerance for) my visible queerness. How does one reconcile these differences, and are they irreconcilable? After this happened, I was much more conservative in expressing my thoughts and feelings to people and learned to censor myself both in public and private settings regardless of the costs. That this decision resulted in my becoming more aloof was a necessary evil for my own personal wellbeing and survival in what was to me, an always potentially hostile environment. However, I also resolved to explore what all my friends had informed me[4] was the more accepting environment of the French Quarter[5] in New Orleans.

New Orleans was in many ways a respite from the difficult and complex life in Baton Rouge that was hallmarked by infrequent, but periodic moments of intense racial isolation and indignity, despite my friends' supportive attitudes towards my sexuality or ethnicity. The city of New Orleans was an hour drive from Baton Rouge where I lived on campus at LSU. It was a Mecca of cultural diversity and was a powerful attraction for students of my age. New Orleans embodies the French Cajun culture's attitude of "laissez le bon temps roule" or, "Let the Good Times Roll." Its appeal for me lay not only in the legality of 24 hour, 7 day a week availability of alcohol or public drinking (although it was a compelling factor) but also in the strong and visible gay center populated with a multiplicity of nightclubs and bars that was so painfully lacking in Baton Rouge. While for some scholars, the utility of gay commercialism is fraught with complex advantages and disadvantages (Buckland, 2002), for me as a young gay man of color surrounded by other gay men (of all colors) freely expressing their sexuality, my visit to a gay club was an excitingly liberating experience. My first visit to the *Bourbon Pub & Parade* and *Oz* remains

unforgettably linked (for better or worse) with a utopian sense of queer freedom and personal liberty. And as Fiona Buckland (2002) articulates, those conceptual connections serve a larger purpose in the construction of queer identities across geographic and sociocultural boundaries.

New Orleans's bohemian live and let live attitude generally seen in relation to diversity, extends to the gay community and attitudes vary from those who simply see it as none of their business, considering the behavior of others as a private concern, to those who recognize the role that gay people have played in the preservation of the [French] Quarter and stress the value of the gay community to the area (Foley & Lauria, 2003). For many it is just not an issue. For others, the contact with the gay community has been enriching for their own lives. Lawerence Knopp (1997) has indicated that "the French Quarter's long tradition as a relatively open center of gay culture afforded New Orleans gays a much greater opportunity to create integrated gay identities and lifestyles, than was available in most other U.S. cities." Many authors have pointed to the importance of certain urban areas as important for the growth of gay identity (Binnie, 1995, 2004; Browning, 1996; Davis, 1995; Rushbrook, 2002; Higgs, 2002; Bell, 2004; and Oswin, 2008).

In this sense, the importance of New Orleans and its geographic proximity to Baton Rouge served as an important escape from the homophobic gazes of intolerance and threats of physical violence. Nonetheless, even within the superficially liberating environment of the queer nightclubs and bars, I, like many queer people of color, found myself occasionally marginalized as a minority, within a minority. As both Chong-Suk Han (2007) and Ian Bernard (2003) point out, queer men of color are equally subjected to racialized discourses that marginalize and stigmatize brown bodies within the queer community. That certainly proved to be true, despite the racial diversity in the city of New Orleans and the larger southern Louisiana geography. I, however, was lucky in that during my residency in Louisiana I fell in love with two wonderful White guys despite the palpable racism even within the ostensibly accepting queer communities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. That one of them happened to live in Lafayette, Louisiana, (an hour away from Baton Rouge) and the other in Addis, Louisiana was poignant in that both "cities" were substantially less populated in comparison to New Orleans or Baton Rouge, the state's capital. While I was (and could never be completely) free from what Bernard articulates as the "objectification of men of color" (p. 38) by other gay White men, I certainly did not experience the racist, fetishized stereotypes that so frequently accompany interracial relationships to which both Han and Bernard refer. That is not to say that the French Quarter in with its extensive historical legacy of complex race relations, is a queer utopia, or an uncontaminated space for men of color to pursue their sexual

desires. But other locations in Southern Louisiana certainly would prove much more difficult places to live by virtue of the complex dynamics implicated within homonormative queer communities subject to the larger discursive forces of race relations, socioeconomics, and identity at work in Louisiana culture.

New Orleans is a city that stands alone in Louisiana; not only because of it concentrated history of racial mixing and cosmopolitan contemporary views towards the queer community. But rather, it is a place that offers the verisimilitude of freedom, without actually delivering on its visual, sensory promise of liberation. The ghettoization of communities of color, especially within the queer community serves to perfectly illustrate the complexity and highly problematic political policies of marginal tolerance. The city will always remind me of a place where I found what I thought to be was genuine and true, sexual freedom. It was only until I had relationships *outside* of the strict confines of the French Quarter did I come to recognize the public limitations of that freedom. This is not an indictment, but a personal, factual observation seen through the unique lens of an "outsider," one neither born nor raised in southern Louisiana culture. Unquestionably, for queer people who were born and raised in rural (and less populated cites in) Louisiana—New Orleans is in fact, *the one place* (however geographically marginalized) that they can truly express themselves, conditionally free from the scrutiny and sexual policing by dominant heterosexual Louisianan society (Binnie, 2004). But for me, I found freedom from the stigmatizing, racialized discourses of New Orleans's queer community, within the arms of two, poor White boys from Addis and Lafayette. While some scholars might argue that this is an example of false consciousness (Scott, 1994), I firmly believe that if they truly knew my ex's, they would come to recognize the abject absurdity of such an assertion. Interracial, same sex desire is *always* a complex and sometimes contradictory experience that involves carefully informed, cautiously observed negotiations of power (and love) between partners. But I'm fortunate in that both my relationships were free from the poisonous influences of racial stigmatization found in the concentrated queer "mainstream" geographies of New Orleans's French Quarter scene. And thus it is in this way that my experience of New Orleans will always be remembered with moments of pure and unadulterated excitement, happiness and regret; none of which are necessarily bad things at all. Were it not for the queer pedagogical experiences I learned in New Orleans, I would never have known what "true" love looked like, much less be capable of finding it when I saw it. It is a debt to the city that I shall likely be unable to repay.

And so now my story ends. In 2007, I finally decided to pursue graduate school, which inevitably lead me to leave my life in Baton Rouge, and

the highly complex, deeply challenging and richly rewarding cultural experiences that I had there, behind me. The many friendships that I developed while living in southern Louisiana have remained strong, despite the many changes in addresses that almost all of us have had over the years, and I will always remember my life there with a fondness tinged with some small degree of relief. Of one thing I am certain—despite the many difficulties and struggles that I faced there—I wouldn't have chosen another path given the chance to do it all over again.

The wide panoply of experiences I encountered exemplifies the diverse methods of adaptation that I had to quickly learn and employ, for a man of my ethnicity and sexual identity. But more significantly, my experiences are a vitally important heuristic for understanding and navigating the paradoxical relationships between race, socioeconomics, education and sexuality that one encounters in southern Louisiana. Southern Louisiana's rich, socially diverse demographics remain deeply embedded in historical discourses of racialized socioeconomics and homophobia. How I've come to perceive my place in the world and the social hierarchies in which I find myself today are forever structured by my life in the past. From my joyous discovery of love and kinship found in my lovers and gay friends; the innumerable, wonderfully inexplicable relationships that I made with my straight White friends; to the difficult but necessary lessons I've learned about racism and homophobia, my life as an undergraduate in southern Louisiana has helped construct my identity and produce the person I am today. And for that, I am forever grateful.

NOTES

1. "Lagniappe" is a French Cajun term colloquially defined as "something extra" or something thrown in, gratis, for good measure.
2. "Symbolic" racist behaviors are distinctly different from other types of racist behavior because of its overt, visibly explicit content.
3. Pedro Zamora, the Cuban American HIV activist on MTV's season three of *Real World.*
4. While I'm sensitive to what Sarah Shulman (1998) calls the performativity for the straight gaze by queer people, and I agree that for many of my friends the novelty of having a token gay male was an important component in their initial decision to befriend me, I firmly believe that their steadfast loyalty and commitment to my safety, sanity and happiness were genuine—especially as the time had long passed by which that novelty would have worn off.
5. A geographically distinct section of New Orleans, bounded by North Rampart, Canal, Esplanade and North Peters Streets; populated with highly concentrated, well publicized, visibly gay and lesbian businesses and residences.

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