Queer Rural Space in Early Twenty-First Century American Narrative:

Listing Landscapes in George Hodgman, Ocean Vuong, and Louis Ceci

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Abstract

"Ruralism" in recent American narratives by queer authors is discussed here as a series of engagements and withdrawals from small-town socio-political landscapes, ensconced in US literature from early US realism and modernism, by contemporary focalizers, who are positioned as quasi-outsiders in the wake of post-industrial withdrawal. The essay pinpoints narrative prose and verse published in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century: George Hodgman's *Bettyville* (2015), a memoir exploring recovery from addiction, Mid-western childhood, aging, gay identity, and rural climate change; Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), describing migrant work patterns and sexuality in central Connecticut; and Louis Ceci's multi-generational *Croy Cycle* novels (2008-2022) set in small-town Oklahoma.

Keywords

Contemporary American Fiction; Contemporary American Poetry; Narrative Theory; Queer Theory; Space.

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"Queers need genealogy"
—Tyler Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form" (723)

The rural is, etymologically and in common parlance, not wilderness, land in an uncultivated or "natural" state. Nor is the rural the opposite of the urban or "developed," but it comprises "peripheral" areas more or less developed largely for agriculture, which is to say, land whose use has historically been centered around regular, predictable cycles of seasons of time and action. This might suggest that anything "queer" about rural space is what breaks with or transcends those cycles, such as what threatens, disrupts, or subverts those cycles or exists within them without quite conforming to their established patterns. "Queer" as it affects the rural might thus include climate change, irregular seasons, changes in work practices, or any disruptions to set seasonal patterns of land use. "Queer," as it relates to narratives, indicates discontinuities or disjunctions in formal or descriptive patterns, or the introduction of sexual (and simultaneously racial or ethnic) minorities into heteronormative and white Anglo-Saxon Protestant storyworlds.

What is displayed of the "rural" in some recent American prose by queer authors, this essay suggests, is a withdrawal of the small-town socio-political landscape, first captured by early US realism and modernism, and observances, by narrators often positioned as quasi-outsiders, of what is left in the wake of this post-industrial withdrawal. This essay examines narrative prose and verse of the last decade: George Hodgman's *Bettyville* (2015), a memoir exploring Midwestern childhood, aging, gay identity, and climate change, across several timeframes; Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), describing post-NAFTA migrant work patterns, sexuality, and the opioid epidemic in historically white rural Connecticut; and Louis Ceci's *Croy Cycle* novels (2008-2022), following two generations of queer small-town Oklahomans.

Listing the Land

Can narrative "actually [help] realize queer possibilities" (Matz 331)? Must it always "restrict human possibility to normative outcomes," recapitulating and reinforcing "normative possibilities" (Matz 331)? "[T]he metronormative narrative," as Jack Halberstam writes, maps "migration from 'country' to 'town'" as "a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a [big city] place of tolerance after enduring life in a [small town] place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy," while "in actual fact, the ubiquity of queer sexual practices, for men at least, in rural settings suggests that some other epistemology than the closet governs sexual mores in small towns and [. . .] rural areas" (36). "In reality," Halberstam goes on, many of these men recounted vivid and

"complicated stories of love, sex, and community in their small-town lives" (36-37). In one case Halberstam describes how in Will Fellows's *Farm Boys* many of the Midwestern, largely Silent Generation, Baby Boomer, or Generation X men asked to narrativize their life stories as gay men felt "disassociated" from "the metropolitan gay worlds that they discovered once they left their rural and small-town homes" (41). Fellows's interviewees' tales rarely recount simple moves from a repressive countryside to a sudden freedom in cities, and sometimes even reveal quite vivid erotic experiences on farms or in small towns, followed by a rather staid cookie-cutter gay existence in the urban Midwest of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Fellows, Halberstam writes, points "to the difficulties involved in taking account of rural gay lives" and charting "the contradictory nature [and indeed politics] of rural [white male] queers who have been omitted from dominant accounts of queer life and yet must not be represented as a subaltern population" (40-41).

The first novels discussed here are set in that very timeframe of generations spanning the 1930s to the 1980s. The first in a four-novel cycle describing multi-generational violence in a small rural community, Louis Flint Ceci's *If I Remember Him* (2020) moves between 1935 and 1952 in Oklahoma. Set in the fictional town of Croy, it opens with a geography of destruction in the wake of one of the tornados for which the region is increasingly becoming known today. Across the towns of "Vasoma, Nelson, Croy, Hoche and the western half of Tyrola, where the White Horse empties into the South Canadian," a 1935 tornado has "sliced through the cross timbers country of Oklahoma, that rolling landscape renowned for its dense, shrubby woods" (*If I Remember* 3). This listing or naming of the landscape's features in opening descriptions of rural space is a common feature in the queer-authored prose discussed in this essay.[1] Lists signal the narrator's familiarity with the space described, perhaps also defamiliarizing the landscape to readers who are unfamiliar with it. As Tyler Bradway says in relation to queer narrative theory and form, listing suggests, rather than narrative causality, simple contiguity, a laying of "one thing beside another; in narrative contiguous events may be linked by causality, but they do not need to be. Narrative contiguity allows for a wider range of relations [than narrative causality does . . .] which are laden with queer potential" (717). Such lists, providing continuity without connoting causality, Bradway suggests, open up possibilities for the ways readers can imagine relations, cause and effect, and even temporal relations between the named or described. The relations between the things listed remain unformalized, not slotted into prescribed roles or spaces. Consider the roll call of queer names attending Jay Gatsby's parties in the fourth chapter of Fitzgerald's 1925 novel: "the Chromes and the Backhyssons and the Dennickers and Russel Betty and the Corrigans and the Kellehers and the Dewars and the

Scullys and S. W. Belcher and the Smirkes and the young Quinns, divorced now, and Henry L. Palmetto, who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square" (63). These names are markedly non-WASP, sometimes vaguely androgynous, some associated with jazz, and almost always with something hintingly scandalous or obscene, and they seem to invite stories (or even gossip) without proscribing them.

Brian Richardson has suggested that, in literature, lists, or things listed, "seem to call out, often irresistibly, for their narrativization" (339). According to Eva von Contzen, perhaps like any form of description, lists open "up a narrative space that is a-sequential and a-temporal with respect to the rest of the narrative" ("The Limits" 246), as she writes in a special issue of *Style* dedicated to the topic. Lists here suggest authenticity, but also a sense of continuity where narrative continuity may be lacking. Alternatively, as von Contzen suggests in a later article, they may project tedium, flatness, or monotony ("Experience, Affect" 315). She further suggests lists in literature encourage readers to imagine (Wolfgang) Iserian "blanks" or gaps, to be imaginatively "filled in" during the reading process (321), or, further still, that lists can function as a form to challenge our "received notions of experientiality" (323).

With this in mind, we might compare Ceci's introduction to the opening passages of George Hodgman's 2015 memoir *Bettyville*, set in the bordering state of Missouri, "a state of stolen names, bestowed to bring the world a little closer: Versailles, Rome, Cairo, New London, Athens, Carthage, Alexandria, Lebanon, Cuba, Japan, Santa Fe, Cleveland, Canton, California, Caledonia, New Caledonia, Mexico, Louisiana. Paris, our home [all real towns in Missouri]" (1). There are also, Hodgman continues, "the funny-named places. Licking is a favorite, along with Fair Play, Strain, Elmo, Peculiar, Shook, Lone Jack, Butts, Lupus, Moody, Clover, Polo, Shake Rag, and the T towns that always end my list——Turtle, Tightwad, Tulip, and Tea" (1). Queer names indeed. Stylistics like these might be seen as "pointedly disrupting the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images," as Teresa de Lauretis writes of queer texts (244). Unable to sleep, Hodgman's middle-aged protagonist explains when "home" from Manhattan for an extended visit to his aging mother and childhood home, he tests how many towns he can still name, "an old game played with my parents when I was a kid looking out the car window at the rolling brown waters of the Mississippi" (1). Across such passages, one might recall Martin Buber's suggestions that naming is reifying, pretending to exert power over the named, making claims on it and placing it, assuming "a position before things" without "confront[ing] them in the current of reciprocity" (80). Hodgman's memoir describes days with his mother as lists: "Sunday is frying eggs and trying not to break the yolks; getting Betty [Hodgman's mother] off

to church; *Parade* magazine; big men streaking down Main Street on Harleys with their hair blowing from their helmets; the long, silent afternoon" (133). The local newspaper recounts, in similar lists, local shootings and exploding meth labs. Hodgman's rural world is constructed of such lists: "morning in Missouri: fog billowing around the grain elevators, streets slick with ice, blue windows, big women in aprons behind the diner counter beating the hell out of egg yolks" (18), jumping from outside to interior, surface to depth, a sort of impressionism of a world with no clear boundaries. The yolk is the part of the egg that holds the embryo. One might contrast "big women [. . .] beating the hell out of egg yolks" (18) to Hodgman's later list, where he himself tries not to break the egg yolks (as the scion of a family, being gay with no children) for his own mother to ingest.

Today's rural United States is often associated, in fiction and in the news, as a series of spaces (or snapshots) of downward mobility. Hodgman's lists continue: "Main Streets in all the towns around are boarded up. Gone are Lillibelle's Dress Shop, Mrs. Bailey's department store, Nevin's Florist, the barbershop" (17). Gone, too, are "an opera house; a grand hotel; a woolen mill that produced yarns, flannel, and blankets [. . .] a pottery works; a flour mill; plow, wagon, and shoe factories; tobacco warehouses; a feed store; a livery stable; a factory [. . .] a wooden Indian" (17). The list continues more ominously as follows: "Things are different now. A book I read said three things changed rural America: the breakup of the family farm; Wal-mart [sic]; meth" (17). Traditional images mix with the more fanciful, with no order of importance. Hodgman's memoir moves us through "the world of the Dollar Store, the Big Cup, the carbohydrate, and the cinnamon roll" (62).

Listing is employed just as clearly in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which is set in rural Connecticut, when a queer protagonist bikes to a summer job in tobacco fields east of Hartford, a landscape unfolding with "telephone wires slacked with the weight of crows dotted along the lines, the sporadic white almond trees in full bloom, irrigation ditches where more than a dozen rabbits would drown by summer's end, their corpses stinking the hot air [. . .] swaths of tobacco, some high as my shoulders, [and] three huge unpainted barns, all lined in a row" (87). Vuong's protagonist's trysting spot lies past a "wheelless John Deere tractor suspended on cinder blocks, the empty chicken coop with latched rusted shut, over the small plastic wire fence invisible under a choke of brambles, then through crabgrass and under the highway overpass, toward the pines. Dry leaves crashing past" (*On Earth* 113). Movement through space, motivated by sexual encounter, is glimpsed from bike, train, or private motor carriage, like a list of passwords for entry—into a slowly eroticizing space. A similar passage occurs when he moves out of such as space when the narrator's lover dies, tragically young, of a drug

overdose. Vuong's protagonist returns to mourn across "windswept towns as the Amtrak slashes past lots stacked with shelled cars and farm tractors shot through with rust, backyards and their repeating piles of rotten firewood, the oily mounds gone mushy, pushed through the crisscross of chain-link fences" (*On Earth* 166).

Lists, as formal devices, can also establish paths to follow, organizing space. In Ceci's *Comfort Me* (2020), set in small-town Oklahoma a generation later in the 1970s or 1980s, "dry grasses of the prairie [roll] along the hills to the north and west of town; ranchland quartered off by rows of blackjack oak," and church steeples poke up "here and there, and the red brick and white cupola of the court house rose from its center. The rail yard was a barren patch in the northeast, empty now with most of its lines torn up; beyond that lay the cemetery" (115). The list continues, as the landscape's markers are seen from a fixed point on a hill above. The unfolding temporal and causally motivated plot involves family members returning from New York or California, legal issues of paternity, conflicts within interracial religious communities of faith, Christian homophobia, a suicide on the town's train tracks, symbolized by the town cemetery, which also, topographically, almost lead to the cemetery and stop there. The connections between this history of the town are occluded to the child protagonist (the son of the gay church music minister killed on the train tracks the year of his birth). The landscape speaks to the son gazing at the horizon from a hill above town, in a language almost proto-narratival, in the passages quoted above.

More elaborately described spaces in these queer rural fictions are eroticized, but they are interior. In Vuong's novel, for example, the lovers' bedroom is described as having

> [a] *Star Wars* poster (*The Empire Strikes Back*) peeling above his unmade bed, among the empty root beer cans, the twenty-pound dumbbell, one half of a broken skateboard, the desk covered with loose change, empty gum packets, gas station receipts, weed crumbs, fentanyl patches and empty dime bags, coffee mugs ringed brown with old water and joint roaches, a copy of *Of Mice and Men*, empty shell casings from a Smith & Wesson. (*On Earth* 110)

The focalizing character's partner is also constructed of lists, from the "stretch marks above his knees, on his shoulders" to "the scent, the atmosphere of him, the taste of French fries and peanut butter underneath the salve of his tongue, the salt around his neck from the two-hour drives to nowhere and a Burger King at the edge of the county" and the "rust from the electric razor [. . .] tobacco, weed and cocaine on his fingers mixed with motor oil," all

"accumulating into the afterscent of wood smoke caught and soaked in his hair" (111). Sensual, deeply marked as masculine, youthful, and slightly naïve, a portrait in intimate glimpses, tastes, and scents.[2]

There is less attention paid to light, color, or effect than to lists of discarded objects imbued with meaning, residually remnant and not pastoral. Vuong's lists are comparatively Romantic. Compare them to a scene of high school voyeurism in Ceci's *Comfort Me*, set in a deserted rail yard outbuilding: "Sunlight pried between the boards over the windows, slashing the main room with diagonals of light. The circular window high on the wall [. . .] made an oval of the sun on the wall to his right [. . .] a few pigeon feathers and droppings, some broken glass, and scraps of ledger paper" (171). This passage sets a scene, spanning several quasi-pornographically described pages, that culminates in "the guy in the leather jacket, breaking in and out with deep, ragged breaths," sinking "back on his heels" on an abandoned, weathered mattress (174). It is erotic, perhaps, but impersonal and less Romantic. David Bell suggests that erotic gay rurality often encodes "in-breeding, animalistic passions and polymorphous perversions" (87). As Natasha Hurley writes on earlier queer US fiction, it suggests that "particular sexual practices (exhibitions of human life) do indeed emerge out of the tranquility of the landscape" (74). I focus on such effects because, in looking for descriptions of the "rural" in these works, I tend to look for descriptions of landscape (or, here, interior space)—the visual. For it is in such spots that authors seem to reach most toward projecting authenticity, almost fetishizing space as they do so.

Hodgman writes of his Missouri that "[t]his is the real country [. . .] not a place for rich weekenders. Tractors putt along highways where vapor rises and tar melts. We go by one of the lumberyards our family used to own, closed decades now, where a meth lab was discovered in an outbuilding. Betty [Hodgman's mother] turns her head rather than see the place" (13). In Missouri springtime, weather itself turns as "queer" and disrupted as human geography, rivers rising, farmers fretting "over the wet ground," wondering when it will be dry enough to plant, as "old women wander through wet grass, bending with dirty hands over jonquils or bursts of peonies, rising to inspect children walking to school" (11). Hodgman's mother, while driving, hits the gas to roll through the water, "never acknowledging anything unusual" (11).

Amidst these changes, Hodgman writes,

> the smallest things [. . .] trouble my mother most, the glass broken, the roast she cannot bake right, the can opener [she] cannot command to do its work, the TV remote [. . .] she cannot operate. Tell her the house is on fire and she will go on with the newspaper. Tell her you cannot find her address book and she will almost fold. [. . .] [A]t some level, she has

> survived to give me□a gay man whose life she has never understood□a place to call home. (9)

In her wake are

> a path of open cabinets, dirty Kleenexes and crumbs, cantaloupe seeds on the couch and the floor, bills she intends to pay, food left out to spoil. I polish the silver, fix her meals, buy her new bracelets, leave Peppermint Patties under her pillow, drive her to a battalion of doctors. I buy mountains of fresh fruit, still [. . .] a luxury for a woman raised in the country during the Depression. (9-10)

Such descriptions fall within what Scott Herring calls "queer rural stylistics" (*Another Country* 27), and more specifically what Édouard Glissant calls "the resolution of elements [. . .] relayed by the aggregation of things that are scattered," as opposed to "the sacred power of filiation" (55), filiation being, in Hodgman's memoir, an adult gay man returning to care for a dying mother, without offspring, the end of a family line, a child himself, but a childless adult. This building of storyworld (the glass, the roast, the can opener, the TV remote), character (Kleenexes, crumbs, seeds, bills, food left out), or plot (farmers fretting, old women wandering, children walking), through an "aggregation of things that are scattered," is a common feature in these texts, whether fictional or nonfictional, prose or verse.

During Hodgman's stay in Paris, Missouri, his mother asks him to make meals from her own mother's recipes: "pimento cheese, lemon pies, burned sugar cakes, oysters, peppered fiercely and baked with crumbled saltines," while his mother "sorts through old baby announcements and birthday cards," worrying over "whom she will likely offend as she changes her mind, over and over, about which of my cousins will inherit her gravy boats, gold bracelets, and silver salvers" (39).[3] Hodgman encourages us to note his mother's pain (or confusion) in passing on family heirlooms. As Glissant writes, if familial (paternal or maternal) legitimacy is ruptured, "the chain of filiation [is] no longer meaningful, and the community wanders the world, no longer able to claim any primordial necessity" at least in epic literature, where, typically, tragic action "absorbs this unbalance" (52). The atmosphere of Hodgman's text is one of the humorous tragedy of aging and dementia, whereas Ceci reframes or rights the historical tragedy of rural gay lynching and suicide, and Vuong presents epistolary tragedy as dire. All the authors integrate patterns of linked or broken filiation into their works, in a sense to offer wholeness to narratives previously broken, disjointed, or historically not daring to speak their tales.

Sky, Sunsets, Stargazing

There is something overwhelmingly Romantic about the listings and spaces of contemporary US rural spaces, with the subtext of often sordid, banal ground features, probably borrowed largely from Romantic traditions associating Nature (with a capital "N") with childhood and beauty. Skygazing falls within this tradition, going back at least to William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, such as in the following passage: "while far distant hills / Into the tumult sent and alien sound / Of melancholy not unnoticed, while the stars / Eastward were sparkling clear, and in the west / The orange sky of evening died away."

In Vuong's *On Earth*, a passage that moves from Hartford to Connecticut's rural outlands marks the transition from an immigrant childhood to queer adulthood, tinged with Americana's trappings, as two young men sit, after work in the fields, on a "toolshed roof by the field's edge," shirts clinging to them "like unmolted skins," the tin roof "touched all day by the heat," warm through their shorts, the wind cool as Vuong's narrator imagines a sunset further west, "like in Ohio, golden yet for some boy I'll never meet" (98-99). Their conversation about guns, the local ammunitions factory, video games, and sunflowers pauses as Vuong's love object, a local man, whips out his phone to snap "a picture at the colors in the sky's end," remarking, "Cleopatra saw the same sunset. Ain't that crazy? Like everybody who was ever alive only seen one sun" (*On Earth* 99), in odd, rambling juxtapositions of the banal and sublime.

In Hodgman's Missouri, "[t]he sky is our sea here, our object of contemplation in all its moods and shades" (30). Contemplation of America's Great Plains seems to be a filial fixation, as Hodgman's father taught him "to observe it," and Hodgman "began to see what he did. I watched for my favorite effect—the way the clouds, in morning and sunset, jutted out into the blues and pinks like islands in a huge bay of light, gradually thinning as they stretched out into what seemed like the waters of the ocean" (30-31). Often, Hodgman's father "would pull over, take his camera from the glove compartment" to "snap some shots while I wondered if we would ever reach our destination. My father loved to watch, in autumn, the long scarves of lonely birds, flying, finally together, toward home" (30-31). Typically, when the sun sets in such spaces, after such poetic interludes of description, the night sky (and typical Western-style campfire dalliances) shines. This is perhaps in part a registration that queer sex is often excluded from the domestic sphere, relegated to the outdoors, or indeed, literally behind the barn.

In Ceci's *Comfort Me*, a two-man camping trip outside town between teenage companions Mally, who is queer and from out-of-town, and Randy, a heterosexual local, ends with staring at the heavens similar to Vuong's description of the activity as a prelude to sexual exploration. Mally, half-orphaned after his own queer father commits suicide in the same Oklahoma

town years earlier, is taught to star-gaze by a queer friend of his mother before moving to town, sharing his skills with Randy, after their campfire burns to embers: "'Hey,' [Randy] said, 'you really know the names [of the stars] and stuff like that?' [. . .] 'Every group of people like to put their heroes in the sky,'" Mally replies (*Comfort Me* 189), pointing out Hercules, explaining that each point of light in the sky may be seen, with "a good enough telescope," to be in fact "a whole handful of stars" or even clusters with a thousand galaxies (*Comfort Me* 190), that with "so many billions of stars [. . .] there's just got to be life. A different life than ours, maybe, but life [. . .]—planets, nations, families [. . .] a place for everyone [. . .], a home, a friend, a place where you can open up your heart and say anything and not worry about if it's the right thing or what people will say. A place with no shame and no loneliness" (190). Randy replies that "[e]verybody feels like that [. . .] That's mostly what we do. We fool each other into thinking we're each perfectly fine and happy, and inside, we're a wreck [. . .]. Everybody fakes it, at least a little bit" (190). Their physical proximity under the skies, as the boys drink beer, is eroticized. Sexual encounter on earth is precluded, but star-gazing bonds them.

Across such scenes, one might recall Greek notions of space, in which areas beneath certain constellations had themselves, both landscapes and groups of people, the qualities of constellations in the sky above them. Different spots on earth have their own set qualities or powers, as Pre-Aristotelian Greek chorography describes in detail: "different areas of the earth (and their contents) are situated under different star constellations," that are guided by particular themes, signs, or archetypes, which themselves are "based on (or inspiring) a mythological narrative" (Parker 86). Aristotle's ideas are echoed in Franco Moretti's moves toward understanding a "narrative matrix" based on "space" (84). Different geographic areas that are depicted as literary settings, Moretti theorizes, are not "just different landscapes," but "different *narrative matrixes*" (84). Each space determines "its own kind of actions, its plot—its genre" (Moretti 84).

Placing the Queer Self

Glissant writes that wherever time isn't "conceived of as linear" but rather as cyclical, founding myths don't generate filiation (47). One might imagine that Hodgman's inability to place himself in the chain of filiation as a childless gay family scion leaves him only able to find his "place" in the rural world within the cyclical seasons. He then lists them as the days and months roll by of his extended, indefinitely long stay in Missouri. Signs of the cyclical movement of rural time outside linear filiation exclude him, as Hodgman observes: "In the baked backyard, I spotted a young deer straining its neck to feed from the low-hanging branch of one of the trees my father planted years ago. Staring,

the deer tilted his head to the side and assessed me quizzically. At Abel's Quick Store, the girl behind the counter [. . .] stared at me in much the same way. I have become an object of puzzlement to all species" (34-35). Hodgman wakes "in fear of the future, of finding myself alone here on the planet" (233).

Vuong's protagonist, son (and grandson) of PTSD-suffering refugees from wartime and postwar Vietnam, rides his bike from Hartford to its outlying countryside to make money for college, picking tobacco, where he befriends a local. Having met in the field, they find each other later in the barn, an atmospheric space described by quality of light, sound, temperature, scent, and movement of air:

> [D]usked light had washed the interior with a bluish glow. Outside, the workers' axes clinked against their belt straps as they climbed the dirt knoll back to their Airstreams by the edge of the wood. The air was cool, tinged with chlorophyll from the fresh-cut tobacco now suspended from the beams above us, some still dripping, making tiny dust swirls along the barn floor. (*On Earth* 95)

Vuong's narrator goes on:

> Surfacing from the sheets, his face shone through. [. . .] He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white. And I knew this was why there was a space for us: a farm, a field, a house, an hour, two. A space I never found in the city [. . .] a room in a broken-down mobile home, was, somehow, a privilege, a chance. He was white. I was yellow. In the dark, our facts lit us up and our acts pinned us down. (*On Earth* 111-12)

In the backyard, "an empty dirt field beside a freeway overpass," Vuong's narrator watches his lover "aim his .32 Winchester at a row of paint cans lined on an old park bench. I did not know then what I know now: to be an American boy, and then an American boy with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to another" (*On Earth* 116).

In Ceci's *If I Remember Him*, Andy, a young church music director, moves to a small town to work in its church, courting the minister's daughter, while having an affair with Sunny, the local Sikh sculptor. Andy commits suicide. The minister's daughter has Andy's child. In the sequel, *Comfort Me*, as is the case in *Bettyville*, Andy's gay son (Mally) returns to care for a grandparent. In *If I Remember Him*, set in 1952, a local dignitary seeks a portrait of his wife after her death, giving his one photo of his late wife to Sunny, the gay sculptor. The photo is burned by the KKK during a local outcry over the sculpture's homoeroticism (*If I Remember* 306-07). This leaves the sculpture copied from

the photo as the last remaining image of the dignitary's wife—a sculpture also including nude images of Sunny and Andy, one lovingly carrying the other. The sculpture appears to be destroyed (*If I Remember* 307)—or at least hidden.

Sunny, after being burned in a hate crime aimed at him, recalls Andy from memory in the hospital.[4] Ceci's tragedy of the rural queer past "deploys anachronism to forge a collective gay body" of contemporary gay readers (Herring, *Another Country* 112), moving between three generations to plot a coherent queer narrative. Images of queer men in "classical rural" history play to a readership of "modern urban" queer men to build a collective identity, and this identity is juxtaposed against images of the past. As Herring writes, anachronistic time "recalls and reformats Anne McClintock's theory of 'anachronistic space,'" defined as a colonial "trope" situating "colonized people [. . .] in a permanently anterior time" within the geographic spaces of modern empires as "anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency—the living embodiment of the archaic 'primitive'" ("Southern Backwardness" 30).

One technique for situating the self in rural (discontinuous) space that these works share is plural first-person narration. Recent narrative theory has turned its focus to the dynamics of "we-narration" (see Bekhta). "We-sections" of narration drift in and out in interesting ways in Hodgman's work, like Ceci's wavering between past and present, "we," "I," or "he," as collective identity in rural space offers openings that are occluded or elusive for queer protagonists. Hodgman's attention shifts from "her" degradation—"Her hearing sometimes fails her, but it is often difficult to determine whether she is missing something or simply choosing not to respond. Also, she is suffering from dementia or maybe worse" (5)—to collective action: "We have hunts for liquid tears, or checks, or hearing aids" (5). Or the couple again searches together for, "hat-pin holders, candy dishes, decanters, ashtrays, and figurines" (15). Or as Hodgman comments on the weather: "This is the third month of the drought. There may be hope for beans, but not for the corn; the farmers are cutting it down for silage. [. . .] Our flowers, miraculously, have survived, mostly" (24).

At "our grocery stores," Hodgman notices "the sunburned kid who mows our lawn sitting on the hood of his car, all alone, hugging his knees, waiting in the dark" (63). The reader sees him "at the car wash or chasing squirrels down the street in the evenings in his dirty clothes," and Hodgman notes that "[y]ou see these young ones, not even out of their teens, walking on the sides of the highway in the early mornings and wonder what they have been up to" (63). The boy comes to mow their lawn: "Bare-chested, lawn-mower boy wears tennis shoes with no socks and a pair of filthy shorts his waist barely holds up. A few curls train down from his belly button," his skin clearly troubled, "on his cheeks and shoulders are dozens of eruptions. [. . .] I find myself holding

out a Coke for the kid, who looks surprised." Their conversation falters, the boy running "a sliver of ice across his forehead," setting "the plastic go cup carefully on the step as if it were something from Tiffany he has felt privileged to use" (84-85). The eroticism in these interactions contrasts with Hodgman's memories of a deceased queer uncle, who "lived alone;" who never sat "in the living room with the men, but [was] always drifting toward the kitchen," with Hodgman's father always saying "his name in a way that was both too nice and not nice at all [with a] flourish that somehow diminished his greetings and their recipient and left me anguished. [. . .] Bill called him a 'mama's boy'" (64-66). Ugly stories, half-remembered, recounted in family lore, never quite canon, whispered to the side. The past is another country, perhaps, but all these scenes across decades are set in the same house.

Ceci's novels trace the effects of the 1935 tornado to its aftermath in 1952. Hodgman's memoir notes the high-school toenail still stuck in the suburban shag carpet decades later (2). Both fixate on traces of the past in the present. Hodgman reflects on his experiences of being queer as a teenager in 1970s Missouri, and he recalls having found a library book mentioning the newspaper *The Advocate*, which, when he orders a mail-order copy from San Francisco, is discovered by his mother Betty:

> All during the day she found the newspapers, my mother turned her face away when I approached. She looked stricken. [. . .] This was the beginning of many silences to follow, our struggle with words. At the time, I thought the silences, the secrets, did not matter. As it happened, they did. This is what I have learned. To build a life on secrets is to risk falling through the cracks. (71)

Forty years later, Hodgman jokes with his mother that he might marry her doctor, after their appointment: "You could do worse," his mother replies, then immediately shifts back toward feigning ignorance of his sexuality (71).

In Ceci's *If I Remember Him*, when Andy's love affair with the male sculptor does make news, Mrs. Oldfield, his landlady, forbids him from having a homosexual affair in the cabin he's rented—or anywhere in town, explaining: "'I will not have it!' she shouted. 'You will not test God in his own house! Nor in mine! You break it off with that boy or you can pack your things and leave tonight [. . .] I will not have it! I will not wake up one morning to find the two of you stripped and mutilated, hanging from a tree!'" (135). Andy agrees, only to find his landlady has installed a deadbolt on the door of his cabin. His South Asian American lover, born locally, and who was once rejected by Andy, reacts angrily: "'You think you've got it made. Because you're the right color and you go to the right church and you latch onto some nice girl at the first sign of

trouble [. . .] You'll never be one of them. No matter how hard you try. No matter how many layers of normal and nice [. . .] you pile on top of yourself. [. . .] To them, you'll always be just another kind of nigger'" (*If I Remember Him* 198). In 1952 Oklahoma, Andy stops his car engine on the train tracks, so as to have his death interpreted as an accident. The only trace of the two men's love is the sculpture, commissioned for the town library's façade, itself seen as scandalous, and so it is quickly removed and stored in the basement of the town's archives, only being discovered decades later.

Ceci's novel highlights connections and tensions between groups of semi-outcasts in this rural community—racial/ethnic and sexual minorities—and his sculptor is part of a diaspora of Sikhs who arrived in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century, immigrating as educated professionals. As in Vuong's novel, in parts of the US where one least expects to find them, characters who find themselves culturally "out of place" connect through sexual encounter, then part ways, and survive, or not, to recount their tale.

Conclusions

Is Hodgman's Missouri "queer"? Is Vuong's Connecticut? Or Ceci's Oklahoma? These authors' prose is sometimes pastoral in its tropes, but not quite Arcadian. If Vuong's love objects can enter "like a shepherd / stepping out of a Caravaggio" ("Odysseus Redux" 75), Vuong wonders elsewhere, "what becomes of the shepherd / when the sheep are cannibals? ("Prayer for the Newly Damned" 54). Must an "experience of disruptive trauma," whether tornados or queer suicide, or a dying parent, "disallow narrative agency" (Matz 331)? Perhaps such disruptions, as queer subjects have historically experienced broken life narratives, are reflected in nonsequential, impressionistic literary stylistics. In any case, these authors offer a toolbox of formal and stylistic work-arounds to drive such tales, however impressionistically, home to readers, projecting authenticity into very real spaces that have been traditionally occluded in queer American fiction.

Notes

[1] Such listing as a stylistic creation of atmosphere also appears in journalistic non-fiction that engages with rural US gay life (see Tate).

[2] For more comprehensive, if less recent, discussions of the erotic homosexual trappings of the rural and the working-class ethos, see Bell.

[3] The items on Hodgman's lists are more evocative of regionalism than of general American ruralism. As Herring notes, in conceptual terms there are "frequent slippages between the 'regional' and the 'rural'" (*Another Country* 26).

Notes

[4] Another queer character in the novel, who is less lucky, ends up murdered in the town during the same week.

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Biography

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