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## "Horrible Mothers in Mémère's Kitchen: Queer identity in New England Franco America"

Susan Pinette

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Franco American<sup>1</sup> identity has always had lots to do with mothers. Whether negotiating allegiance to the Quebec motherland, remaining faithful to the French mother tongue or seeing the maternal body as the site of social reproduction, Franco Americans are intricately linked to mothers. While this is true for other cultural identities as well, this is particularly the case for New England Franco Americans who came from a French speaking Canada where, as Lori Martin notes, “le mythe de la mère y a atteint des proportions inégalées” (“The myth of the mother reached unparalleled heights”) (48). It comes perhaps as no surprise therefore that Franco American writers draw from this deeply rooted myth of the mother to create a highly, charged representative symbol. Herbert Gans affirms that for ethnic identity, especially in the third generations, “Expressive behavior can take many forms, but it often involves the use of symbols...Ethnic symbols are frequently individual cultural practices which are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are 'abstracted' from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it” (9). Franco American literature is replete with mothers who symbolize both the ancestral homeland and Franco American identity: Eglantine and Rose-Aimée in Norman Beaupré’s *Deux femmes, deux rêves*, Cecile in Gerard Robichaud’s *Papa Martel*, the women who inhabit many of Grégoire Chabot’s writings, or in Kristin Langellier’s argument that it is through family stories centered on “Mémère” that Franco Americans “become linked with the motherland and mother tongue in [their] imagination of Franco American identity” (56). In Franco American communities, “The Franco American *mémère* is the most French of the French, a privileged icon and a locus of performative power” (Langellier 61-62).

Integrally linked to all these mothers, Franco American ethnic identity as it is articulated and performed in the Franco American community is deeply hetero-normative. French Canadian nationalism was grounded in high fertility rates and large families, because “both the Catholic Church and the nationalists believed they could count on the proverbial high francophone fertility rate ... to maintain the proportion and standing of French Canadians within the Canadian political landscape” (Baillargeon 236) and while the imagined “Revenge of the Cradle” was perhaps never as much in play in Franco America as it was in French Canada, the importance of extended family and kinship ties is, as seen for example in Bruno Ramirez’s and Yukari Takai’s work on the prominence of extended family ties in French Canadian chain migration, in Tamara Hareven’s documentation of French Canadian kinship networks in the Manchester mills, in Kristin Langellier’s emphasis on the ongoing importance of extended family gatherings, or in the centrality of genealogical work to current Franco American ethnic identity.<sup>ii</sup> Franco American ethnic identity is not unique in its reliance upon hetero-normativity. As Anne McClintock has argued, the nation – which I would extend here to include ethnic identity – is often construed in terms of familial and domestic metaphors (62).

This paper investigates how Franco American authors, given this hetero-normative discursive regime, write their queer identities, and it argues that it is the figure of the mother that enables the signification of Franco American ethnic identity and in particular, a Franco American queer identity. What interests me in particular is how mothers – as a key site and symbol of Franco American ethnic identity – are deployed in queer ethnic narratives. Gay identities often figure self-realization and self-knowledge in opposition to heterosexuality and the heterosexual family; they are based upon "a performative act, [that] constitute[s] identity by naming itself in public discourse" (Grindstaff 58), a naming that often figures self-realization and self-knowledge

in opposition to the heterosexual family. As Anne-Marie Fortier notes, "A recurring theme in [coming out] stories is the association of migration with the fulfillment of the 'true' homosexual self outside of the family home of one's childhood" (1). It is also a highly individual act, one that marks its speaker as individual and highlights his/her difference from the world s/he comes from. Given these discursive qualities, Franco American queer identities in many ways seem to comprise what Eithne Luibhéid calls "'impossible subject[s]' with unrepresentable histories that exceed existing categories" (171). In struggling with this unrepresentability, Franco American gay writers universally turn to one trope in particular to write their queer identity – the deeply rooted myth of the Franco American mother. This paper looks at the representation of mothers, grandmothers, and aunts in texts by Paul Monette, David Plante, Alan Bérubé and Steven Riel; it argues that horrible mothers determine the possible signification of queer ethnic identities.

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Paul Monette's memoir *Becoming a Man* won the 1992 National Book Award for Nonfiction, the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Nonfiction, and was nominated for the Stonewall Book Awards. Apart from his prominence and recognition as a gay writer, he is rarely recognized as Franco American (for example, Paul Monette is not listed on the Wikipedia page of "American people of French Canadian descent" though he is included on the page "American people of French descent"). Yet, to those of us studying Franco America, just a short citation from his literary biography signals his ethnic background, "Paul Landry Monette was born on October 16, 1945, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, an industrial town on the Merrimack River known for textile mills" (Knox 149) and he himself clearly articulates this ethnic family in *Becoming a Man*.

Sunday afternoons we'd go over to Lawrence in the '51 Buick, to visit the other side. The Monette grandparents were as stubbornly French as my mother's people were English.

They lived in a great peeling pile of a gingerbread Victorian, where Grandpa Joe still had his shingle out, thought he was well into his eighties when I knew him...Joe was a totem figure in Lawrence, lawyer and general sage to masses of immigrants from Quebec, the broken-French mill-workers who kept the hum going in the vast brick textile engines along the Merrimack...Decidedly anticlerical, but that was nothing compared to his animus toward the Irish. Hardly alone in that: where I come from, Micks and Canucks are the Hatfields and the McCoys, with so much hate to spew about one another that they hardly had any left over for blacks and other exotic types. The only son among four sisters, Joe had taken his entrance exams to Harvard Law in classical Greek, because his English was still shaky. And told us once... that he'd added the last two letters to the family name because he got so tired of his Harvard profs mispronouncing Monet with a hard T...Twenty years later I'd still run into the occasional elderly frog whose eyes would mist and voice choke when he heard I was Joe Monette's grandson (14-15).

Monette's narrative of his grandparents is striking for its resonance with Franco American ethnic signifiers: Sunday afternoons with extended family, textile mills, the animosity towards the Irish, the inability to speak English, and the pressure to change one's last name because of the inability of Anglophones to pronounce it. Yet despite these clear markers, it could be argued that Monette should not be included in this exploration of mothers and queer Franco America. Not only does his text define this Little Canada as a world gone by, "That Sunday world of the ancients was my only regular foray into the urban stew of Lawrence, already half-dead in the 50's as the textile baronies fled to the South in droves. It always had the feel of a ghost city, mined out and long passed by" (16), his mother is not even Franco American! Yet it is his mother – both as the key figure in the creation of Monette's closet and as a non-Franco-American – that makes this text a key if not exemplary candidate for this cursory survey of queer Franco America. It is the protagonist's "horrible" mother who bears the full the responsibility of putting the protagonist in the closet, and it is her explicit "non-Franconess" that provides the narrative structure of the way out.

Monette's narrative pinpoints his mother as the principal creator of his closet. His father remains silent throughout the text, speaking to Paul only once about the impropriety of his queer

desire and only at the insistence of Paul's mother.<sup>iii</sup> Instead, it is his mother who creates the shame that requires the closet and polices Paul's enclosure in it. She stumbles upon young Paul in his homosexual play with his friend Kite, and she is singled out as the one who stigmatizes that key awakening as something to be ashamed of.

No moment of my first twenty years is more indelible than the kitchen inquisition of my mother. All the ambiguity of sex reduced to a single question, the implication crystal clear that something very bad had happened – unnatural, even. The flinching of my heart from that point on would ensure our brief exchange a central place in therapy, fifteen years later (29).

Throughout the text it is again and again his mother who is the key enforcer of his closet. When Paul's brother gets bullied because the neighborhood kids suspect Paul of being gay, their mother asks his brother to keep it quiet, "Secrets upon secrets. Thus by inexorable degrees does the love that dares not speak its name build walls instead, till a house is nothing but closets" (54). She stands guard over his place in the closet throughout his college years as she peppers him about the girls he was dating, "My mother's subtext had to do with shaming back into the straight and narrow by letting me know she had my number. Her dread at having produced a homo son was shaped by her own wounded narcissism" (183); and remains there through to the end of the novel when the protagonist enters therapy, "Cantwell cut to the chase: my approval mechanism sprang from my desire to recover the relationship I'd lost with my mother the day she found me with Kite" (249). It is precisely this closeted, claustrophobic world created by his mother that the protagonist must leave behind in order to find "freedom" and a "real life," "The very act of remembering begins to resemble a phobic state – feeding on every missed chance, stuck forever in the place without doors. What's crazy about it is, I forget that I ever got out. For an hour or a day the pain wins. It throws a veil of amnesia over my real life, almost twenty years now since I took my first breath of freedom" (172).

Sociologists and literary scholars have repeatedly pointed to the importance of this “coming out” story to gay identity. Matthew Rowe calls it a “formula story that maps gay men’s and lesbians’ experiences onto institutionalized understandings of collective identity” (3), and Monette’s text is often cited as the paradigmatic example of the “closet,” a space that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “...the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (71). Rowe’s piece notes that recent explorations of this “formula story” have focused on how “social context affects identity-related understandings and practices;” Rowe in particular is interested in how the particularly American notion of voluntarism as a “broad cultural trope” (4) is activated, “showing how a constituent feature of American culture figures in the concrete meaning-making practices of one social group today” (4). In a similar way, I argue that Paul Monette’s “formula story” is anchored not only in this very American notion of voluntarism but in another broad cultural trope that Rowe does not signal out and recognize: ethnic assimilation.

The mother in *Becoming a Man* creates and polices the protagonist’s closet; she also – and perhaps more importantly – provides Monette’s novel with the rhetorical architecture that narratively structures his escape into his “real life.” Paul’s mother is not Franco-American but “English” and actively upwardly mobile.

Yet there was something more subtle at work in my family than money; call it an instinct for gentility that was equal parts Episcopal and English...For my mother’s people the move from Lawrence to Andover was a move up...They were definitely out to better themselves....my parents clearly believed they’d cast their lot with a better class (23).

Bruce Robbins highlights that upward mobility “whatever it may be to the sociologists, upward mobility is also a story” (xi), a powerful story, he argues, because it focuses “on the passage between identities and how one gets from here to there, they reveal something important about power, which can never be located within one identity alone” (xii). In Monette’s text, his coming out into his “real life” is structured on this paradigm of upward mobility. Franco Americans are

represented only as working class and only seen in his father's working-class workplace. They are mentioned twice after the description of his grandfather's world: when Paul would visit his dad's workplace when he was a child, "Maybe once a month my father would take me over to Cross Coal with him on a Saturday morning... I was thrilled to the rough and tumble of the men, the purple streams of profanity, the cowboy moves as they loaded and weighed the trucks. Mostly Canuck, with names like Gus and Fat" (16) and when he works for extra money to fund his studies, "Over Christmas I worked sidekick on one of Dad's coal delivery trucks...I needed the money to keep up with the social life of the school...So Proulx, the Canuck driver, and I battered our way through weeks of blizzards, chuting coal to snowbound customers like Saint Bernards" (109). As he grows older, he shifts from accompanying his father to the workplace peopled with "Canucks" to mornings with his maternal grandmother and her escape from that world.

I'd outgrown going to the office with my father on Saturday mornings...but I'd still spend Friday nights at Nana Lamb's whenever I was on vacation...She set great store by education, having been forced out of school and into the mills at ten...Now in her eighth decade she wasn't about to deny herself... Out on the town with Nana, I was worldly, and didn't have to watch my every gesture to see if I was man enough (72-73).

It is his mother and maternal grandmother's active identification away from his father's ethnic world that provides the narrative structure that creates Monette's queer identity. Monette's text harnesses a specifically American story, one of leaving behind one's ethnic origins in order to come into an individualized self not impinged by the ethnic traditions of the past. This specifically American assimilationist story requires the absence of the symbolic Franco American mother. And in Monette's mother's turn away from the ethnic towards an Americanized self, free of communal demands and traditional ways, she provides a narrative structure that dominates the landscape of gay Franco American fiction.

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David Plante, a retired creative writing professor from Columbia University, is the author of more than twenty published volumes and numerous short stories. While Paul Monette disavowed his Franco American heritage, David Plante is perhaps one of this ethnic communities' most well-known representatives. Many of his novels feature Franco American characters set in New England Franco communities and his autobiographical text *American Ghosts* explicitly engages with the ethnic milieu of his youth. Yet despite the differences in each author's identification, Plante's ethnic narrative resembles Monette's both in the representation of his mother and in the way he harnesses his coming out story to an assimilationist narrative structure.

Werner Sollors theorized that American ethnic literature exists in the crux between two opposing forces: "descent" and "consent." "Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and 'architects of our fates' to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems" (6). The figure of young David's mother, as in Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man*, embodies Sollors' idea of consent. In *American Ghosts*, while the protagonist's father is repeatedly classified as a "Canuck," his mother "was, above all, American" (63). Her American identity is embodied first and foremost by her rejection of the Franco American community, "My mother's mother had been against her marrying my father. "Tu verras," she said, "il est un vrai Canuck. Je les connais, les Canucks." My mother, who in marrying my father had married a real Canuck as if she herself, being French, were not, retained the feelings her mother had about the breed" (50) and accompanied by a similar portrayal of the claustrophobic, dying ethnic community. "I found a strange freedom, confined as I was by the darkness of my parish. More

and more, I saw emerge from the darkness mostly images of abandonment, as if abandonment were, finally, the fulfillment of the history of the parish” (60). Like Monette, it is in the abandonment of this ethnic community that the protagonist finds the freedom deemed necessary to express and fulfill his homosexual desires. “I wanted to get out of America” (76); “In Europe, I was free” (89).

Both Paul Monette’s *Becoming a Man* and David Plante’s *American Ghosts* rely upon similar tropes and mechanisms to write a “formula story” – a story that is anchored in the figure of the upwardly mobile, non-ethnic mother and harnessed to a narrative of “consent.” That Plante, even though he actively identifies as Franco American, continues to employ these specific literary devices shows the ways in which these tropes and narrative structures found and anchor American gay identity, even for those who actively identify with their ethnic heritage. Despite these discursive regimes, however, there are many gay writers who are not content to embrace this assimilationist storyline, David Plante included. In the remaining pages, I will explore three different re-inscriptions of an ethnic identity through the figure of the ethnic mother. In particular, I will explore how David Plante in the remaining pages of *American Ghosts*, Alan Berubé in his essay “Intellectual Desire” and Steven Riel in his poem “In My Grandmother’s Kitchen” introduce and deploy a maternal figure. While the non-ethnic mother is the figure of assimilation, the ethnic mother appears in all three attempts to write Franco American queerness.

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David Plante, to use Werner Sollors’ vocabulary, spends the rest of *American Ghosts* re-inscribing the language of descent into his narrative. Whereas Monette’s fairy-tale like story ends happily in the loving embrace of his partner, Plante’s doesn’t. Like Monette, he finds the love of

his life, Nikos, and with him, he lives “a life... that was secure in his love for me” (176). But while Monette’s narrative ends on this particularly American note of voluntary identity and fulfilling love (Monette meets his soul partner Roger in the last pages of the book), Plante’s doesn’t (Nikos and David become life partners on page 161 of 288). Instead, *American Ghosts* documents the insufficiency of this narrative plot. The protagonist, even though he has left behind his dying parish and found freedom in true love, is not happy. “I began to weep, and, unable to control myself, I went to a wall and stood facing it and sobbed, tears and saliva running down my face. When he asked, “Why can’t my love for you be enough? I turned around to him and held him to me” (190). Finding a life-long soulmate is not the end of Plante’s autobiographical narrative.

María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren argue in their introduction to *The Spectralities Reader* that “ghosts and haunting can do more than obsessively recall a fixed past: in an active, dynamic engagement, they may reveal the insufficiency of the present moment (16). The ghosts in Plante’s narrative -- the *American Ghosts* of the title -- perform such a function. The ghosts in his text allow him to re-inscribe the language of descent. It is their haunting that pushes him to visit his parish, to return to the birthplace of his parents in Canada, and to trace his genealogy all the way back to France. Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren also note that “ghosts are not interchangeable and it matters greatly...in what guise they appear and to whom” (309). The ghosts that come to haunt Plante, despite the fact that the text locates ethnic culture with his “Canuck” father in the beginning, are overwhelmingly Franco American women. “As much as I told myself that with Nikos I was free of my parish, that with him I was free of my Canuck God, it would, however, happen, with or without Nikos, that I would suddenly become aware of my grandmother sitting next to me on the top of a bus going along Oxford Street, of my aunt Cora,

in her nun's habit, at a table next to Nikos and me in a restaurant" (284). These specters, haunting Plante's text, figure both the ethnic culture that Plante's queer identity left behind and the ways in which that ethnic culture continues to haunt his "free" existence outside of the parish.

Bérubé and Riel take a different approach. Neither of them relies upon the "formula story" and in fact Alan Bérubé expressly rejects it. An American historian and gay activist, Alan Bérubé was best known for his work, *Coming Out Under Fire*. Allan Bérubé's keynote address given at the First Quebec Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference, in Montreal in November 1992, was revised and published as an essay, *Intellectual Desire*. In this keynote address, he explicitly rejects a traditional coming out narrative, "How did I - a Franco-American kid raised rural and working class in New England, whose earlier family history included no self-identified intellectuals or homosexuals - learn to become this new thing: a gay community-based historian who lives in a gay ghetto in San Francisco? I'm not going to answer this question with the happy-ending narrative of a coming out story" (44).

Bérubé's alternative is to reimagine and refigure the narration of his homosexuality as a migration narrative. Instead of harnessing his coming out story onto a storyline of assimilation and upward mobility, he uses one more aligned with the language of descent. For Bérubé, his identity is not established through his journey from an oppressed space to one of freedom but as one of migration, from one country to the next:

The history of working class Francos trying to survive in a fiercely Anglo North America in so many ways resonates with the emotional history of homos having to survive in a fiercely hetero world...My own life's itineraries -- coming out across sexualities, becoming a working-class intellectual in middle-class worlds, moving to California -- all distanced me from my Franco-American family of origin. Yet it is our common history of migration that I and my Franco ancestors share most profoundly--crossing borders generation after generation for more than three centuries on this continent as we searched for ways to survive, creating new selves in the process (47).

In his use of this narrative structure, Bérubé deploys different tropes, tropes that maintain a connection to the home he left behind and provide a space to articulate the pain and sense of loss that departure causes – a pain which the traditional coming out story precludes as it conceptualizes the home as a space of oppression. By harnessing this specifically ethnic trope to queer ends, Bérubé rearticulates his identity on different grounds, one that maintains ethnic identity and that aligns him closely with “mémère” in her longing to “bridge the distances:”

My interest in the queer, multiracial, working-class history of this union is part of the magnetic pull back to the past that haunts me as it has haunted at least four generations of my family...From that farm, my *mé-mère* longed for her French community in Aldenville. There, her parents looked back toward their homes in Québec (61).

While Bérubé uses the idea of his grandmother’s migration and subsequent longing to rethink the coming out narrative, Steven Riel engages directly with the descent discourse centered on the all-powerful grandmother. A prolific contemporary poet, living and writing in Massachusetts, Steven Riel published "In my Grandmother's Kitchen" in Denis Ledoux's anthology *Lives in Translation* anthology. The epigraph to Riel's poem cites the title of a cookbook, *Rien n'était gaspillé dans la cuisine de ma grand-mère,* or *Nothing went to Waste in my Grandmother's Kitchen,* a classic collection of recipes and folk remedies from the Lausier family of Grand Isle, Maine originally published by the National Materials Development Center in the 1980's as part of a Title VII grant for bilingual education.

Through the epigraph and his use of his grandmother’s eponym "mémère" in the poem, Riel’s text signals its engagement with the folkloric grandmother of Franco American families. Yet the poem evokes this mémère trope only to mark its inability to make space for him as a gay man.

‘You'll never be rich,’ you once barked at me,  
snapping up the ends of celery stalk

I'd chopped off – 'They'd make good stock' (65).

Like the grandmother in the title of his epigraph, nothing was wasted in his grandmother's kitchen either. Yet whereas the idealized *mémère* is the place for the articulation of an ethnic identity in Lausier's cookbook, Steven Riel's poem uses this mythic figure to mark the space of his failure.

You shoo me out of your pantry in disgust  
whenever I try to help with the dishes.  
I knew better than to ask for an unwritten recipe:  
'Bachelors shouldn't set up house.  
They should live at home until they marry.  
Next time, bring home a girl with you.  
There must be a girl somewhere!  
*You* made this bread? You'd make someone a good wife.'  
...  
...a good wife...a good wife...  
In a kinder mood, you advise, 'Pray St. Jude,'  
but this lost cause will never be  
the kind of man your *shoulds* require" (66).

The narrator will never be the man his grandmother wants him to be and she cuts off access to his ethnic identity.

It is in the space of the failure of the nationalist trope that the narrator articulates an alternative. He, despite his grandmother's inability to acknowledge him, has the recipe, "You see, I've weaseled the recipe out of you: my mother asked for it" and he makes the soup, "acheiv[ing] that intricate, simple miracle of feeling a little closer to you" (66). Though the narrator has failed his grandmother's gender expectations he nevertheless cooks, "but now I have the recipe," the narrator states, "and I can alter it." But lest we think that the narrator's win is a triumphant one, the poem also reminds us of the pain of that failure,

*Mémère*, you fed a water on water and bones.  
For me, you've nothing but candy or stones?  
I warm my hands over the generous pot,  
watch the steam rise.

So much goes to waste  
in my grandmother's kitchen (67).

One might conceive of the protagonist's inability to meet his grandmother's demands under Judith Halberstam's recent theorization of the importance of failure to queer identity, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well" (1). It is through his failure that Riel articulates the liminal space of queer Franco American identity. Yet Riel's poem also reminds us that Halberstam's attempt to recode abjection into resistance too easily ignores the pain that Steven Riel at least does not want to simply chalk up and recuperate.

When Franco American authors write about their ethnic identities, like other ethnic writers, they engage a whole range of pre-established tropes already recognized as the signifiers of American ethnicity: the narration of immigration, either one's own or of past generations, the exclusion from the national community based upon cultural difference, the response to assimilatory forces or the narration of past suffering and hardship. Most of these tropes are deeply embedded in a discourse regime that is overwhelmingly heteronormative, undermining from the very beginning the possibility of a queer ethnic identity. Franco American gay writers turn to one trope in particular to write their queer identity – the deeply rooted myth of the Franco American mother. The danger with these tropes of ethnicity, especially the Franco American *mémère*, however, is the facility with which they can reduce the author's story into a romanticized past, stripping the narration of its particular content. Gay writers show us that queering those tropes paves the way for the rest of us as we aim to write stories that don't romanticize the past or rehearse the tropes of nationalist belonging but instead articulate the sometimes painful space of Franco American identity.



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<sup>i</sup>The term Franco-American typically designates descendants of Québécois and Acadian migrants from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who settled in the northeast United States, particularly in New England and New York. Depending upon the state, Franco-Americans constitute from ten to twenty five percent of New England populations. In two New England states (Maine and Vermont) French is the leading non-English language and Franco-Americans are the largest ethnic group. These Franco-American communities constitute one of the largest concentrations of French speakers in the United States.

<sup>ii</sup>It just such centrality that makes Greg Chabot quip, "Les gens qui se tracassent au sujet de la perte des forêts au Brésil devraient parler aux Francos" (11).

<sup>iii</sup>"I got in the car, Dad and I exchanging the usual laconic pleasantries. Then he said, "There's something we have to talk about. Your mother was cleaning your room this morning..." Hunkered against the car door in the dark, I could see her methodically tearing my room apart, going through everything till she found the evidence. I reeled from the violation as Dad went haltingly on. "There's nothing wrong with those girlie magazines," he declared, "That's perfectly natural, you're almost a man. But the homosexual ones...that's not good." I don't think it went any further than that, no hellfire and damnation. It seems almost decent in retrospect, compared to the ugliness and disownings that have rung down on my brothers and sisters, killing off parent and child for good" (96).