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Realism and a Discourse of Alternative Sexuality in *A Small Gathering of Bones*

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Abstract

A discourse of alternative sexuality has emerged alongside other heteronormative discourses in the literature of the Anglophone Caribbean, albeit it is clear that diasporic, rather than regional, writers are engaging more openly with such a discourse. Consideration can be given as to whether the status of this literary discourse can be described as avant-garde, risqué, accepted or inchoate and whether these texts are mainly assimilative or transgressive, and what is the significance of them being predominantly one or the other. Another significant concern regarding the literary representation of gay/lesbian/queer issues is how writers attempt to portray such material for a society that is largely conservative and parochial and in which heterocentric, heterosexist and homophobic attitudes prevail. Therefore, one has to consider the ways in which they use or manipulate language and what the identifiable links between the oral and scribal literatures that address the theme of alternative sexuality may be, for example. Controversial, topical and visible issues associated with the gay and lesbian community such as public sex, adoption, gay marriages, hate crime legislation, laws against discrimination, health and insurance benefits for couples who cohabit, for example, are debated mostly outside rather than inside of the region. Of particular interest to this paper is the portrayal of specific issues such as domestic violence, cohabitation, public sex that are explored with realism in Patricia Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones* (1994), a novel by a lesbian who takes a sensitive and poignant look at the gay male in Jamaican society – a society that has rightfully or wrongfully been accused of being stridently homophobic. The novel seems to smack of irony, therefore, because Powell, who lives and writes outside of the region, powerfully addresses some everyday matters related to homosexuals that are hardly given prominence in Caribbean society, yet she situates her story in none other than her native Jamaica. How these elements of gay love and lifestyle play themselves out within what is primarily a discourse on AIDS – though this latter theme is explored by way of implicature rather than explicature - is also of interest here.

Introduction

This paper aims to discuss the realistic portrayal of particular aspects of gay lifestyle in a fictitious piece of work, set in a region where in reality gay issues are not at the forefront, or even on the margins of public, social or political discourse, and where there is no vibrant and cohesive gay activism as is evident in the metropolitan countries of the world.

That issues such as domestic violence, cohabitation and a studied look into the personal relationships of homosexual males, as well as public sex are depicted in a literary text, means that this minority group is finding voice via a medium that has generally been comprised of heteronormative discourses – the word ‘minority’ here as an indication of its stigmatization and marginalization in a heterosexist and heterocentrist society, rather than as a quantitative marker. That is, there seems to be an emerging gay canon in anglophone Caribbean Literature albeit by writers who are now residing outside of the region.

Ironically, *A Small Gathering of Bones* is set in Jamaica, a country known for its open and vociferous distaste for homosexuality and homosexuals. What is striking about this portrayal is that although it acknowledges these attitudes that are channelled via members of the family, church, and medical establishment, for example, there is not a *preoccupation* with homophobia in the novel. The feelings and experiences of the characters are foregrounded or given prominence instead.

The spectre of HIV/AIDS hovers throughout the text, appearing in the very first line of the first page. However, this is done via implicature because the acronyms are never mentioned – indeed they cannot be in the diegetic world of the text, for it is the year 1978 and the nature of the disease is a mystery to the medical fraternity and to the general public. The fact that it is reduced to an anonymity, therefore, is reflective of the lack of information – as well as the resultant misinformation – that existed in the early years when it seemed to be targeting the gay population. It is ironic that Ian Kaysen ultimately dies not from the disease but from a fall, because his mother pushes him down the stairs. As biological mother, she stands as a symbol for Jamaica, the geographical mother, as far as homophobia is concerned. A discourse on HIV/AIDS is clearly one of the major foci in this novel, yet it frames other discourses that are of importance to the dynamics surrounding same-sex relationships.

The novel is narrated by an omniscient third-person voice that speaks in the Jamaican Creole. It is a heterodiegetic narrative, but point of view is also conveyed via devices such as the Free Direct Thought (FDT) and Free Indirect Thought (FIT) presentations of the protagonist Dale Singleton. It is through him and the characterization of his friend Ian Kaysen, for instance, that we are able to get into the mind, as it were, of the male homosexual as he interacts with family, friends, antagonists, casual sexual partners, and lovers; as he attempts to live in a mainly heterosexual environment; as he finds refuge in or rejects his religion; and as he battles with a mysterious disease.

No doubt the use of the Creole dialect is to effect a vivid, true-to-life atmosphere – one is constantly reminded that this is indeed a story about gay men living in Jamaica. Patricia Powell declares that: ‘I chose the dialect so that the experiences would feel authentic. It was also the language of the characters. It is the language of Jamaica, the language of its people. And these gay men are Jamaica’s children.’¹

Marginalization

She goes on to identify that ‘country’s struggle to accept the truth of gay love, and that country’s ultimate rejection of her gay children’ as being one of the ways her novel can be read. However, I do not particularly see this in my own reading of the text. I would suggest instead that it is the *gay community’s struggle* for acceptance there – that the *aim* of the novel is to foster an awareness and appreciation among the straight Jamaican population, and among straight readers in general, of the truth of that love.

In January of this year the press reported the Jamaican Government’s refusal to consider the recommendation of a Joint Select Committee of Parliament to repeal the buggery law.² It was recommended that amendments be made to the ‘Offences Against the Persons Act’ so that consensual anal sex between adults could be decriminalized. However, the Information Minister, Mr. Colin Campbell, emphatically declared at a post-Cabinet press briefing that: ‘It is not an issue. We will not be considering the issue of homosexuality [...] it does not arise.’ It was noted in this *Jamaica Gleaner* report that it is this law which gay activists believe is the basis for discrimination against male homosexuals in particular. Ironically, at the same time that the committee put forward the proposal for the decriminalization of homosexuality, it rejected requests made by gay lobbyists for a guaranteed protection against discrimination in the Constitution.

The Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), founded in December 1998, is at the forefront of gay activism there, and is the group that submitted the recommendation to the Joint Select Committee. However, J-FLAG has other internal problems of its own. Their efforts have been plagued by a dearth of human and financial resources. The former has been occasioned by the migration of a significant number of its founding members, so there are fewer qualified people to coordinate their programmes. In fact, the Programme Coordinator, Tony Hron, is a US Peace Corps volunteer who had to assume the post because there was no one else available, and when he leaves in August 2002 he is unsure whether the organization will be able to continue. Mr. Hron bewails the fact that: ‘This is a frustrating and disappointing reality to gay rights activism here.’³ However, he quotes J-FLAG’s mission as being:

[...] to work towards a Jamaican society in which the Human Rights and Equality of Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays are guaranteed. To foster the acceptance and enrichment of the lives of same-gender-loving persons who have been, and continue to be, an integral part of society.

It is likely that a novel like *A Small Gathering of Bones* indirectly contributes to that mission. It must therefore be of significance to those members of the gay Jamaican population who would get the opportunity to read it. Gregory Woods notes that gay literature began with the writing of openly gay authors who wrote about the gay experience; and as regards gay readers themselves, he observes that: ‘As important as the text itself are the ways in which we come to hear of it, find a copy of it, read it, and keep it to ourselves, or pass it on to others.’⁴ Although Woods is referring to the gay canon evolving out of the Western tradition, the same sentiments can be easily applied to recent texts in Caribbean literature that deal with alternative issues and many of the authors who write them, including the lesbian writer Patricia Powell.

Reed Woodhouse differentiates between assimilative and transgressive literature/fiction/ stories/writers in gay writing.⁵ He defines assimilative literature as ‘fiction about gay men for straight readers’ where gay life is implicitly or explicitly portrayed within a context of mainstream life, and which appeal in a tacit way to family values or to monogamous love – that is, to mainstream values. He feels, therefore, that in such portrayals gays are allowed the right to exist only insofar that they resemble straight people. Transgressive literature, on the other hand, is on the margins outside of the mainstream, usually depicting shocking and horrific stories of ‘extreme psychological states and extreme sexual acts.’

What are we to say of *A Small Gathering of Bones*? If we are to adopt Woodhouse’s distinction between the two types of literature then certainly it cannot be described as transgressive; but if as I opine above, that one of the reasons it was written is to sensitize a straight population to the real world of the gay person, then can it be considered to be assimilative? For certainly an Anglophone Caribbean writer, be s/he regional or diasporic, who chooses to write a piece of gay fiction in a transgressive style would most likely not be able to establish any viable readership among the straight community in Jamaica, or anywhere else in the region for that matter. It would be difficult enough to create a thriving market even with assimilative texts.

One may safely say that these texts are already in a category that can be deemed as avant-garde, risqué and inchoate in the tradition of the region’s literature. Oral literatures such as those found in the popular art forms of the calypso and reggae include lyrics that encourage violence against and are derogatory, pejorative and offensive to the gay populations in Trinidad and Jamaica. Therefore, again, it is unlikely that the so-called ‘assimilative’ novels will as yet gain wide currency in the region.

Powell’s *A Small Gathering of Bones* may be assimilative insofar as it is not ‘edgy and dangerous,’ or ‘obscene (in the usual, sexual sense)’ as was evident, say, in pre-Stonewall gay literature (Woodhouse 8), but it presents specific aspects of gay life that is deemed to be transgressive in mainstream opinion - indeed, homosexuality is in itself considered to be transgressive.

While Woodhouse frowns upon assimilation, Stephen Adams takes an opposing view and cautions against exclusivism. Of the terms ‘gay writers’ and ‘gay novels,’ he says:

They suggest a category of writers and novels with a restricted outlook, and the notion of a minority literature written by, for, and about homosexuals, carries the danger of its trivialisation or dismissal by those outside that grouping. This is not to deny the therapeutic charge of these concepts and their ability to foster a new sense of identity and community. Nevertheless, the relegation of such literature to a specialised genre can obscure its complexities and its contribution to our more general cultural debate on sexuality and the definitions of the self.⁶

It is inevitable, however, that Anglophone Caribbean novels like *A Small Gathering of Bones* may serve a two-fold function of being geared towards both the gay and straight communities: to give a visible presence and voice to one, and to attempt to stimulate thought and understanding in the other. If the straight community at large rejects these novels, then they may well have to be classified as a ‘minority literature’ – for just as black writers and women writers in the Caribbean literary tradition sought to find voice

and agency by offering a counterdiscursive viewpoint, then it was only a matter of time that gay writers – and even writers sympathetic to gay individuals - would slowly start ‘speaking’ about themselves for themselves.

Domestic Violence

One of these things about themselves that Powell seems not afraid to highlight in the novel is the domestic violence that also occurs in same-sex relationships. When Caribbean society addresses this problem in public forums, emphasis is given to the rate and incidence of violence in heterosexual households.

Although abuse in gay and non-gay relationships is quite similar, most of the research and statistical information is centered on non-gay partners; furthermore, gays are generally unwilling to report these acts of violence not only because they consider these matters to be personal and private, but also for fear of revealing their sexual orientation to the public, exposing themselves and their partners to homophobia, and to an unkind, unsympathetic legal and social services system, and of betraying an already marginalized community.⁷

Domestic violence in gay relationships, as in non-gay ones, can take various forms: ‘verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, destruction of personal property, psychological or emotional abuse, economic abuse, social abuse, or spiritual abuse.’⁸ In *A Small Gathering of Bones* we see forms of physical, psychological or emotional abuse and destruction of personal property, for instance, as the relationship between Dale and his live-in partner, Nevin Morgan, founders – ‘Everything is quarrel-quarrel and big fight’ (32). Jealousy and infidelity are two factors which give rise to domestic arguments and physical fights between them. Nevin ‘[g]rab his head and ram it against the wall [...] Cause twelve stitches across the middle of Dale’s forehead and a circular scar [...]’ (24) when Dale brings a married man, Alexander Pilot, with whom he is having an affair, into Nevin’s house. On another occasion when they are having an argument over the breakdown of their relationship, Nevin flings a clock towards Dale who barely has time to duck to avoid injury (25).

However, Dale retaliates with verbal threats when Nevin jabs him with his shoe (73), and flies into a murderous, jealous rage when Nevin employs someone else he has befriended called Johnney instead of him to assist with the management of his store, and for which Dale suspects Nevin has ulterior motives despite the latter’s firm denials. Dale’s instrument of death is an ice pick which Nevin has to wrestle from him; and in the ensuing struggle they also cause damage and destruction to household items:

Thrust up against the cabinet, then the stove, then knock over kettle, turn over chairs and shatter the vase lean up in the corner [...] Dale hit the floor first, screaming hysterical, Nevin beside him calm, talking reason. One second Dale fling Nevin flat on his back, shaking the floor, rattling the few pieces of china on the wall, breaking one or two, next minute Nevin lay down on top, hugging him, telling him is all right, trying his best to finagle the ice pick from out Dale’s hand (57).

On the two occasions that Dale, the younger, more dependent partner shows verbal and physical violence against the more dominant, older man who is the financial provider in the relationship, he is able to instill fear within Nevin (58 and 73) and so reverses the power dynamics in the relationship.

There are of course no reports made to the police. Instead, Dale seeks professional counsel because he is confused by his uncharacteristic urge to kill Nevin: 'Him didn't know where the power had come from all of a sudden, causing him to grab the ice pick. Him wasn't a violent person' (58). He makes one visit to a psychiatrist whose advice is that he must get out of the relationship right away (57-58). Perhaps the implicature is that he should get out of the *homosexual* relationship. In addition, though he clearly expresses his feelings about the fights and the relationship with Nevin to Dr. Barnaby, she still advises that he return for a second session in which they could 'get to the root of this business' (65) which - along with the description of her uneasy body language such as her darting eyes (64) and fidgety fingers (58) - suggests that she is unable or unwilling to truly relate to his problem as a homosexual male in a troubled relationship. Possibly, too, the 'root of this business' is not the relationship but his *homosexuality*. No wonder, as a character who is portrayed as fairly secure in his sexuality, he 'never went back' (65).

Both Dale and Nevin emotionally abuse one another. Johnney is at the root of Dale's own pain, and although he still loves Nevin he takes revenge by wilfully hurting him. He tells him he is too old for him now - Nevin is ten years his senior - and suggests that they have an open relationship so that they can see other people. He has a perverse delight in the effect such statements produce: '[...] him like the shadows of pain dancing back and forth across Nevin's face' (72). However it 'backfire[s]' on him because Nevin openly and unabashedly engages in multiple, casual affairs in an apparent attempt to get back at Dale, as well as because he seems to have a penchant for fleeting encounters with other men - his affair with Ian lasted only four weeks. Dale witnesses these encounters of Nevin's because they continue the same living arrangements and practise a hot-and-cold type of relationship.

Besides the damage done to items during their physical fights, Dale rips up a cheque Nevin offers him to pay his university fees (99) and this causes Nevin to rip their photographs apart; to pound a ring flat with a hammer and disfigure gold jewelry that Dale gave him; and to tear up letters Dale had sent him during an eight-week period when they were apart (102). This passionate response from Nevin emotionally cripples Dale:

For two weeks Dale couldn't speak. Lost his voice completely. Could only communicate to Loxley [his new live-in lover] by scribbling notes on scraps of paper [...] after five years with Nevin, there wasn't anything to show except deep wounds that embed permanent grooves in his heart (102).

The resolution offered in the narrative is that despite the fact that Nevin 'hurt him so bad' (102), Dale still loves and yearns to be with him, but it is apparent that his pride and inexorable jealousy over the situation with Johnney - who, ironically, is given minimal characterization in the novel - prevents complete reconciliation between them, and Dale continually rejects Nevin's displays of affection and offers of financial assistance.

Cohabitation

Powell notes in her e-mail communication of 04 June, that in the gay community in the Jamaica she grew up in, the older men - many of whom were wealthy, accomplished

citizens - would mentor the younger ones who looked upon them as role models. This is certainly the case between Dale and Nevin – the former is only eighteen when the two become involved. They live together for five years before the former eventually moves in with Loxley. In both situations it can be said that Dale is ‘kept’ by an older man who is financially secure – Nevin is an entrepreneur and Loxley is a lawyer. She notes, too, that many of these older men were married, and so in effect were living double lives. This is depicted in the portrayal of the relationship between Dale and Alexander in the novel.

Dale is showered with gifts and is taken for trips abroad. His role is defined largely, if not only, by his domestic and homemaking skills – he cooks, does the laundry and decorates the house, for example – although at times we do see the other partner sharing these chores - because he loves doing these things. Ian has a similar relationship with Bill whom he has known for five months although there has been no sexual relations between them: ‘We travel everywhere together. You name it, him buy it and give me’ (32).

The roles in these relationships closely resemble those in heterosexual ones where the tasks and responsibilities are generally gender-based. It has been noted when observing long-lasting same-sex relationships that these partners tended to have ‘nontraditional expectations about relational roles’ and would share domestic tasks according to skills and talents, and there would be an element of mutuality in making decisions that affected the relationship.⁹ Dale’s relationships with Nevin and Loxley are perhaps too short-lived, and the age and income differences too significant to effect meaningful mutuality and equity in their companionship. Three years into their five-year relationship, Nevin and Dale begin sleeping with other people, and not long after he moves in with Loxley after knowing him for only ten days (94) the relationship takes on a more platonic tone: ‘[...] this sibling-like relationship was easier. It would last longer. Wouldn’t hurt as much’ (132). And to complicate matters, Dale can never really love Loxley like he does Nevin, and really only moves in with him on the rebound because Nevin hires another male acquaintance to manage his second store (94).

Mackey et al. identify the themes of ‘power, autonomy, mutuality, and equity’ as being related to the meaning of money to the same-sex relationship.¹⁰ They observe that: ‘Individuals with higher incomes appeared generally to have more power in relationships than did their lower-income partners [...] Income differences tended to magnify inequities and had the potential to undermine mutuality’ (86). This certainly applies in the Dale/Nevin, Dale/Loxley relationships. In fact, Dale feels he can meet Nevin ‘on his own terms’ if he shares the business with him (69) – ‘I would gain autonomy, independence’ (69) he says; to which Alexander Pilot responds:

You need to give Nevin a walk. You need to find your own work, find your own place. Live your own life, so you and him can see each other eye to eye. On the same level. [...] Give him reason to respect you. Stay with him till you grey, and him still treat you like boy (69).

So, Alexander finds Dale a job as a postman which Nevin, however, sees as Dale’s attempt to spite and shame him, for he believes that: ‘Working for somebody else is shit’ (70). So the job produces the exact opposite to what Dale intended. Only briefly does Dale’s quest for independence ‘frighten’ Nevin to the point where he would perform the domestic chores himself (70). As regards his arrangements with Loxley,

Dale insists on purchasing the groceries although his savings are dwindling and he refuses to take money from him, especially because he knows he does not love Loxley (96). He also feels that:

Loxley's gifts wasn't free, each one of them had an invisible string attached, a demand. Him couldn't wear them and walk free. And even though [he] had special feelings for Loxley, for his kindness and generosity and opulence, him still wasn't safe. Him wanted to be able to pay rent even if it was less than half the amount or buy groceries. For at least then he could still preserve some of his integrity (104).

It is well known that in the United States and Europe, for example, gay couples have been lobbying, with success in various states and countries, for the right to marry and adopt children. These activities are of course not legally sanctioned in countries like Jamaica where homosexuality is still a criminal offence. In *A Small Gathering of Bones* there is a reference to gay adoption – though done via implicature – when we are told of Dale's dreams of 'raising a child or two together' (27) with Nevin. One may wonder how this could be realized given the circumstances not only in the real world, but also the diegetic world of Jamaican society portrayed in the text. This fancy of Dale's to be a parent is framed within a larger desire 'of growing old with Nevin, travelling with him to distant places, probably even buying several acres of land' (26-27) together - in other words, an arrangement that is akin to a marital commitment. And indeed, they had both exchanged rings (98), but when Loxley initially asks Dale to move in with him '[...] suddenly Dale felt anxious, for it felt like the beginning of *another* marriage' (94) (emphasis added). Dale therefore continually grapples with issues of loyalty and commitment in the text.

Public Sex

A significant finding in Laud Humphreys' controversial research survey conducted in the 1960s on the tearoom trade was that 54% of the men who visited these public toilets to engage in impersonal sexual encounters with other men were married and lived with their wives.¹¹ We see Dale and his married lover, Alexander Pilot, also engaging in public sex in Nanny Sharpe's, the park where other homosexuals meet to partake in casual, anonymous sex. This incident is, however, conveyed by way of implicature for the narrator tells us only that: 'Coming out of the park one evening, Alexander already drive off, Dale spy Ian from across the street and immediately him feel shame, the sting flooding his cheeks, spilling into his neck' (28).

As regards what public sex connotes now for those in *both* straight and gay communities, Michael C. Clatts observes:

Once a gesture of communion for many gay men [before the emergence of HIV/AIDS], unrestricted sex, particularly public sex, has become increasingly resignified as evil and deployed as a symbol of sanction even within the gay community itself. [...] Unregulated sex has been medicalized as 'sexual addiction,' identified with a personality 'type' that is clinically termed 'compulsive,' 'out of control,' and 'maladjusted.' Similar diagnostic images attend the contexts in which some men find male sexual partners – bars, bathhouses, bookstores, public parks, and bathroom 'tearooms' – places represented as conducive to 'impersonal sex' – a term that is itself loaded with cultural

meanings denoting something ‘strange,’ ‘deviant,’ and ‘dangerous’ [...].¹²

Thus we see the homophobic reactions of the hospital receptionist and Dr. Walker (79 and 82) when they reveal to Dale that an ailing Ian was found paralyzed in ‘the’ park. Dale, upset with the doctor, wonders why it must matter where he was found; it should only matter that he is ill (83). However, the irony is that Dale is unaware that it does matter – it is 1978 and unsafe, promiscuous sex such as what takes place in Nanny Sharpe’s is causing the spread of HIV/AIDS among homosexual males.

In the midst of one of his personal crises that corresponds with the peaks or climactic episodes in the novel – what I consider to be *the* peak in his own story - Dale throws caution to the wind and ignores his own advice to Ian – a frequent visitor to the park – and makes his way to Nanny Sharpe’s where he has anal sex, in the passive role, with a stranger whose face he never sees (112-114); for identity concealment is one of the conditions common to public sex.¹³

He feels guilt, shame and pleasure all at the same time; but when he completely gives up going to church, where he was an active member, ‘[a]fter work him would frequent the park, eagerly awaiting the moment when the hand would press against his shoulder [...]’ (121). Because men of diverse racial, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds and physical types tend to visit these public settings - for the impersonal nature of the encounters enables minimal involvement and therefore minimizes the usual personal preferences used in selecting partners (Humphreys 34) – Dale can only discern the kinds of men he is having sex with by using his senses. Therefore, olfactory, tactile and auditory imagery are used to convey his experiences in the park (112-114 and 121).

The juxtaposition of events where in his depressed state he weighs the options of whether to walk pass a roadside preacher and his congregation or to enter Nanny Sharpe’s on his right, and then chooses the latter course (112), brings to mind the association between homosexuality, unprotected sex, sin, and disease; between transgression and punishment. For one feels that he has now made himself totally susceptible to contracting the HIV/AIDS virus; like Ian, Loxley and the man Dr. Walker calls George Brookes (86), it is only a matter of time before he dies from the disease.

Sadly, though, we really know that before his first sexual encounter in the park he may already have fallen a victim to HIV/AIDS because he had met Loxley in a gay bar – Clovy’s Bar, a regular meeting-place for the gay community – and immediately accompanies him to his apartment for sex; and Loxley, much like Ian, shows signs and symptoms of the disease. Thus Dale himself may be a risk to the men he meets in the park.

Sadly, too, it seems that Dale also visits the park hoping that one day the stranger would be Nevin. Again this is conveyed via implicature: ‘Sometimes him would reach out his hand to feel for grooves alongside the corners of a mouth, his heart hammering loudly...’ (121); time and again reference is made throughout the novel about the remnants of a dog bite, the scar in the shape of a centipede alongside Nevin’s mouth, and so we, the readers, know for whom Dale is searching and why his heart hammers so.

Spatial perspective also becomes an interesting factor, for it is notable that there is a clear division regarding the activities of Nanny Sharpe's – what can be called the normative activities of people walking dogs and strolling around with their babies in prams (80), and the men-having-sex-with-men activity occurring close by; for even when Dale is having sex with the stranger people walk by and traffic pass just yards away on the main road (114). Thick foliage protects them from view.

Therefore notions of place/space and public/private become relevant here. This public park is a *place* only insofar as it is a naturally formed location, and it becomes a *space* when its meaning-potential is developed – when the various forms of human activity impose meanings upon it and transform it from a neutral terrain into a landscape – that is, into a 'way of seeing' that is relevant to its locale (Leap 7). Previously, the area in which the men meet had a sign that read: 'KEEP OFF. NO ADMISSION THIS SIDE OF PARK' (80). So, they are able to find a private space within a public space – whereas the park is a public location for others who use it for relaxation and family outings, the gay men are able to conceal themselves and partake in what is considered to be a private activity in the same location albeit in a once restricted area, but they are always open to the threat of violent hate crimes and arrest by gay bashers and police officers (82). Thus within this context *private* and *public* become relative terms (Leap 9).

Conclusion

When one looks at the portrayals of cohabitation and domestic violence in *A Small Gathering of Bones*, one realizes that they bear stark similarities to not only what occurs in real-life same-sex relationships, but in heterosexual ones as well. Issues of abuse, infidelity, power, equity, loyalty, commitment, mutuality, autonomy and independence are realities equally of concern to both groups. It seems we largely ignore the similar, sometimes identical, psychosocial factors that exist and highlight the sexual differences in our discussions of hetero-/homosexuality. The dangers and follies of public sex - a defining characteristic of gay identity - especially in light of HIV/AIDS, as well as its pleasures and its ability to effect solidarity among gay men are given candid, but not overly explicit, description.

Powell, as a lesbian writing for *all* readers, does not try to present a false or idealized gay world so as to validate its existence. Her novel is one that shows the homosexual male as an Everyman, struggling to maintain his identity, his relationships, his very life.

Endnotes

- ¹ Patricia Powell, e-mail to the author, 04 Jun. 2002.
- ² 'Gov't says no to gay sex,' *Jamaica Gleaner on the Web* 22 January 2002, 25 January 2002 <<http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20020122/news/news1.html>>.
- ³ Tony Hron, e-mail to the author, 13 May. 2002.
- ⁴ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998) 10.
- ⁵ Reed Woodhouse, *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998) 3-4.
- ⁶ Stephen Adams, *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Vision, 1980) 9.
- ⁷ Carol T. Tully, 'Hate Crimes, Domestic Violence, and the Lesbian and Gay Community,' *A Professional Guide to Understanding Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence*, ed. Joan C. McClennen and John Gunther (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1999) 19.
- ⁸ Tully 19.
- ⁹ Richard A. Mackey, Bernard A. O'Brien, and Eileen F. Mackey, *Gay and Lesbian Couples: Voices from Lasting Relationships* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1997) 159.
- ¹⁰ Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey 86.
- ¹¹ Laud Humphreys, 'Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places,' *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia UP, 1999) 35.
- ¹² Michael C. Clatts, 'Ethnographic Observations of Men Who Have Sex with Men in Public: Toward an Ecology of Sexual Action.' Leap 141.
- ¹³ William L. Leap. Introduction. Leap 12.

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