AMLit
AMERICAN LITERATURES

Vol. 4 No. 2 (Oct. 2024)

Queer Ruralisms

Ralph J. Poole and Ben Robbins
(Guest Editors)

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AMLit
AMERICAN LITERATURES
Vol. 4 No. 2 (Oct. 2024)

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.0

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AMERICAN LITERATURES

Imprint

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Cover Image Jean "jwimmerli" Wimmerlin, "bird's eye view photo of plant fields" (2018). *Unsplash*. https://unsplash.com/photos/RUj5b4YXaHE.

Typesetting Georg Gruber
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Media Owner University of Graz
Universitätsplatz 3
8010 Graz
Austria

UNI GRAZ

ISSN 2789-889X

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Introduction:

Queer Ruralisms

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Abstract This special issue considers queer attachments to rural space in literature, which have often been obscured by privileging the urban in cultural depictions of queer lives. Queer studies scholarship has worked to overcome this urban bias to reveal the diversity of queer lives within rural environments. We make a new contribution to this research by exploring literary manifestations of queer ruralism in terms of narrative form and within the contexts of transmedial and transnational exchange. To illustrate these approaches, we introduce a range of recent works from the 2020s, with deep roots in American literary culture, that have contributed to the dissemination of queer rural texts. They have achieved this, first, by reframing characters' experiences within transnational contexts and, second, by engaging in cultural cross-pollination across diverse media. Here we focus on Genevieve Hudson's novel *Boys of Alabama* (2020), contemporary queer country music and music videos by Dixon Dallas, Willy Strokem, Tyler Childers, and Silas House, as well as literary precursors to these works in the fiction of JT LeRoy (Laura Albert) and Dorothy Allison. Across the work of these artists, negotiations across borders and media are used to explode the stereotypes and limiting roles associated with queer rural lives and to reinvent genres, such as the Southern Gothic or country music, in ways that centre non-normative sexual identities.

Keywords Rural versus Urban; Transnational; Transmedial; Southern Gothic; Country Music; Narrative Theory.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.1

Near the end of Andrew Holleran's 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance*, which evokes the hedonistic gay scene of 1970s New York, the narrator establishes distance between members of the metropolitan queer community and their families in the rest of the United States, a region which he names "that inscrutable past west of the Hudson [. . .] in the hills of Ohio or Virginia" (244). For the narrator, the queer population of New York has succeeded in divorcing itself completely from its rural roots. However, it would be too easy to accept this disparagement of the rural at face value as reflective of modern gay life and its embrace of the liberating possibilities of the city. The novel in fact concludes with a surprising epistolary exchange between two framing narrators, one based in the Lower East Side and the other in the Deep South, who write letters to one another with a range of camp aliases, beginning with the names "Rima the Bird Girl" and "Diane Von Furstenberg." The letter writer based in the Deep South, Von Furstenberg, describes themselves in a scene of queer rural contentment and pleasurable detachment from the urban: "I wanted a real porch, a real front yard with real live oaks and real flowers in real pots—and that is what I have now [. . .] content with the quiet pleasures of life" (253). Despite their decision to move out of the city to the South, Von Furstenberg does not wish to derail the dominant urban focus of the narrative: "That is what your novel is about in the end, you know: the city. Hot summer nights in that city" (257). It is a clear example of reluctance to talk about queer rural identity and a concomitant marginalization of non-urban narratives about queer life. As Von Furstenberg later remarks, "there were tons of men in that city who weren't on the circuit, who didn't dance, didn't cruise, didn't fall in love with Malone [the beautiful hedonistic protagonist of the novel], who stayed home and went to the country in the summer. We never saw them" (258). This observation reveals how much a focus on urban queers has hidden an abundance of alternative queer histories from view, rendering the experiences of queer people whose lives are more domestic, more rural, and perhaps less networked invisible.

The essays in this issue instead pay attention to queer attachments to rural space in literature, which have often been obscured by privileging the urban in cultural depictions of queer lives. As David Bell and Gill Valentine highlight, "much work on sexual identities and communities remains firmly located in the urban—especially the metropolitan" (113) principally due to the opportunities cities afford for anonymity, heterogeneity, and the sheer size of minority populations that gather there. Lesley Marple additionally highlights that "[r]ural queer experiences are often made invisible, are problematized, and when they are seen it is as a deviation from the norm. [. . .] Rurality is a subject that is often broached only in the interest of discussing the horrific backwoods from which some urban queers flee" (71). As we will see, queer writing nevertheless connects rural and urban locations in complex ways through the mobility of characters and authors across diverse subcultural communities.

Queer Rural Theories and Approaches

Queer studies scholarship has worked to overcome the urban bias to reveal the diversity of queer lives within rural environments. For example, Jack Halberstam has argued that the casting of the urban as queer people's "natural environment [. . .] occludes the lives of nonurban queers" (15), and Scott Herring, in his ground-breaking study on queer anti-urbanism, challenges the investment in the "metropolitan as the terminus of queer world making" (4) by highlighting the potential of the rural as "a premier site of queer critique against compulsory forms of urbanization" (6) instead. A number of sociological, geographical, anthropological, and literary and cultural studies approaches to queer ruralism have worked to address the general invisibility of LGBTQIA+ rural experiences in queer theory.

In a qualitative field study conducted in Western North Carolina, LaToya Eaves, for instance, found queer rural culture to be rich and nuanced in its nonmetropolitan spatial scale providing "a corrective to the assumptions that urban spaces are the only utopias for LGBTQ individuals. On the contrary, with its southern and mountain culture, Asheville supports tight-knit communities that are racially, socioeconomically, and sexually diverse, while also welcoming travelers seeking respite from urban life" (149). This study is part of a seminal collection on *Queering the Countryside* (2016), which overall resonates with other recent queer critical works on ruralism, such as those of Colin Johnson—one of the co-editors of said collection—whose historical study *Just Queer Folks* deals with the history of gender non-conformity and same-sex sexual behavior in the rural United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Introducing a special issue of *American Studies* on "Homosexuals in Unexpected Places?", Johnson joins those aiming to counter the cherished cultural truism "that lesbians, gay men, and members of other sexual subcultures somehow belong in cities in a way that they don't belong in suburbs, small towns, or the rural recesses of the [. . .] hinterlands" (5). Like Asheville, other queer rural communities have also proven that the "hinterlands" can be welcoming and self-reliant spaces. The Tennessean Short Mountain is such a community, where a rural gay collective formed in the 1970s and subsequently became a hub for the globally organized group of queer neo-pagan spiritualists named the Radical Faeries (Glasby and Pendygraft 198). The radical faerie culture has since also sought and found sanctuaries in other places such as the Oregon town of Wolf Creek, or the commune Lavender Hill in Ithaca as documented in Larry Mitchell's novel *The*

Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions (1977), all of which attests not only to rural practices of mobility, but also to critically reflexive practices of life on settled land. Scott Lauria Morgensen in his ethnographic account asserts that "[r]adical faerie communities arose historically from deliberations on the intersections of sexuality, race, and nation within colonial histories. [. . .] In such practices, racial faerie culture produces modern sexual minorities by mediating their relation to histories of colonization" (72, 90).

From a legal perspective, Luke Boso draws attention to how courts play a key role in perpetuating urban bias "by explicitly approving the belief that sexual minorities do not belong in small towns," and he offers suggestions "for how judges should take rural sexual minorities into account to maximize the latter's ability to live comfortably in their homes" (562). Likewise, Bud Jerke studies judicial rhetoric regarding rural queers and finds the following: "Language from judicial proceedings and opinions demonstrates that the judiciary engages many perceptions of rural queers that affirm and reinforce stereotypes of rural as backwards and queer as urban" (260). Crucially, he outlines material consequences of discriminatory mechanisms such as "enormous deficiencies in educational resources for queer rural high school students, inadequacies in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS for queer rural dwellers, and lack of political attention to rural queer priorities" (262). But while Jerke utilizes "queer ruralism" as a concept that demonstrates structural discrimination, we follow those who rather embrace "queer ruralism" as a term of empowerment, visibility, and creativity.

By now, many critics have countered the metronormative construction of queer subjectivities that maps the story of migration from country to town onto a rural coming-out narrative (Halberstam 36), thus problematizing stereotypical claims of rural antipathies against foreigners, deep-rooted apprehensions against non-normative sexualities, and the burdens of solitary, agronomic lives. In her ethnographical study, *Out in the Country*, Mary Gray speaks of how rural queer youths negotiate the tension between asserting queer difference and claiming status as a local. She highlights a governing private/public split and the challenge of in/visibility for coming-out efforts since "discovering a sense of one's queer self requires three things: the privacy to explore one's queer differences [. . .], a visible community able to recognize and return one's queer gaze; and the safe space to express queer difference without fear of retribution" (5). The availability of internet, social media, dating apps, and popular culture streams connects young rural queers to the world beyond their immediate physical reach, and significantly reduces the former information gap that queer adolescents had to suffer from growing up in remote rural spaces. But as Gray cautions, this seeming connection to a translocal queer community also has the counter-effect of a local hypervisibility where everyone knows everything about everyone. As a result, many queer youths prefer to remain "functionally invisible" (96), a protective behavior of not being or acting "too queer." Especially when it comes to finding spaces for realizing sexual desire and to claim a "world-making publicness" (Warner 177), this too often remains relegated to what Michael Warner calls a "world-excluding privacy" (177) of either the openness of nature or the safety of enclosed rooms. Thus, for many rural queers, visibility may need to be governed by the urge to blend in, to belong, to be "different-but-similar" as Kelly Baker conceptualizes it (50).

The emphasis on difference within the rural echoes Julie Keller and Michael Bell's call for a plural rural sexual approach that not only encompasses sexually and otherwise marginalized groups, but also takes into account the perspectives of mobilities such as re- and immigration (514-16). Recent queer-, trans-, and xenophobic pushbacks in the United States notwithstanding, the turn to political conservatism, especially in rural areas, has nevertheless "not stopped minorities from speaking up or moving in" (Hagstrom 160), thus asserting the rural as their rightful home as "spaces of otherness and belonging" (Mhurchú 413).

This special issue makes a new contribution to this scholarship through an original focus on literary manifestations of queer ruralism in terms of narrative form and within the contexts of transmedial and transnational exchange. First of all, it explores the particular narrative structures and textual features that have been used to depict queer rural life across the literature of the Americas. In particular, the essays in this issue consider how queer rural literature challenges the travel narrative of metronormativity that "demands a predetermined flight to the city" (Herring 15). Queer rural literature instead traces journeys undertaken by subjects who resist or ignore the pull of the urban. Across these works, one can also observe the recurrence of a range of narrative structures, tropes, and conventions that writers of queer rural experience appear particularly attracted to, such as the use of "romantic pastoral conventions within the homosexual literary imagination" (Shuttleton 123) or evocations of rural "homotextual space" in which characters "flee oppressive space by seeking out the marginal space of the open countryside" (Stockinger 143).

The essays in this issue additionally explore how queer rural texts travel across borders creating connections between global non-urban communities. The forms of migration contained in this literature link diverse rural environments at national and international scales. Finally, we investigate the relation of literary depictions of queer ruralism to those found in other media, including music, visual art, and digital platforms and consider whether these interactions with other media are characterized by adaptation, allusion, homage, or parody. Throughout the issue, we do not wish to universalize queer rural identity, and we are therefore careful to consider how experiences in rural environments may differ for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary communities, as well as to take into account how intersecting categories of identity, such as gender, race, class, or age, shape the lives of rural queers. Within such an intersectional framework, it is crucial to recognize the diverse relationships queer people have with rural space, as explored in a rich body of literature that may, on the one hand, embrace "plural rural sexualities [as] liberating utopia" (Keller and Bell 518) or, on the other hand, address the sometimes dire, lonely, and even violent realities of queer rural lives.

What we hope to offer here is something of an alternative queer literary history that foregrounds the rural. Indeed, queer rural histories have not only been concealed in literary texts, but the role of rural spaces in producing important works of queer literature has often been overlooked in conventional accounts of writers' lives. In fact, rural environments have played a crucial role in the creative activities and interpersonal relationships of many canonical U.S. queer writers. To give but one example, partly on the basis of their transatlantic novels, writers such as Henry James, James Baldwin, and Patricia Highsmith have been closely associated with narratives of queer flight to international metropolises, most frequently Paris, in texts such as James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955). Despite these associations with Paris, and although the French capital city afforded these writers freedoms at certain points in their lives, they all ultimately spent their final years in rural enclaves: James in Lamb House in Rye, East Sussex, England; Baldwin in St. Paul de Vence in Provence, southern France; and Patricia Highsmith in a "bunker" construction she commissioned an architect to build in a village near Locarno, Switzerland. Reflecting these lived realities, we would like to shed light on the role rural environments have played in the lives of queer writers, both widely known and critically neglected, and identify communities that have particularly given rise to the production of literature on the theme of queer non-urbanism.

Queer Rural Literature at Transnational and Transmedial Scales

To illustrate these new avenues of inquiry, we would like to introduce a number of recent works from the 2020s, with deep roots in American literary culture, that have contributed to the dissemination of queer rural texts. They have achieved this, first, by reframing characters' experiences within transnational contexts and, second, by engaging in cultural cross-pollination across diverse media. In striking commonalities, these negotiations across borders and media are used to explode the stereotypes and limiting roles associated with queer rural lives and to reinvent genres, such as the Southern Gothic or country music, in ways that centre non-normative sexual identities.

Many positive examples of queer homesteading in rural areas notwithstanding, there are exciting new works that continue—albeit in creatively new and challenging ways—to speak of the difficulties of overcoming shame and coming out of the closet within such a setting, attesting to a lingering presence/absence of LGBTQIA+ people "in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictated that heterosexuality is the only way to be" (Brown 1). Genevieve Hudson's 2020 Southern Gothic novel *Boys of Alabama* is a case in point, highlighting the lasting effects of queer rural experiences of isolation and intolerance in a cultural climate that is dominated by straight white toxic masculinity. The novel is set in the American Deep South of small-town Alabama, where ultranationalist political leaders unite with evangelical Christians in scapegoating queers. The narrator Max, a hypersensitive gay teenage boy from Germany, who has recently resettled to Alabama is still mourning the loss of his great first love, Nils, who died of leukemia. Max has a spiritual gift of reawakening dead animals and plants that he hates and tries to hide because it makes him different. In his struggle to fit in, he engages both with the violently homophobic boys of his football team, and the village's queer outcast Pan, with whom he falls in love and who cherishes Max's supernatural powers. Through the lens of his liberal, atheist German upbringing, the narrator strains to claim his place as outsider amidst a predominantly but not exclusively queerphobic Southern rural community. Hudson is an outspokenly queer Alabama native, and brings to the open what earlier queer writers of the Southern Gothic tradition such as Truman Capote and Carson McCullers mostly only alluded to. The strategic feat of framing Deep Southern ruralism through the eyes, language, and emotions of a gifted (or "cursed," as he claims himself [125]) German boy highlights the strangeness of the experience as a transnational negotiation: While Max's mother tries to stay true to her secular European pedagogical ideals and fears for her son's safety and sanity, his father is more accommodating and very proud of Max's seemingly successful adaptation process. And whereas Max is intrigued by the local bonding mechanisms ritualized through sport, politics, and religion, he is equally enthralled by Pan, the rebellious, gender-fluid Puerto Rican boy, the town's "witch." In the course of his mental and corporeal ordeals, Max experiences brainwashing in his Christian private school called God's Way, being groomed by the local "new-born" judge running for governor, and being raped by one of his football mates, the judge's closeted son. Max has nightmares in which "he saw thousands of bodies, purple-skinned and starved, rise from the red Alabama clay and climb down from the trees. Their arms had been tattooed with numbers like the concentration camps in Germany. The bodies filled the entire town. [. . .] Max wanted to run from the bodies, but they were everywhere" (257). The novel does not conflate the horrors of the Holocaust and those of the Jim Crow South, but Max's perception marks the lingering sentiments and effects of racism, xenophobia, and queerphobia across time and space. This is, above all, a novel of survival and love in a rural setting that seems too hostile to allow for non-heteronormative desires to thrive. And yet, that is exactly what happens for Max—and for the readers—against all odds. In the end, Max resists the coercive power of the rural community's heterosexual matrix and is not willing to self-destructively give in to what Alexis Annes and Meredith Redlin have called "effeminophobia" (279). Instead, he embraces queerness along with his strange gift and his feelings for Pan.

In a similarly expansive fashion to contemporary works of queer rural literature, recent examples of pop country music have become part of a wide-ranging transmedial dialogue on the relationship between rural culture and its diverse audiences. Country is a genre frequently associated with rural, white, working-class producers and audiences; new artists have made use of queer personas to interrogate the heteronormative roles of singer and addressee typically sustained in these works. For example, Dixon Dallas is a queer country music alter ego created by Daniel Jacob Hill, a singer, rapper, and metal vocalist from Alabama, who was born in the early 1990s. He has moved through a series of musical personae in his career, including Jake Hill, Lil Tra$h, and ur pretty, and across the diverse genres of alternative rock, rap, indie-pop, and metal. His music has placed a consistent emphasis on queer-inclusive lyrics, but his 2023 song "Good Lookin'" (Dallas) gained increased attention when it went viral on TikTok, in part due to listeners being shocked by its explicit sexual lyrics. In the song, Dallas addresses his male lover in an erotic romance, which makes use of gay slang for sex and sexual roles, such as "bussy" and "Daddy" ("Good Lookin'"). It is particularly the chorus that has sparked polarized reactions, in which Dallas sings about being passive in gay sex, provocatively using the language of cowboys (Dallas's signature look is a stetson and a sleeveless vest) in a graphically queer context: "He's bouncing off my booty cheeks, I love the way he rides" ("Good Lookin'").

The song was followed by a series of reaction videos on TikTok, in which listeners appear variously shocked, baffled, or amused by the lyrics. Dallas shared one of these videos as a reel on his Instagram page with the caption "Dixon Dallas is for the people." The video shows young people's entertained or horrified responses to the song being played at a dance hall full of Mormon college students in which straight couples line dance. The person filming the video laughs uproariously throughout, and we see a mixture of responses, largely negative: A man leaves the dance floor covering his ears to block out the sound; another exclaims "Why!?" and indicates that they should cut the track; and a woman at the edge of the hall looks directly at the camera and loudly asks, with a smile, "I hate it [. . .] Why did you do this?" The "shock" generated, or manufactured, by the song appears to be related to the ways in which it challenges audience expectations, namely that the rural identities expressed in country music are antithetical to direct, graphic expressions of queerness (an incompatibility we would not associate with various strains of electronic music, for example). And Dallas clearly welcomes the shocked engagement with his music as he gleefully shares these ostensibly negative responses to his music. Dallas's work has also led to imitators, who the singer has called "copycats," but insists "there's only one Dixon Dallas" ("Dixon Dallas Explains"). These include the subtly named Willy Strokem, the gay country persona of Alex Anderson, vocalist of the Midwestern pop-punk band Brooklane. In the lyrics to his 2023 song "My Hole" (a clip of which Brooklane posted to TikTok with the caption "Move over Dixon Dallas, Willy Strokem is coming for you"), Strokem also makes use of cowboy imagery, but, more graphically, includes lines such as "[t]hese old country roads lead you to my back door," "[i]t's time to take this cowboy for a ride," and "[t]onight's going to be a hell of a rodeo, when I let him stretch my hole." Significantly, though, beyond the performative queerness of the Dixon Dallas and Willy Strokem personae, there seems to be no suggestion that either Hill or Anderson are themselves gay.

These types of gay cultural personae have literary forebears, who have similarly taken advantage of urban interest in queer rural sex to make waves in the publishing, film, and music industries. In the 1990s, the author Laura Albert, a woman in her thirties from Brooklyn, invented the literary persona of JT LeRoy, a West Virginian teenage boy who is prostituted by his mother to men and then escapes to San Francisco, where he lives a life of sex work and addiction before turning to writing after a stint in therapy, publishing his first novel *Sarah* (2000) at just 20 years of age. The novel focuses on the lives of the gender-ambiguous "pavement princesses" (LeRoy 1) who are pimped out at a West Virginia truck stop. Albert published a number of these "semi-autobiographical" works as LeRoy in the early 2000s, and managed to convince the alternative cultural establishment that he was real through solely communicating by phone or email or convincing a female family member to appear occasionally in public as the writer in a blonde wig and sunglasses. The work of "LeRoy" appeared in prominent literary journals, the fictional author contributed material for musicians including Marilyn Manson, Courtney Love, and Liz Phair, and the filmmaker Asia Argento adapted LeRoy's novel *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001) as a movie in 2004. Albert circulated an invented story of abuse and queer flight from the rural South among coastal cultural elites and gained considerable financial rewards in the process. Here we should bear in mind John Howard's call to not "allow smug urban condescension to displace homophobic violence onto the hinterlands," as he critiqued the equation of the countryside with "timeless hostility to queers"

(102) in cultural works such as Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and the Annie Proulx story (1997) on which it was based.

Albert's writing as LeRoy created shock value in a similar way to Dallas and Strokem, playing on outsiders' prurient interest in, but also general ignorance of, queer rural sex. The queer West Virginian writer Ann Pancake has pointed out that LeRoy's fiction had little impact in Appalachia itself "because there's precious little in his work that's Appalachian" (37), highlighting a lack of authentic dialect, a failure to evoke a sense of place, and a reliance on stereotypes of "oversexed, violent, grotesque white trash hillbilly caricatures" (38). Indeed, Pancake was incredulous that any reader could consider this to be an authentic portrayal of West Virginia after she read LeRoy's work before Albert was exposed as the author. Pancake goes on to argue that belief in the LeRoy ruse was only possible for readers who do not understand rural Southern culture or Appalachia, and the novel pandered to the distance and prejudicial ignorance of reviewers, consumers, and collaborators in creative industries on the basis of their "urban provincialism," which she describes as "the condition of many urban middle-class and upper-class people, especially those on the coasts, who assume that because they live in these urban centers, they are automatically more knowledgeable than other Americans about almost everything, including the rural" (44). She suggests that authenticity and fantasy "can cohabit credibly only in certain 'worlds'" (41) due to a lack of knowledge about them, one of these worlds being Appalachia. To such worlds we might add the "queer rural," as the personae of LeRoy, Dallas, and Strokem all seem to use limited awareness of queer rural identities to titillate consumers and maintain their credibility.

What alternatives are there to these personae in queer rural literature and music, which do not take advantage of the apparent dissonance of queerness and ruralism in order to shock audiences? The 2023 country song "In Your Love," written and performed by the country, bluegrass, and folk singer Tyler Childers, offers something of a retort to the work of Dallas and Strokem. While Childers is not himself gay, the video to the song stars a gay couple called Matthew and Jasper, played by out Hollywood actors Colton Hayes and James Scully, and was written by the queer Kentuckian novelist and current Poet Laureate of the state Silas House. The lyrics to this love song are universal enough to be inclusive of straight and queer desire. The video itself portrays a gay relationship between two coal miners in 1950s rural Appalachia (Childers). When they are caught kissing in the bushes after a shift by a colleague, one of the two is violently beaten, perhaps providing another example of rural "effeminophobia," as it is the less conventionally masculine man who is the victim of the violence. After this, they move into a house with agricultural land, which they tend together. The isolation of the house demonstrates the capacity of the rural to also function as protection for queer lives through distance from social contact. (This presentation of queer space was also reflected in episode three, titled “Long, Long Time,” of the 2023 post-apocalyptic drama series *The Last of Us*, in which a romance develops between two men in an isolated compound protected from the zombie-like creatures beyond the barbed-wire fences.) At the end of the video, one of the partners dies of black lung disease, leaving the surviving one to stay in their home until old age, in which his memories of his deceased lover are triggered by his intimate relationship to the land and the plant life that thrives there (the video ends with the old man holding a four-leaf clover [Childers]).

The song and video present not only a synergy of music, visual culture, and literary craft in the evocation of queer rural life, but also an impulse to recover histories that have been erased or hidden from view. As House said in a statement about the project, “[a]s a gay teenager who loved country music, I could have never imagined seeing myself in a video. That visibility matters. There have always been LGBTQ people in rural places, and finally we’re seeing that portrayed in a country music video” (DeSantis). Another central aim of the “In Your Love” project was to challenge limiting portrayals of queer rural life by ensuring, as House describes, that “the house and the people looked realistic for the time period instead of the stereotypes of country people that have become so ingrained in the public consciousness” as “[t]oo often simplistic notions are pushed about both rural and LGBTQ people” (DeSantis). House achieved this authenticity in part by basing the appearances of Matthew and Jasper on a photograph of his own uncle and grandfather, who were Kentucky coal miners (Powers). Such projects contribute to overcoming the invisibility of queer rural experiences, which has been furthered through either a privileging of the urban in queer imaginaries or an investment in keeping the queer and the rural separate from one another to police desire (evidenced by the mixed reaction the video has attracted on social media, including repeatedly being attacked for being “woke” [Crabtree]).

The “In Your Love” video contributes to shifting narratives about queer rural lives away from stereotypical associations with deadly violence and flight. House has additionally commented that “[y]ou rarely see LGBT people in rural settings in a positive way. You often see them getting murdered there, or escaping from there, but that’s it” (Powers). The writer Dorothy Allison, who hails from South Carolina, has similarly railed against stigmatizing representations of rural, working-class, Southern characters in literature. She plays with these negative portrayals in the story “Monkeybites” from her 1988 collection *Trash*. The story ironizes stereotypes about queer rural identity through exaggeration in a Southern Gothic tale, a recurring genre in her writing (see Bailey). It explores a lesbian romance between two students at a college in Florida. The narrator is studying anthropology but considering a switch to biology and so spends a year working in a laboratory that keeps rats and monkeys. Her lover Toni is a literature major, and the two of them have sex in front of the monkey cage, in a scene that invokes Southern Gothic tropes of obsession and perversion: "She inched my jeans down over my butt until I was whining like a monkey strapped to a metal table. [. . .] I started to scream and the monkeys in the wall cages screamed with me" (Allison 85). Toni is invested in the narrator's stories of the working-class, rural South and asks her to repeatedly tell her about her experience of being bitten by a monkey as a child at a fishing camp. In the dialogue between the lovers about literature of the rural South, Toni believes the narrator should exoticize herself to establish her place in the violent, transgressive lineage of Southern literature, othering her with the line "you southern dirt-country types are all alike," and arguing that she should cynically mine her background for literary success: "Shit, girl, it's just too much, too Southern Gothic—catfish and monkeys and chewed-off fingers. Throw in a little red dirt and chicken feathers, a little incest and shotgun shells, and you could join the literary tradition" (Allison 87). The story engages with the process of trying to find a space for queer rural identity in literature, but the cost of this may be to perpetuate stereotypes, something that Allison's exaggeration of Gothic tropes to frame queer sex both participates in and questions.

However, Allison also suggests that literary and cultural forms can be re-signified to incorporate queer rural desires in ways that preserve their authenticity. In another scene in the lab, after she breaks off her relationship with Toni, the narrator gets drunk on Pabst Blue Ribbon and serenades the monkeys in the cage: "I'd sit up on one of the tables and entertain the monkeys with rock and roll punctuated with burps. I sang the love songs the loudest, emphasizing the female pronouns by slapping the table" (Allison 90). In a similar move to an artist like Dixon Dallas, the narrator confounds heteronormative expectations within a particular musical genre and inhabits the position of a rock singer serenading a female lover. For Allison, such cross-identifications can be a means of connecting with one's background even from a position of remove. Allison now lives in California, and in the preface to *Trash*, written in 2002, she talks about how networks of rural Southerners may be sustained through music: "[T]hese days I feel like there is a nation of us—displaced southerners and children of the working class. We listen to Steve Earle, Mary J. Blige, and k.d.lang" (xvi). Finding one's place within art, whether country music, rock 'n' roll, or the Southern Gothic, as a queer rural artist requires challenging stereotypes and actively situating one's experiences within established narratives or genres.

The essays in this volume approach the topic from a diversity of intersectional, transmedial, and transnational perspectives to consider how creative traditions have been reinvented to accommodate the experiences of queer rural identities. The first two essays in this volume offer alternatives to the metronormative narrative, taking into account categories of sexuality, gender, and class. Phillip Gordon's article, "Finding a Rural Trans South: Queer Migration and Belonging in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* (2016)," studies the reversal of the traditional queer migration narrative in Russo's young adult novel: In this text, a young trans woman, who has recently transitioned, moves from Atlanta to live with her father in rural Lambertville to escape the violence she has experienced in the suburbs of the Georgian state capital. Here, a queer character seeks out the anonymity of rural space, where she hopes she will not be recognized as trans. Gordon discusses the different historical investments trans people have had in rural environments, and how Russo presents a counterpoint to the violence and marginalization generally presumed to accompany trans lives in the rural United States.

In "Class and Capital in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature," Kristen LeFevers demonstrates how the work of the writers Julia Watts and Fenton Johnson also challenges metronormative narratives by showing that queer migration to urban space is not synonymous with liberation and happiness, and that remaining in a rural environment may still be a legitimate choice for many queer people. She additionally illustrates how the lives of queer people in Appalachia, as explored in these literary works, are complicated not just by their sexual or gender identities, but also by their socioeconomic status, on account of which they may face stigmatization from insiders and outsiders.

In keeping with this issue's focus on overcoming stereotypes, H. J. E. Champion's essay on "Queer Rural Landscapes: New England Farmers and Masculinity in the Midwest" analyzes how limiting gender roles have been questioned in queer rural narratives by nineteenth-century women writers. She shows how the enclosed New England garden appended to the domestic space has often been allied to traditional feminine representations of the "True Woman." She goes on to trace how these connections were challenged by several short stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, who explored masculinized female labor through portrayals of the female farmer, and Willa Cather, who penned incipient versions of the "New Woman" within the unbounded landscape of the Midwest. Champion thereby challenges the presumption that the modern "New Woman" is a quintessentially urban figure and offers a queer interpretation of her gender and spatial transgressions.

Michael H. Feinberg also considers the queer renegotiation of relationships to rural space during the nineteenth century in his essay "Beyond the Imperial Metropole: Queer Anglophone Representations of the Haitian Revolution." In a transnational approach, Feinberg studies both textual and visual representations of the Revolution in the work of the white, U.S. and British writers Leonara Sansay and Marcus Rainsford. Using queer theories of the deformative, Feinberg shows how both writers came to associate the disruption and disaggregation of revolutionary change in Saint-Domingue/Haiti with an alluring queer desire to flee the metropolitan norms of empire, and the attendant patriarchal and white supremacist social order, in the pursuit of alternative intimacies.

The intermedial focus continues in Laura Handl's essay, "Queer Southern Place-Making in *A Dirty South Manifesto* (2020)," which considers the relationship between queer rural literature and music. Handl focuses on the recent manifesto of scholar and writer L. H. Stallings, a text that challenges the prescribed action of queer flight from the rural in metronormative narratives and the one-dimensional othering of the South as an irredeemably hostile place. In contrast, Handl shows how Stallings's text imagines queer futures in the region through the genre of Dirty South hip-hop, deploying this subcultural medium to advocate for social transformation and sexual resistance. For Handl, the genres of the manifesto and hip-hop can interrogate dominant views of the South (as white, heteronormative, and hostile to queers) and offer a queer alternative to hegemonic linear narratives of progress.

Joshua Parker also considers the temporalities of literature in his essay "Queer Rural Space in Early Twenty-First Century American Narrative." Parker begins by reflecting on how rural space is associated with the cyclical patterns of agriculture, and therefore the queering of rural space may involve a disruption of those cycles. He sees such disruptions reflected in the work of contemporary writers of queer rural lives—George Hodgman, Ocean Vuong, and Louis Ceci—whose fiction introduces discontinuity and sexual diversity into the normative storyworlds often bound up with rural environments. Parker suggests that these authors draw upon a range of common queer rural narrative techniques (such as the listing of landscape features to disrupt causality or the use of plural first-person narration to situate the rural self in community) to bring authenticity to experiences that have often been hidden in queer literary history.

The issue concludes with an exchange between two queer U.S. rural writers: Chris Belcher, author of the memoir *Pretty Baby* (2022), finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Memoir, and Carter Sickels, author of the novel *The Prettiest Star* (2020), winner of the 2021 Southern Book Prize and the Weatherford Award. In a wide-ranging discussion, they discuss their own experiences of movement between rural and urban environments, the ways in which their writing both reinforces and questions queer metronormative narratives of flight, the representations of queer rural identities in different media, and the relationships they are trying to cultivate with different urban and rural readerships through their work.

Notes

[1] This research was funded in part by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): doi.org/10.55776/P35199. For open access purposes, the author (Robbins) has applied a CC BY public copyright license to any author-accepted manuscript version arising from this submission.

[2] While the Highsmith novel is set predominantly in rural Italy and Rome, the protagonist Tom Ripley repeatedly expresses his ultimate desire to go to Paris, with or without the queer object of his obsession, Dickie Greenleaf.

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Finding a Rural Trans South:

Queer Migration and Belonging in Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* (2016)

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Abstract

Meredith Russo's 2016 young adult novel *If I Was Your Girl* follows the story of Amanda Hardy, a recently transitioned 19-year-old, fleeing suburban Atlanta to live with her estranged father in rural Lambertville, Tennessee, an apocryphal space somewhere in the Appalachian foothills along Interstate 75. Twentieth- and twenty-first century queer narratives and historiographies tend to depict migrations towards urban centers, but Russo's novel envisions the opposite: a trans girl seeks anonymity in a conservative rural space where she is unknown so that she can pass as trans and live as a "normal" girl, not a queer person. This essay analyzes the different ways that Russo's novel engages with narratives of queer migration for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals while also offering a revision to that narrative for a trans person seeking to fit into cisgender and heteronormative social settings, not fleeing them for queer urban space.

Keywords

Gay and Lesbian; LGBTQ+; Queer Ruralism; Southern Literature; Transgender; US South; Young Adult.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.2

At the beginning of Meredith Russo's 2016 young adult (YA) novel *If I Was Your Girl*, the protagonist Amanda Hardy seems to be going in the wrong direction. Readers first meet her on a bus headed north from Smyrna, Georgia, part of the sprawl of the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, towards rural Lambertville, Tennessee. She is a senior in high school and already nineteen, whereas most incoming high-school seniors are eighteen. She is traveling to live with her father, whom she has not seen in the six years since her parents divorced.

Smyrna (and Atlanta) are real locations on a map; as is Knoxville, the destination for a young man who talks to—and flirts with—Amanda. She, however, is headed to a fictional place in the equally fictional "Hecate County," a kind of Yoknapatawpha—William Faulkner's invented Mississippian county—hidden in the hills outside of Chattanooga, part of the southern Appalachian foothills where Russo also grew up. "As the suburban sprawl of Atlanta disappeared beyond me," Amanda narrates, "I tapped my foot on the floor and chewed a lock of my newly long hair" (Russo 1). She insists that "something had to change. Because I had changed" (1), at which point the narrative flashes back to a recent incident at a mall in Smyrna. A classmate had recognized her in a changing room and screamed. That classmate's father charged in and body-slammed Amanda, leaving her with a black eye, which her fellow traveler asks her about. When Amanda is reluctant to answer, he asks, "[w]as it your boyfriend?" (2). Amanda's face flushes. This stranger on a bus has "assumed I was a girl" (2).

Amanda's "change" is her transition. She is trans and is fleeing anti-trans violence in the suburban space where she began her transition. Her "newly long hair" signifies her transition to a new person in search of a place to be herself, but despite how much her body has changed, she is still recognizable in her suburban hometown. She is leaving Atlanta to find space to be "Amanda," not "Andrew," her deadname that she also provides early in the novel during a flashback to a suicide attempt that led her to confess to a counselor, "I should have been a girl" (Russo 11), a repetition of the six words she also wrote on a questionnaire after her hospital admission for an overdose on her mother's pain medication. If these past experiences haunt her, in this scene on the bus, that past, at least briefly, disappears. A stranger who does not know her creates a story about her black eye: not that it was the result of anti-trans violence but a too-familiar result of heteronormative domestic violence. Amanda looks like a young girl trying to get away from an abusive man. Unfortunately, the bus is a liminal space between a life she is fleeing and a new life in a rural space that would not, traditionally, seem conducive to the flourishing of queer, much less trans, lives; yet, in this moment, Amanda exists as the girl she knows herself to be.

This essay assesses Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* as a powerful retelling of trans narratives, especially in non-urban spaces where queer identities are often proscribed as other and equally as often queer people are presented as on the move towards somewhere else. When we first meet Amanda, she is on the move, seeking a new start in a new environment, but unlike stories of urban queer migrations to the safe spaces of large cities, Amanda is headed to a small, bucolic, conservative mountain town. She does not originally intend this move to be permanent but only a temporary arrangement due to her recent victimization in Smyrna, where even after having transitioned, she is already known. As Amanda narrates, “I had come to Lambertville with a plan: I would keep my head down and keep quiet. I would graduate. I would go to a college as far from the South as I could. I would live” (17). From this premise, the novel confronts a number of queer myths: that out trans people cannot find safety in rural spaces, such as the apocryphal smalltown of Lambertville; that being “stealth” (or blending in, or passing, which are other terms used to describe a trans person who goes undetected as trans) is preferred for survival; that trans survival is itself far from a foregone conclusion; and that the US South is a repository for the worst possible outcomes for trans lives. Ultimately, Amanda, who seeks recognition as a girl in a binary gender system, will see beyond these myths, at least to a point. While her story offers an alternative narrative for trans inclusion, it simultaneously reasserts the exclusion of other queer lives (specifically bisexual people, gay men, and lesbians) from rural spaces. In the process, the novel crafts a counterpoint to the well-documented murder of Brandon Teena in rural Falls City, Nebraska in 1993, while also taking aim at the more regionally specific canon of Southern literature to establish a new sense of who belongs—and who can belong—in the rural South.

Historiographies of Queer Urban Migration

The myth that rural space is antithetical to queer existence saturates LGBTQ+ historiography. The core of this myth begins with an individual in a rural or semi-rural environment who feels outside of the hetero- and cis-normative expectations of US life. Their sense of difference emerges almost phenomenologically as a tension against what Adrienne Rich once called compulsory heterosexuality. They seek access to a bigger life where they can find others like themselves, so they dream of, and then eventually move to, cities known for having visible queer populations—New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans—and maybe even to so-called gayborhoods, or recognizable enclaves of queer community—Greenwich Village, the Castro, the Vieux Carré. That queer person, marked by an outsider status related in some way to sexuality and/or gender, moves towards a city where they encounter varieties of queer life that refine into the numerous identities grouped into the contemporary nomenclatures: LGBT, LGBTQ, and LGBTQIA+.

The urban trajectory of queer life, tied to the historical rise in visible queer cultures, is most succinctly summarized in John D'Emilio's seminal 1983 essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity," at least to the extent that *queer* primarily denotes sexual orientations. D'Emilio argues that capital labor markets led to an opening up of opportunities away from a colonial and early nineteenth-century rural farm economy. Over time, American society moved towards a modern urban economy that replaced the centrality of the family and its necessary repetition to guarantee labor for financial survival. In these urbanized communities, individuals could own their own labor and engage in non-procreative sexual acts as a result. D'Emilio states the following:

> In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created the conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbian and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity. ("Capitalism and Gay Identity" 470)

From this premise that capitalism enabled the urbanization that led to the emergence of gay and lesbian communities, he argues against what he calls "the myth of the 'eternal homosexual'" ("Capitalism and Gay Identity" 468) because only after the formation of communities in urban spaces—which he dates to post-World War II in the United States—did same-sex behavior shift to the articulation of an identity. The identity enabled a feedback loop wherein still-rural queer individuals saw themselves as related to these urban communities, which they, in turn, sought out for full self-expression.

D'Emilio's argument about a trajectory of migration for "gay" history ties into larger patterns of urbanization that have defined US social life, including patterns still present for the broader queer (not just "gay") community. From the harsh conditions of colonial farm life in the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries, movement towards industrial city life led, by the early twentieth century, to more Americans living in urban centers than in rural settings. Even in the contemporary moment, the friction between a largely white, rural agricultural economy that covers a vast geographic area and the multi-racial, multi-ethnic space of diversified city life with enormous populations sharing relatively small geographic space defines the current red state/blue state political map of the United States. This division, legally ensconced by an antiquated electoral college system that over-represents rural voters in presidential elections and in the United States Senate, buoys the influence of red state (i.e. Republican/conservative) power over national trends in politics. Since 2020, red states with outsized conservative political power have passed extraordinary restrictions on trans people. By early 2023, restrictions on gender-affirming care for minors in states such as Florida and Arkansas have even led to stories of families leaving those states to seek out states like Minnesota and Washington that openly offer trans sanctuary.

Notably, D'Emilio's 1983 essay does not attend to trans and non-binary communities, only to "gay identity," as reflected in its title, even as contemporary trends seem to mirror the pattern his work proposed. In a 2009 interview published in *The International Socialist Review*, D'Emilio attempted to consider trans identities in the context of his original argument:

> It seems to me that the emergence in the last half century or so of transgender as an identity articulated by a social group depends on something different. It's more closely connected to the increasingly porous boundaries that have come to characterize gender roles in post-industrial capitalist societies. In the West, one can find individual transpeople in the past who "passed" successfully. But as long as gender roles were highly polarized and sharply differentiated, as they have been until the last generation or so, openly declaring oneself as a gender crosser brought great trouble and persecution. As the distance between male and female has narrowed, it has become easier for individuals to make those crossings. I say "easier" in the sense of relative to past generations, because it would be hard to claim that being trans is easy.

These comments construct the contemporary rise in trans visibility as an additional outcome of the capitalist forces that led to the creation of gay and lesbian communities and as arising after the migrations during an era of industrial capitalism that gave rise to communities based on queer sexual orientations. Accordingly, the relationship between urban spaces and trans identities proves to be more complicated than the rural-to-urban migratory patterns of gay and lesbian individuals.

In *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Susan Stryker traces the emergence of trans identities from the nineteenth century without explicit recourse to urbanization. Citing her impression that "[i]n practice, the distinctions between what we now call 'transgender' and 'gay' or 'lesbian' were not always as meaningful [in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] as they have become since" (50), she seeks a history of transgender identity as "a movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place [i.e. assigned gender], rather than a particular destination or mode of transition" (1). She wants to define "*transgender* in its broadest possible way" (1; italics in original), and she does not explicitly link trans identities to broader queer migration patterns. She does, however, share with D'Emilio the sense that modern gay, lesbian, and transgender identities are connected to the politics of visibility for equal rights, even as such political maneuvering ascribes to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would identify as a minoritizing strategy for queer identification. To minoritize queer identities as other or outside of the mainstream inherently implicates the need for distinctively queer social space to ensure one's unfettered access to an identity, a space to learn and grow wherein one's identity is honored and affirmed.

Through the early 2000s, as the United States became increasingly embroiled in the debate over same-sex marriage, a more universalizing sense of gay and lesbian identity emerged in the national consciousness, bolstered by data from the 2010 US Census that tracked the number of self-described same-sex households, despite federal laws restricting the government from recognizing those households as equal to opposite-sex cohabitations. As reported by the Williams Institute at UCLA, significant numbers of same-sex partnerships and shared households were found in former Confederate states in the US South; urban areas may have larger numbers of queer-identified individuals, but individuals identifying as living as same-sex couples were revealed to be prevalent even in rural and red-state geographies. Then, after the Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, a new minoritizing rhetoric seemed to explode into the American consciousness: transgender rights quickly took center stage as a separate fight from the decades-long debate over same-sex marriage equality.

In *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variance*, Jack Halberstam describes this shift:

> In 2015, after functioning for at least half a century as the name for a bodily disgrace and gender absurdity, "transgender" (used as an umbrella term for gender-variant bodies) became a household word. What with debates about bathroom use and regular appearances of transgender people on TV shows and within celebrity culture, the term suddenly circulated widely, and it came to the point where not a day went by without some kind of news story on transgender people in bathrooms, in the military, in the law, in sports, in school, in fact and fiction and everything in between. Transgender thus became and remains the newest marker of exclusion and pathology to be seamlessly transitioned into a template for acceptance and tolerance. (46)

That "seamless transition" has been, perhaps, less seamless than Halberstam admits. With regard to trans histories before 2015, Halberstam explains that "[u]ntil the middle of the last century, countless transgender men and women fell between the cracks of the classifications systems designed to explain their plight and found themselves stranded in unnamable realms of embodiment" (*Trans** 4). Halberstam's interest in *Trans** is in how this political shift towards minoritizing visibility accounts for the sudden emergence of trans rights in contemporary discourse, but there are additional historical and technological factors at play.

Writing in response to the upswing in draconian laws that attempt to re-subjugate LGBTQ+ lives back to periods in which sodomy and cross-dressing were both legally proscribed, in June 2023 Hugh Ryan constructed a simplified history for *Slate* that connects D'Emilio's urbanization to the emergence of a broad and inclusive contemporary LGBTQ+ community. Ryan summarizes queer history first by drawing on D'Emilio:

> In the 19th century, America went from a country where 8 percent of people lived in cities to one where 40 percent of people lived in cities. In these new American urban meccas, the separations between men and women broke down. People who were "normally" gendered but desired people of the same sex—people who had been rather invisible before—began to find one another in greater and greater numbers, and recognize themselves as a community. Soon, these people would be categorized as their own thing—homosexuals—and any sign of homo*social* behavior, which had been so celebrated before, became an indicator of hidden homosexuality.

He then adds to the history of the formation of "homosexual" communities that "transsexuality and intersexuality" also began to separate from the concept of "inversion," leading to the advent of the "queer" community as understood and articulated with the abbreviation LGBTQ+ today:

> This new L-G-B-T organization of sexuality and gender held true for most of the 20th century, until around about the 1990s, when a second great reorganization began, this time thanks to the internet. Like urbanization, the internet allowed individuals to find one another around less visible and less understood aspects of desire, sexuality, and gender. Like urbanization, the internet changed what ideas we could access and what people we could model ourselves on. Like urbanization, the internet is changing our concept of queerness.

Ryan effectively roots the contemporary proliferation of LGBTQ+ identities and the ever-diversifying acronym used to contain the queer community ("queer" in this instance meaning a coalition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations) in the history of urban migration, which allows for such visibilities to emerge. His history accepts the premise that queerness stems from (and benefits from) a migration pattern from rural to urban, which implies that even queer identifications in contemporary rural spaces are fundamentally manifestations of urban-based minority identity categorization, the consequence of political efforts to make queerness visible in varied forms.

The problem is that this history still structures queer identities as external to rural space and as only finding annunciation in rural spaces through the interconnectedness of the world wide web; or, to put it another way, first came the chicken (urbanization), then came the egg (the internet). From this perspective, queer individuals are still rare and isolated phenomena when they emerge in rural spaces. According to this logic, they must seek communal connections far from their native ground if they want to find others like themselves.

Narratives of Queer Displacement

One can survey queer fiction from the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to see how the myth of urban migration is operative in queer narratives. Beebo Brinker, the eponymous heroine of Ann Bannon's iconic lesbian pulp novel from 1962, is too uncomfortably mannish even for farm life in Wisconsin, so she moves to Greenwich Village where she encounters a wide variety of lesbian identities. Michael "Mouse" Tolliver, one of the ensemble cast of Armistead Maupin's celebrated *Tales of the City* series (1978-2014), flees the orange groves of his upbringing near Orlando, Florida for the decadent bohemia of San Francisco, where he can bar hop until he finds just the right kind of gay man for his tastes on any given night (notably, in the seventh installment in the series, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, from 2007, Mouse returns to Florida with his husband and encounters a thriving gay community there that did not seem to exist when he escaped to California in the 1970s). Dorian Greene, a minor character from John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), keeps an agreeable distance from his family in Nebraska by hosting lavish parties in his adopted New Orleans, paid for with the promise he will not return home.

Even up to the present moment, the mystique of the migration narrative holds. Writing in early June 2023, the Mississippi-based social commentator Jesse Yancy published on his blog a celebration of stories like Dorian's, in this case to honor the start of Pride month. Yancy recounts how Ignatius Reilly and his mother, Irene, have stepped into a bar in the French Quarter, where Irene notices a foppish man in a stylish jacket. When she comments on it, Dorian responds, "I don't mind telling you it cost a fortune. I found it in a dear little shop in the Village" (Kennedy). Seeing in Dorian far too urbane a character to be from "the village" or any other provincial place, Irene replies, "[y]ou don't look like you are from the country" (Kennedy). He corrects her, "I meant Greenwich Village in New York, sweetie," then compliments her hat (Kennedy). The humor of the exchange stems from the idea that certain modes of queer identity could not possibly be from "the village," but only from "the Village," though later we find out that Dorian is not from a village but "out there in the wheat" in Nebraska, which he describes as follows: "I can't tell you how depressing it all was. Grant Wood romanticized it, if anything. Went East for college and then came here. Oh, New Orleans is such freedom" (Kennedy). Yancy specifically quotes from this exchange to praise that freedom, commenting that "[y]es, Dorian found freedom in beautiful, decadent New Orleans, as have so many thousands of gays from the hinterlands." That freedom is, however, bankrolled by Dorian's family, who apparently pay him not to come home. Notably, many queer urban migration narratives from the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are predominantly white and focus on middle-class protagonists who are usually less self-aware than Dorian of their privilege.

The fundamental sense of non-urban space being anti-queer carries into recent twenty-first century narratives, too. Two YA novels by Becky Albertalli, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) and *Leah on the Offbeat* (2018), narrate gay and bisexual experiences for high school-aged students in the same suburban Atlanta sprawl that Russo has her protagonist, Amanda, flee. Albertalli creates her own fictional space—Shady Creek—and with rare exceptions does not name specific locations in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area. Simon Spier comes from an upper-middle-class, two-parent home and has an older sister away at a private college in the northeast as well as a younger sister who secretly practices with her rock band; Leah Burke lives in the same wealthy, mostly white suburb but is from a one-parent home (her mother is divorced) and feels very class-conscious about her mother's working-class status.

Simon, a nerdy but nonetheless popular kid with a strong friend group, clearly expresses his understanding that his being gay will not lead to his parents disowning him, nor any family tension for that matter, but he fears coming out partially because he knows that to do so will change how people relate to him. He fears the minoritizing capacity of a non-heteronormative identity because he wants to maintain his status as just a "normal" high school kid until he leaves for college. He intends, of course, to attend NYU. He also fears his location, even in the suburbs. He explains this fear in one of his many internal monologues about coming out as gay:

> Maybe it would be different if we lived in New York, but I don't know

> how to be gay in Georgia. We're right outside of Atlanta, so I know it could be worse. But Shady Creek isn't exactly a progressive paradise. At school, there are one or two guys who are out, and people definitely give them crap. Not like violent crap. But the word "fag" isn't exactly uncommon. And I guess there are a few lesbians and bisexual girls, but I think it's different for girls. Maybe it's easier. (Albertalli, *Simon* 21)

His presumptions about the experience of queerness for women-identified individuals aside, his comments about his suburban space structure it as a middle-ground between the frightening conservative rural areas surrounding Atlanta and the progressive, accepting urban space within its city limits. When he is outed via social media, he does encounter significant bullying—always with words, never physical assaults—which demonstrate to him that his school's "zero tolerance bullying policy is enforced about as strictly as the freaking dress code" (Albertalli, *Simon* 191), which is to say that it is not enforced at all beyond moral support from teachers and friends. Despite his privilege, being identified as gay makes him stand out and makes his life more difficult.

Russo addresses the same sense of non-belonging for students presumed to be gay, only in the rural space of Lambertville the bullying that Simon mentions in passing is amplified to deadly ends. When Amanda arrives at her new school, she is read as a cisgender woman whose looks appeal immediately to two guys, Parker and Grant. Grant originally tries to play wingman for his friend Parker and hits on Amanda on Parker's behalf before falling for her himself. After a house party later in her first weeks in Lambertville, Amanda finds on the mantel above the fireplace photos of Grant and another boy, Tommy, whom she has not encountered yet in town or at school. When Amanda asks who this person is, one of her new friends, Layla, answers, "[s]ome kid Grant new back in the day [. . .] They were pretty inseparable, I remember" (Russo 57). Anna, the religious member of the friend group, recalls that Tommy's family went to her church, but she did not befriend Tommy, explaining, "[h]e always seemed really sad, but my parents wouldn't let me talk to him. Bad influence" (58). Layla interjects that she heard Tommy was really sick, "like terminal" (58), forcing his family to move away. Parker then jokes, "[y]ou talking about Tommy? Grant's little gay boyfriend? [. . .] I heard his mom went full psycho, killed the dad and little Tom-Tom with a shotgun" (58). At this point, Grant tells everyone to stop talking about it.

Later, Amanda follows Grant out of the party and to a quiet place by a lake in the woods. Alone together, Grant reveals that "[t]his was Tommy's old hideway [. . .] We used to come out here, when his folks fought or when somebody screwed with him at school" (Russo 68). Recognizing Grant's reluctance to say the rest, Amanda asks him what happened to Tommy. All Grant can say aloud is “[h]e died,” but when Amanda asks if he committed suicide or was killed by someone else, Grant declares, “If people drive you to something [. . .] then it’s their responsibility” (68). Grant may blame Tommy’s suicide on others, but in the context of rural Lambertville, the implication is that the perception of being gay will lead to bullying and ostracism that makes life untenable. Without an option for geographic relocation, the other option for escape is self-harm.

Amanda is mortified by Tommy’s story, but she also realizes that Grant, though a jock and friends with guys like Parker, is not a bully. He was willing to be Tommy’s friend, for which he is still teased despite that teasing having pushed Tommy to take his own life. Such a rejection of male homosexuality lands hard on Amanda, not least because at no point does the novel confirm whether Tommy was gay or just perceived to be. Amanda, in finding herself falling for Grant, begins to worry about her own secret, though she also emphatically denies that she is homosexual. She may be a trans woman, but her sexual orientation is heterosexual. She is a woman who wants to love and be loved by a man, even if she cannot have children of her own with him.

This sense of her trans identity is addressed explicitly in the novel and in deleted chapters from its original draft that are included in the reader’s guide materials at the back of the paperback edition of the book. In a flashback to three years prior to the main story, Amanda recalls her first appointment with a psychologist after her own suicide attempt. The doctor asks her, “[w]hen you wrote ‘I should have been a girl,’ did you mean that you’re afraid to come out as gay, or embarrassed that you want to wear women’s clothes?” (Russo 30). Neither, it turns out, as Amanda explains, “I don’t think God actually cares about that kind of thing, and I think I could deal with just being gay or whatever. It feels wrong that I’m a boy, though” (30). She even explains that having a man love her as a boy or man terrifies her. She is a woman and needs people, including intimate partners, to relate to her as one. Also, in another “Deleted Scene,” Amanda recounts her experience four years prior to arriving in Lambertville when, after being harassed at school for the perception that she was a gay boy, she found herself in a secret relationship with Jamie, the captain of the football team. That relationship did not work out because Amanda knew that Jamie, a closeted homosexual, wanted her as a boy, not as a girl. Her desire was for cisgender heteronormativity, not queer coming out. Notably, Jamie warns her about coming out as gay: “Then when you actually announce to the world that you’re a fairy they’ll upgrade from beating the shit out of you to trying to kill you” (294). As with Simon’s concerns in Albertalli’s novel and Tommy’s experiences in Lambertville, such comments implicate that a great deal of fear and the threat of violence looms over being openly, identifiably gay outside of progressive urban areas.

The specter of violence does not hang so heavily over the women-identified queer characters, though both Chloe, a lesbian, and Bee, her bisexual ex, struggle in rural Lambertville. Amanda first befriends Bee when they are put together in an art class that has no teacher so, instead, hide out behind the school smoking weed. Very early in their friendship, Bee confesses that she is bisexual and that she and Chloe are secretly dating. Amanda thinks to herself, "I wondered if anyone else knew about Chloe. I doubted it; she was a little masculine, of course, but that didn't necessarily mean anything, and it didn't seem like anyone was out and proud at Lambertville High" (Russo 45). Amanda also recalls seeing Bee and Chloe together at a football game on what she realizes, after Bee's confession, was a date, but their spending time together socially does not otherwise out either Bee or Chloe, whereas Grant's having befriended Tommy leads to teasing even after Tommy's death. Chloe and Bee break up shortly after Bee's confession about their secret relationship because, according to Bee, Chloe was falling in love too quickly (a common stereotype in depictions of lesbian relationships), whereas Bee was only interested in sex (an equally common stereotype of bisexuality).

Chloe later comes out to Amanda when she and Amanda go to a corn maze together at Halloween. Amanda pointedly does not bring up to Chloe that she knows about her and Bee, but Chloe wants to talk about it, lightly cajoling Amanda's reticence about Bee not having joined them: "You really aren't going to ask?" (Russo 149). Once she breaks the seal on her silence—Amanda is the second person, after Bee, to whom Chloe has come out—she explains that she is "not used to talking about it" (149) and adds the following:

> We didn't have the internet or anything on the farm when I was little. It was just me, my parents, my brothers, the animals, and the farmhands. There was no place I could've learned about people like me. I thought I was the only one in the whole world when I was little. (149-50)

When Amanda eventually talks to Bee about the breakup a few days later, Bee does not share Chloe's sense that Lambertville has no other queers. In fact, Bee insists such assumptions are a statistical impossibility:

> So there's about seven thousand, four hundred people in Lambertville, and queer people represent about ten percent of the population. That's, what, seven hundred and forty people right there. Let's assume women are an even half of that, and you can assume there are three hundred ninety bisexual or lesbian women in this town. (163-64)

Amanda thinks "[t]hat seems high," but Bee declares that the only reason her calculation "seems high [is] because queer people in the South are addicted to the closet" (164). Neither Bee nor Chloe cites fears of anti-queer violence for the basis of their assumptions, even as their perspectives are at odds: Chloe thinks her being queer is rare; Bee thinks queer people are common but just hiding their identities. Bee also presumes that half of her ten-percent calculation are bisexual and lesbian women. Does she mean the other half are bisexual and gay men? Or do her statistics include the possibility of trans identities?

The answer to the latter question seems to be no. Bee's comments prompt Amanda to come out to her as "transsexual," though Amanda also tells Bee that the better term is "trans people" after Bee clumsily uses the word "transgendered" (Russo 168). Bee admits her surprise: "I've never met anybody like you," to which Amanda responds, "[m]ost people haven't [. . .] or at least they don't know they have" (168). Amanda constructs a different kind of closet with her response. Bee believes gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are afraid to come out but do exist, even in towns like Lambertville, in relatively high numbers. Amanda implies that trans people like her may very well be truly rare, but they also may simply prefer not to be identifiable as trans. Like Amanda, they may blend in as cisgender, since recognizable queerness is the opposite of their goal.

Amanda then goes so far as to introduce Bee to her trans mentor, Virginia, who stops in Lambertville on her way back to Atlanta from Knoxville. The three even go to a gay bar together in Chattanooga, though the novel shows them on the road leaving Lambertville before flashing forward to the next morning with no commentary at all about their adventures at the bar itself. However, something has gone awry. At their next encounter, Bee is angry at Amanda because, despite whatever queer kinship they may have felt leaving Lambertville and going to a gay bar together, Amanda clearly fits in with the popular kids at school. She is, according to Bee, "gorgeous," whereas Bee believes herself to be overweight and unattractive (Russo 169). Bee's animosity boils over at homecoming when she drunkenly makes a scene while Amanda is being announced as homecoming queen. Bee yells at Amanda that "[y]ou've convinced yourself and everybody else that you're this perfect, demure girl next door when you could be so much more" (219). Then Bee takes the stage to out Chloe as a lesbian and Amanda as trans, loudly proclaiming the following:

> Look at our beautiful homecoming queen. Ain't she sweet? Ain't she beautiful? She's livin' the dream, right? I bet a lot of you guys've thought about her in the shower. Smart, pretty, but not pushy or intimidating . . .

> she's everything this fucked-up place wants a girl to be [. . .] But guys, guess what: She's a *he*! (222)

Realizing the danger Bee has exposed her to, Amanda rushes away from the dance and, inadvertently, towards a violent encounter with Parker, enraged that he had been attracted to Amanda while unaware that she is trans.

Bee's anger seems to stem from her sense that fitting in is not a desirable option for queer people, who by their nature should escape the conventions and provincialism of small towns like Lambertville. Thus, she outs Chloe and Amanda to force them to be seen as queer. That outing exposes Amanda to violence. The fact that Russo chose to have a bisexual character be the voice for this kind of queer rage plays to negative stereotypes of bisexuality as deceptive and bisexual people as untrustworthy. Russo's depiction of bisexuality is problematic; her focus is trans identity, and, generally, her depictions of gay, lesbian, and bi characters can seem ungenerous to readers seeking affirming representations of LGB identities. In this regard, Russo's novel serves as a reminder that using the term queer to signify a unified or interwoven coalition (or community) of LGBTQ+ people may be more politically aspirational than grounded in actual experiences from LGBTQ+ lives.

A more nuanced depiction of bisexuality is Becky Albertalli's *Leah on the Offbeat*, which, as mentioned earlier, is set in the same suburban Atlanta sprawl where Amanda's story begins. Leah Burke has the same body-positivity issues as Bee from *If I Was Your Girl*. Leah also exhibits frustrations with Simon's seemingly perfect coming-out experience as well as jealousy for his relationship with Bram Greenfield, who comes out alongside Simon and remains Simon's doting boyfriend a year after the events of *Simon v. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Leah's path to coming out as bisexual also has to go through Abby, Leah's crush who is dating their mutual friend Nick. However, Abby admits to Leah that she is also bisexual, which leads to discussions in the novel about the differing ways to be bisexual (Leah cannot believe Abby is bisexual because she seems so perfect and pretty and has an adoring boyfriend). Nonetheless, Leah does not out others to express her frustrations, nor does she flee suburban Atlanta for the east coast, as Simon and Bram will for college. She can only afford to attend the University of Georgia in nearby Athens, about an hour from home. She and Abby begin a relationship and become roommates. Her story ends happily even as she stays in the South, albeit in a trendy college town and coming from the suburbs. The more rural environment of Lambertville apparently does not offer Bee such possibilities.

Geographies of Trans Lives

Only rarely do positively portrayed trans characters appear in twentieth-century fiction. The most notable, Anna Madrigal from *Tales of the City*, follows the rural to urban migration paradigm: she grew up in a brothel in rural Winnemucca, Nevada, before migrating to San Francisco with a detour to Denmark for her surgical transition. She is also proudly a "garden variety landlady" (Maupin, *Tales* 69) without an ostensible past in the first novel in the series, wherein there are many hints at her secret trans identity even though it is not openly revealed. She seems to want to come from nowhere and have no history. The major hints in the novel stem mostly from interactions with a private detective hired to find out who she really is.

The twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of trans narratives, many of which engage with the myth of urban queer migration in their own ways. The gender-shifting protagonist from Andrea Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (2017) lives in Iowa City, a major college town known for its liberality, although still ensconced in conservative Midwestern farm country, but she moves to coastal cities and otherwise never inhabits truly rural spaces outside of bastions of acceptance with visible queer communities (camping at a lesbian music festival, staying with a partner in Providence, Rhode Island). Her ability literally to morph from one gender to the other at will allows her to enter gay and lesbian spaces, though she rarely enters explicitly trans spaces. Both Reese and Ames (Amy/James) from Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021) grew up in the suburbs of Madison, Wisconsin, Ames as a star baseball player who preferred to cross-dress, Reese idolizing soccer moms whose lives she envied. Both move to New York, the main setting for the novel save for flashbacks to their places of origin to which neither wishes to return. Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) reverses this typical spatial trajectory. Maria Griffiths moves from New York to rural Nevada after a break-up to restart her life. Once there, she notices James Hanson, whom Maria recognizes as trans even as James has not realized it yet himself. Binnie's novel makes literal the idea of queer identities in urban spaces creating opportunities for LGBTQ+ identities to emerge in non-urban places. James does not encounter the word trans in an online forum; he encounters an actual trans person relocating to Star City to promote his own coming out.

Most critical works in trans studies engage with trans identities through the lens of intersectionality, not geography—trans studies scholars have traditionally been more invested in how, say, race impacts gender identity and expression, not where trans people live nor what migration patterns, if any, they might follow. Nonetheless, implicit geographies of trans lives do surface. In *Transgender History*, Stryker discusses the Stonewall Uprising in New York City in 1969 but also lesser-known riots, led mainly by trans people, in Philadelphia, San Francisco, and other urban centers with trans populations. This history is set into narrative motion in such films as

Roland Emmerich's much-maligned 2015 *Stonewall*, where a dreamy, blonde, all-American white teenager from the rural heartland arrives in New York after being thrown out by his parents. Boringly cisgender, he encounters in New York a vibrant, multi-ethnic group of drag queens and cross-dressing sex workers. The implications are that queerness which emerges from rural spaces is fundamentally cis-normative whereas trans and non-binary queer expressions are strictly urban. Season one of *Pose*, a 2018 television series that fictionalized elements from the 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, offers a Black version of the same trajectory. Damon, a gay male from the rust belt in Pennsylvania, is thrown out of his house when his parents discover that his effeminacy is part of his closeted gay identity. In New York, he is taken in by Blanca in her newly formed "House of Evangelista" where Damon meets a multi-ethnic group of drag performers and trans women, all of whom have backstories firmly rooted in the five boroughs.

Stryker also discusses Virginia Price, a pre-Stonewall trans activist who founded the magazine *Transvestia*, which circulated through the mail to a variety of individuals spread across the United States. As with the internet allowing queer individuals in rural environments to access information on queer identities away from urban centers, the circulation of Price's magazine suggests that trans individuals live in the hinterlands, not just in urban centers, even as their histories remain otherwise invisible. Amanda's trans mentor, whom she meets at a support group in Atlanta, is named Virginia, a nod to the real Virginia Price, who is sometimes credited for first coining the term "transgender." The Virginia in the novel comes in person to visit Amanda in Lambertville, but even as Amanda is happy to see her, she insists that Virginia not use "the t-word" and help Amanda stay "stealth" (Russo 176).

C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* focuses primarily on how the categorization of Black bodies during enslavement and after is intimately connected to the formation of trans identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the ways Snorton explores this intersectionality is by discussing newspaper coverage in the 1950s of Black trans individuals in rural Florida and Mississippi whose outings led to coverage in the Black press, often with a sense of awe about these apparitions of non-normative bodies. In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Julian Gill-Peterson focuses primarily on the medical history of trans surgical procedures, a history often fraught with racial prejudices and efforts to enforce surgical normalization on otherwise non-binary and intersex bodies. To tell this history, Gill-Peterson incidentally reveals a kind of migration wherein individuals experiencing gender dysphoria seek out medical centers, such as Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Maryland, for treatments unavailable in hospitals closer to home. One story that stands out is that of a patient known only as

Bernard, "a textile worker in his late twenties" who, in 1938, "journeyed from Alabama to Baltimore complaining vaguely of a 'congenital malformation'" (84). Bernard was drawn to the clinic at Johns Hopkins after reading about it in "*Sexology Magazine*, [which] like many other popular sources of information on sex in the 1930s, would have been a productive relay point between the trans reading public and institutional medicine, reaching as remote a location as small-town Alabama" (85). Gill-Peterson is implicitly locating "the trans reading public" in places like "small-town Alabama," not New York or Los Angeles. Access to "institutional medicine" would, therefore, require at least a temporary migration; it is not explored whether post-surgical trans individuals returned to small towns.

Nearly a century after Bernard's migration, Samantha Allen went looking for the queer people who stay in their small towns and in conservative areas for her 2019 travelogue *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States*. Traveling from Utah to Texas, Indiana, Tennessee, and Georgia, she documents a range of queer lives, including those of many trans and non-binary individuals, primarily in college towns and cities but still in states generally considered hostile to openly queer lives. A trans woman herself, Allen seems to be writing directly to Russo when she declares, "[i]f the dominant LGBT narrative of the twentieth century was a gay boy in the country buying a one-way bus ticket to the Big Apple, the untold story of the twenty-first is the queer girl in Tennessee who stays put" (9). This declaration could almost be a description of Amanda Hardy, except Amanda is specifically trans, not generally "queer," and does not stay put. She actively moves to Tennessee from the hustle and bustle of suburban Smyrna and its proximity to Atlanta's diversified and openly queer spaces. In Smyrna, she faced violence and felt too known to thrive. Moving in with her father in Lambertville was her best option to escape Smyrna, even as it placed her in a rural setting that, upon her arrival at least, terrifies her until she begins making friends.

The urban-to-rural geography in Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* best engages with Amanda's motives for her rural migration, particularly in how Halberstam explicates the narratives that emerged concerning the murder of Brandon Teena. However, if Halberstam criticizes how those narratives—specifically the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* and the film *Boys Don't Cry*—engage in projects of stabilization, rationalization, and trivialization to delegitimize trans identities, Russo reconstructs the trajectory of rural migration to point towards positive, openly trans outcomes. Halberstam does not offer a definition of "transgender" so much as an explanation of how it "proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside of categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition" (*In* *a Queer Time* 48). Amanda Hardy wants to be seen as a woman, despite how often her internal monologue reminds readers that she was assigned male at birth and how hyper-aware she is of her body as an object of the male gaze, though she can never determine whether that gaze is desirous or skeptical. Halberstam continues to argue that "[t]ransgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds" (48). Indeed, Amanda is fully aware of the artificial construction of her gender markers as a woman, but she does not want to be perceived as an effeminate homosexual, like Tommy or other gay-identified individuals visible even in their absence by the specter of violence and the closet. Nor does she want to be perceived as what Halberstam calls a "failed [boy]" (*In A Queer Time* 54). She wants Grant and others to treat her like a "normal" teenage girl, even as she anticipates their discovering her trans identity.

Amanda takes synthetic hormones and is already nineteen, as during what would have been her senior year in Smyrna she was undergoing surgical transition, including bottom and top surgeries. She avoids discussing that missing year and or explaining the gap to any of her friends—Layla, Chloe, Bee, Anna, or Grant—but as her relationship with Grant develops, she feels extraordinary anxiety about his finding out her secret. So, despite her desire to remain stealth, she writes Grant a letter explaining her transition and including her deadname. When she gives it to him, he burns it. He claims that just knowing she was willing to share her past was all that mattered to him, but, as with Bee's insistence she had never met anyone like Amanda (namely a trans person), it is likely that Grant had not imagined Amanda's secret was that she transitioned. As with the unnamed man flirting with Amanda on the bus in the opening scene of the novel, Grant likely envisions a haunted past of bad familial relationships or abusive boyfriends from whom Amanda has fled. His actions put Amanda in a bind. She fears what Imogen Binnie describes in *Nevada* as a trope in trans narratives, especially on television and in film, specifically "that [trans women] are all psychos with big hair who trick straight men into having sex with them. On television. Gross" (18). But if Amanda does not want to be perceived as deceptive, she also wants to be related to as a woman, placing her into the double-bind of presumed duplicitousness into which many non-trans people too readily perceive trans lives.

Possibly the most famous historical example of the negative outcomes associated with trans passing is the story of Brandon Teena. Halberstam details at length in *In a Queer Time and Place* how his story is always already narrativized away from an understanding of Brandon's actual motives to a historiography wherein his body is a site of contestation and debate, even from beyond the grave. Still, Halberstam hypothesizes that Brandon chose to flee urban

Lincoln, Nebraska for the rural Falls City "[to pull] off a credible presentation as male" (*In a Queer Time* 43) because in such settings "[h]is plans were better served by the daily routine of life in a small town where most people lived far apart, asked few questions, and kept their opinions to themselves" (*In a Queer Time* 70). In that setting, Brandon began dating a local girl, Lana Tisdel, only to be discovered as passing while trans by two men who then raped and ultimately murdered him under what appears to be a desire to protect Lana (and Falls City) from Brandon's "deception." On the one hand, Brandon's death seems directly related to him being discovered as trans. On the other hand, gender matters, and John Lotter and Tim Nissen, Brandon's murderers, may have had other motives in maintaining cisgender stability via the erasure of trans life. Halberstam argues heavily for the latter: Brandon's rape, especially as depicted in the film *Boys Don't Cry*, was intended to reinscribe Brandon's womanhood through violence and, thus, re-stabilize the gender categories his discovery disturbed. Their subsequent murder of Brandon may have resulted from their desire to silence Brandon after he reported the rape to the police. The rape, more than the murder, is the site of what Halberstam calls "the project of stabilization" (*In a Queer Time* 54) to erase trans identity (even as it is the murder than ended Brandon's trans life).[1]

Amanda, a trans woman, can partially be read through the lens of the historiography surrounding Brandon's death. Like Brandon, Amanda passes while trans in a rural setting which is presented as antithetical to LGB life, much less trans identity. When Bee outs her, Amanda faces Grant's shock, which she perceives as repulsion. Fearing a possible violent rejection, she flees the homecoming dance on foot where she encounters the real danger: Parker follows her in his truck and attempts to rape her in the woods on the side of the road. As an act of anti-trans violence—Parker punches Amanda hard in the face to subdue her—this moment appears to be the sum of all trans fears of violence, more evidence for why trans people need to stay in populated, relatively queer-friendly urban spaces.

Whereas Halberstam argues that Brandon's rape was intended to reinscribe womanhood on his trans body, Amanda's gender identity alters the relationality between her and Parker in this attempted rape scene. Parker had originally been attracted to Amanda, who started dating Grant instead. Now, he is violently angry at what he considers her deception and insists, "[y]ou made me look like a dickhead for months, and now you don't got Grant to look out for you. You don't get to play hard to get anymore" (Russo 230-31). As he moves to assault her, he adds, "[y]ou coulda had this the easy way. Now, let's see how close you are to the real thing" (231). Parker does not intend to inscribe Amanda's womanhood via sexual violence. Instead, his motives seem to be his closeted homosexuality that has previously emerged in his crude jokes about Tommy. Terrified that his initial attraction is indicative of homosexual desire, he wants to force Amanda into submissive womanhood via male sexual violence to reassert his own masculinity. As with Lotter and Nissen's project of stabilization, wherein they force womanhood on Brandon, Parker wants to stabilize the conditions under which his own masculinity is secure. But the shift from violence directed at a trans-masculine person to violence directed at a trans-feminine person must be taken into account in these otherwise similar stories.

The other alteration in this scene is the outcome. Just as Parker pulls Amanda into the woods, Amanda hears someone saying, "I knew you were a creep," at which point "[a] beam of light landed on us, revealing Chloe's silhouette holding a rifle at Parker's back" (Russo 232). Brandon Teena, as well as two other people, were executed by Lotter and Nissen in Falls City in 1993. In the fictional Lambertville, Amanda's friends come to rescue her. Though they might have been shocked to discover she is trans, they do not feel the repulsion or hate she presumed they did. Even Grant comes to check on Amanda at home later that evening, at which point Amanda's father runs Grant off under the belief that he, not Parker, had attempted to hurt his daughter. His efforts to protect Amanda mark the first time he has treated her not as a son who needs to fight his own battles, but as his daughter who needs a father to make sure boys have honorable intentions.

In response to these events, Amanda contemplates another suicide attempt and seeks shelter back in Smyrna for Thanksgiving with her mom and Virginia. While there, she submits her application to NYU, but after Thanksgiving, she comes back to Lambertville to finish her senior year. She does not know what her future with Grant holds except that they are at least friends if not currently dating. He makes a point of telling her that he has done some research trying to understand "transsexuals," even as he is no surer of their future together than Amanda is. She has other friends in Lambertville as well, Chloe and Layla, who seem willing to continue treating her as one of the girls. The novel concludes with Amanda's determination that "I wasn't sorry I existed anymore. I deserved to live. I deserved to find love. I knew now—I believed, now—that I deserved to be loved" (Russo 273). This realization was enabled by the rural space of Lambertville and her experiences there, because of—not despite—her being visible as trans in that space.

The Southern Canon and the Trans South

Finally, Russo's revision of place in trans narratives does not only engage with other trans and queer texts. She uses *If I Was Your Girl* to make a comment on the relationship of new trans narratives to established canons, in her case the canon of Southern literature represented by key writers of the Southern

Renascence. First, when she attends Grant's football practice, reluctantly fulfilling the role of girlfriend even as she and Grant are not yet officially dating, she buries her head in "my *Catalogue of American Fiction* textbook" (Russo 75). She is reading Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," about which she notes, "I immediately hated the old woman in the story, though it was pretty obvious I was supposed to" (75). Even before the recent surge in bans on LGBTQ+ books in schools, it should go without saying that catalogues of American fiction do not regularly include trans narratives. Russo seems to envision her novel helping to change that.

More movingly, Amanda has a flashback to before her parents' divorce when she, still known as Andrew, wrote a story in school about what she wanted to be when she grew up. The story depicts Andrew driving in a magic car to the future where "he" encounters "his" future self as a successful scientist, who also happens to be a woman. Andrew's teacher encouraged her to show the story to her parents. Excited by the praise, Andrew rushed home to show the story to her father, who, in his own excitement, exclaimed before even reading it, "I bet you'll be the next [William] Faulkner" (62). As her father reads the story, his excitement changes to anger. He frowns and demands Andrew tell him the story is a "joke, right?" (63). When Andrew refuses to agree with his trivialization, her father grabs her arm and insists, "[y]ou need to tell me this was a joke" (63). When Andrew continues to refuse, he coldly explains, "[s]on [. . .] I want you to have a good life. Boys who really think the things in your story are confused. They don't have good lives. So you're not one of those boys" (63). Deeply scarred by the insinuation, Andrew gives in to her father's demands.

Later, as Amanda, she manages to repudiate the incident and the implication that "the next Faulkner" could not be "one of those boys." While waiting for Virginia to arrive for her visit, Amanda sits in an aptly named diner, reading a novel assigned for class. The scene, the opening for chapter 20, reads thus:

> Virginia was late.
>
> I sat at the bar in the Sartoris Diner and read *Absalom, Absalom!* for class, trying to figure out which character disgusted me the most. (174)

Sartoris is the name of the family featured in Faulkner's first Yoknapatawpha novel, *Flags in the Dust* (originally published as *Sartoris* in 1929). The opening pages of that novel introduce the character Aunt Jenny Du Pre: "Jenny" is short for Virginia. The reference adds an additional layer of meaning to Russo's choice of Virginia as the name for Amanda's trans mentor. The name is not only an allusion to an icon of trans history, Virginia Price, but also a nod to the opening scene of Faulkner's first foray into his celebrated creation of a fictional county. Amanda is probably remembering her father's comment about her being the next Faulkner until he realized her story was about being trans. Russo, as a novelist, is clearing the stage for her own story, a trans story, that she is not afraid to put in conversation with the greatest writing from the US South.

If I Was Your Girl engages with a broad range of queer historiographies and narratives, as well as the canon of Southern literature. It participates in discussions embedded in trans studies and advances representations of trans identity in narrative form as part of an emerging genre of explicitly trans literature that is both part of other canons and a canon all its own. As such, it takes its proverbial stand as an important work at a critical juncture in LGBTQ+ history when diverse and complex trans stories need to be told.

Notes

[1] Death is often what erases trans identity, especially as coroners, whether through legal requirement or just prejudicial practice, often re-inscribe birth certificate gender on a trans body on a death certificate and family members often de-trans the bodies of deceased trans loved ones (see, for example, the death of Leelah Alcorn). So it is important to qualify that the rape, in this case, erases trans identity, not the murder as usually it would be the latter when that erasure begins/occurs.

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Biography

Phillip "Pip" Gordon is a visiting assistant professor of Gender Studies at the University of Mississippi. He has previously been an associate professor of English and the LGBTQ+ Studies Coordinator at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville. He is the author of *Gay Faulkner: Uncovering a Homosexual Presence and Beyond*. His more recent work has explored the boundaries of trans and non-binary souths, especially as it relates to retellings of the work of William Faulkner.

Class and Capital in LGBTQ Appalachian Literature

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Abstract

Appalachia has long been considered the "other" to the American "mainstream." However, the complexity of queer life in Appalachia is not limited to geography, but also relies upon class differences and an association with rural poverty. The intersection between queerness and socioeconomic status appears frequently in LGBTQ Appalachian literature, such as Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.*, a young adult novel, as well as Fenton Johnson's novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock* and accompanying short story "Bad Habits." In these texts, being queer and a rural Appalachian is a struggle. This paper argues that the struggle is further complicated by issues of social standing and each character's lack or acquisition of Pierre Bourdieu's economic, social, and cultural forms of capital.

Furthermore, this paper employs Jack Halberstam's theory of metronormativity to examine the urban/rural binary in these texts and the ways in which characters sometimes support but ultimately subvert the metronormative mindset, which privileges the urban over the rural by positing that queer individuals can find happiness only in the former. These Appalachian characters show that urban life does not always result in a happy ending for queer individuals and that remaining in the rural setting, despite challenges and heartaches, can be a valid choice.

Keywords Appalachian; Capital; Class; Metronormativity; Queer; Rural; Urban.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.3

A dichotomy has long stood between the Appalachian environment and the rest of the United States. Though the United States is an amalgam of cultures, ethnicities, and identities, and, contrary to some popular beliefs, cannot be defined as a singular "mainstream" America, Appalachia and its people have nonetheless been held up against "mainstream American culture" as a crude and outmoded other. As Shaunna L. Scott and Stephanie McSpirit point out, "Appalachia has an 'image problem.' Working against the region are media depictions of Appalachian mountaineers as backwoods, gun-toting 'hillbillies' who shoot first and ask questions later" (42). The systemic issues that the Appalachian region has faced, including limited access to educational resources, exploitation from outside corporations, crumbling infrastructure, generational poverty, and substance use disorder, are not endemic to Appalachia alone; these same issues plague other rural areas across the United States. Similarly, as with other rural locations throughout the US, Appalachia has been continually devalued in terms of the urban/rural binary, with journalists, filmmakers, and artists conflating its popular rural imagery with graphic poverty and general misery. Until recent decades, the experiences of individuals, both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community, who have grown up or lived in Appalachian *urban* spaces have often been overlooked in literary portrayals of the region. Instead, popular media depictions of Appalachia, such as in older comic strips like Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* or the more recent autobiography *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, continually portray the region as a backwoods and heteronormative monolith, ignoring and even omitting the presence of queer individuals, especially those queer individuals who do not leave the region or otherwise become trapped in this "hopeless" rural setting.

However, the complexity of queer life in Appalachia, as well as for Appalachian natives who choose to leave the region, is not limited to geographical place and differences, but, in many cases, may rely upon differences in class and capital as well. These socioeconomic differences represent a theme that appears more than once in LGBTQ literature from or about the region, such as Julia Watts' *Finding* H.F. (2001), as well as Fenton Johnson's 1993 novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock* and the short story "Bad Habits," which Johnson wrote over twenty years later as a spin-off centered around a secondary character from *Scissors*, Nick Hardin. Watts' young adult novel, published in 2001, follows best friends H.F. and Bo as they navigate high school and queer life in a rural Kentucky town and eventually run away to find H.F.'s absent mother. Johnson's novel was originally published in 1993, while "Bad Habits" debuted in the 2019 anthology *LGBTQ Fiction and Poetry from Appalachia*. *Scissors* showcases the lives of the Hardin family, especially Raphael, as he moves away from his Kentucky hometown to create a new life and explore his sexuality in 1980s San Francisco; in contrast, "Bad Habits" focuses on the Hardins' neighbor, Nick Handley, as he, too, comes to terms with his sexuality. Unlike Raphael, however, Nick chooses to stay in the Appalachian rural setting. These texts subvert not only a heteronormative view of Appalachia, but also what queer theorist Jack Halberstam would describe as a metronormative mindset, as their characters realize, upon outmigration from Appalachian rural settings, that the urban setting does not necessarily fulfill their expectations of liberation, convenience, and happiness. Additionally, in these texts, being queer *and* a member of rural Appalachia is a struggle for the characters; however, the struggle is further complicated by issues of class, social standing, and each character's lack *or* acquisition of various forms of capital, as the characters in these texts not only face rejection and homophobia from their communities of origin, but also encounter stigmatization because of their associations with rural poverty.

This intersection between queer identity and rural poverty would behoove us to examine these texts through the lenses of different types of capital as defined in Pierre Bourdieu's "The Forms of Capital" and Jack Halberstam's theory of metronormativity. In his essay, Bourdieu describes capital as "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (280). Regardless of the several forms that it can take, capital "takes time to accumulate" (280), although the different forms of capital "[represent] the immanent structure of the social world" (280). According to Bourdieu, capital can take on three distinct forms—economic, cultural, and social (281). The first type of capital, economic, is probably the most self-explanatory of the three and the type that comes most naturally to mind whenever we think of capital. Indeed, economic capital is "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized into the form of property rights" (281). As a result, economic capital is the most obvious and therefore most desired form.

However, as Bourdieu shows, cultural and social capital can be lucrative, too, as they may rely upon or be converted into the economic form. Cultural capital is often established through "educational qualifications" (Bourdieu 281), whereas social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to [. . .] membership in a group" (Bourdieu 286). Participation in these relationships—membership in a group—may be formally recognized, as in the case of an official club, or it may be more subtle and personal (Bourdieu 286). Similarly, the expectations for these relationships may be "subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)" (287). In Johnson's *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, for instance, we can certainly see that Raphael's membership of the queer community in San Francisco has produced in him those feelings of kinship and empathy. As a member of that community, or group, then, Raphael also operates as a "custodian of the limits of the group [. . . and] can modify [it] by modifying the limits of legitimate exchange through some form of misalliance" (287). Such a "misalliance," as Bourdieu puts it, is seen in Raphael's interactions with his family, as well as Nick Hardin, back in Kentucky, who do not claim membership in this community. Consequently, Raphael might be seen as a representative of San Francisco's queer community to his family and the Hardins.

Throughout this article, I will use Bourdieu's three forms of capital to emphasize the characters' socioeconomic statuses and examine how those statuses affect the way these characters relate to individuals both within and outside of Appalachia, as well as the impact that socioeconomic status has upon queer identity for individuals who may also identify, whether explicitly or implicitly, as Appalachian. Additionally, the concept of metronormativity, as presented in Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*, may facilitate a deeper understanding of the intersection of queerness and rural poverty for the characters in Watts' and Johnson's works. According to Halberstam, metronormativity "reveals the conflation of 'urban' and 'visible' in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities [. . . and] the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities" (35-36). The metronormative mindset, or worldview, essentially holds that individuals from the queer community can only attain happiness, fulfillment, and liberation in an urban setting; indeed, "[r]ural and small-town queer life is generally mythologized by urban queers as sad and lonely, or else rural queers might be thought of as 'stuck' in a place that they would leave if they only could" (Halberstam 35). While this attitude may be appealing in its simplicity and seeming obviousness, it does in fact do an injustice to many individuals who are part of both the queer and the rural (in this case, Appalachian) communities—individuals who, for all the frustrations, rejection, and bigotry that they may face in small towns, may also have very valid reasons for wanting to remain in these spaces. One such reason may be the love for one's family, as exemplified by the end of *Finding H.F.*, when H.F. chooses to remain in her rural hometown in Morgan, Kentucky, and continue living with her grandmother. Even though H.F.'s grandmother is a conservative Christian who, it is implied throughout the novel, may not be accepting of H.F.'s queerness, H.F.'s love and care for her grandmother is apparent when, in the epilogue, she turns down Bo's offer to come live with him in Lexington, Kentucky, saying, "It's tempting, but Memaw's not getting any younger, and I don't want to be too far away in case she needs me. She's always done right by me, so I need to do right by her" (Watts 274). H.F.'s desire to stay in her Appalachian small town with its potential ongoing hostility toward her and Wendy's queer relationship, even as her childhood best friend Bo leaves to attend music school in the more urban Lexington, shows the depth of H.F.'s devotion to her family, a devotion that is just as much a part of her identity as her sexuality.

As Halberstam points out, "[g]ay men and lesbians from rural settings tend not to be artists and writers in [. . .] great numbers, and so most of the coming-out stories that we read are written by people from cities or suburbs" (41). The narrative of metronormativity has perhaps been easily perpetuated by such underrepresentation of queer rural voices in literature; however, the divide between rural and urban spaces, and our expectations for each space, which Halberstam describes at length in the chapter "The Brandon Archive" from *In a Queer Time and Place* (22-46), may in fact lend some insight into Watts' and Johnson's texts. For example, *Scissors*' Nick Handley sees Raphael as worldly and sexually liberated because of Raphael's life and experiences in urban San Francisco, while he, a Kentucky tobacco farmer, remains steadfastly in the closet. Moreover, in Watts' novel, H.F. and Bo spend much of the first half of the book decrying their rural upbringing. H.F. demonstrates shame over her perceived ignorance of the world outside rural Appalachia as she encounters the social and economic capital of the Cook family and the cultural capital of Dee, Laney, and Chantal, three friends in urban Atlanta. Equally, Bo doubts his ability to earn a scholarship to attend music school because of his upbringing in rural poverty. However, the characters in these texts initially appear to support but ultimately subvert metronormative attitudes. Raphael challenges Nick's belief that life in an urban environment is superior to that in a rural setting for queer individuals, as he has not seen anything that Nick has not also seen, but he has simply seen "more of it" (Johnson, *Scissors* 155). H.F. and Bo likewise begin to perceive themselves and their Appalachian upbringings differently by the latter half of Watts' novel—if not as something wholly positive, then at least in a neutral light and not as something that will hold them back from happiness or success.

The issues of class, capital, and metronormative expectations are evident almost immediately at the beginning of Watts' *Finding H.F.*, as H.F. brings up the subject of her mother, a high school dropout who abandoned H.F. soon after she was born: "Unlike Momma, I fully intend to graduate from high school" (Watts 18). Though it appears to be a simple statement at first glance, H.F.'s remark reveals not only a sense of shame and disappointment in her mother, but also a desire to accrue the cultural capital that comes from formal education (Bourdieu 281). When she talks about the popular and well-to-do students at school, or "the cheerleaders and jocks and the people who walk around and every step they take says, *My daddy has money, and you don't even know who your daddy is*" (Watts 18), H.F. also introduces the issue of economic capital, and how her lack of such capital leads to discrimination and judgment from her classmates. However, she tries to downplay this issue, saying that it is not the "money thing" (19) that so profoundly affects her social standing, but the fact that "the popular kids know I'm different. Different on the inside" (19). Although the difference that H.F. references here relates to her sexuality, which does affect her social standing at school, her lack of economic and cultural capital further complicates her struggle to fit in with her peers.

Even Bo, H.F.'s best friend, struggles with being doubly different and a complicated otherness because of his sexuality and social standing. We see this when he talks about the music scholarship to the University of Kentucky, which he seems to believe he has little hope of winning: "There's lots of competition for them scholarships [. . .] people from all over the state who've had lots better music teachers than some sissy little piece of white trash from Morgan County" (Watts 33). With this remark, Bo confronts two reasons for his inability to fit into his hometown: first, he is gay, and second, he comes from a poor family. H.F. reinforces this point later in the novel as she fights the urge to tell him, "*[t]ell that to the boys on the football team who bust your head every chance they get, not just because you're a faggot but because you're a white trash faggot*" (196-97). Being different, deviating from societal norms in any way, is hard; but it is not just that H.F. and Bo are gay or that they are situated on the lower rungs of the social ladder—the full, complicated struggle of Watts' characters lies in the fact that they are *both*. As we can see in the previous two excerpts from Watts' novel, H.F. and Bo are ostracized by their peers because of their queerness and defiance of heteronormative demands and expectations, but their ostracization does not stop there. These characters are additionally othered and isolated because of their poverty—their lack of economic capital.

H.F.'s lack of economic and cultural capital, as well as her awareness of that lack, is highlighted in her interactions with newcomer Wendy Cook. In the novel's third chapter, H.F. arrives in study hall and has her first real interaction with Wendy, a new student from Scranton, Pennsylvania, and H.F.'s as yet unrequited crush. Although the girls commiserate over their inability to fit in with the popular or "normal" kids at the school, H.F. still carries an internal monologue of insecurity and self-deprecation (Watts 62-67). While Wendy discusses her hometown and the stereotypical expectations of hospitality she had held for the small town of Morgan, H.F. tells the reader that she suddenly "can't stop thinking about Wendy being a college professor's daughter from up North. She's too good for this dried-up little coal-mining town, and since I can count on two hands the times I've been outside this town, that must mean she's too good for me" (64). Although she manages to summon the courage to invite Wendy over to her grandmother's house for dinner sometime, H.F. still questions herself: "*Shut up, H.F.*, I'm telling myself even as I talk. You don't want this college professor's daughter over at your tacky little house, picking at her pinto beans and staring slack-jawed at all the egg dioramas" (67). It does not matter that Wendy finds H.F. charming and worthy of friendship, nor that Wendy herself does not have a college degree; because of her parents and her former residency in a more urban area, Wendy possesses a level of economic and cultural capital that H.F. can only dream of at this time in her life when living in a rural town.

Watts reinforces this discrepancy between the girls' relative levels of capital a few chapters later, when H.F. spends the night at Wendy's house. Upon her arrival at the Cook home, H.F. notices the hundreds of books that Wendy's parents have crammed onto shelves and scattered across the floor (Watts 90-91). Astounded, she tells Wendy that Wendy's family has more books than the county library (91); but when Wendy responds, "[n]ot that that's saying much," H.F. becomes newly self-conscious about the smallness of her world (91), or in other words, the limitations that her lack of capital has imposed upon her. As H.F. notes, this particular room in the Cooks' home is devoid of the fine, opulent furniture that she had imagined the family would own (91); yet the books continue to strike her as significant and foreign items, as her observation of them is tied, perhaps symbolically, to the ideal of education—and more specifically to the fact that Wendy's parents have college degrees and her father is an English professor. However, H.F.'s observations of the Cooks' residence is not confined to cultural capital, nor to what they *actually* possess. When she questions Wendy about the absence of a television in the home, for example, Wendy answers in a lighthearted way, saying that her family is strange because they prefer conversation over entertainment (95). H.F. then reflects to herself that "I've never thought about people not having a TV not because they were too poor to buy one, but because they just plain didn't want one" (95). In her world, the absence of a television, arguably one of the most common technological staples in modern homes, could be directly attributed to a lack of money or economic capital; yet the fact that the Cooks do not own a television by their own *choice* is a foreign concept to H.F. Ironically, the absence of this material possession in the Cooks' home (of their own accord) shows H.F. the ability and power to make choices for oneself through the acquisition of capital and reminds her once again of her own lack of both cultural and economic capital. This lack of capital (especially cultural) continues to impact the way H.F. perceives herself and her queerness as she privileges the urban setting—or, at least, the urban experiences of others—over her own rural upbringing and her consequent lack of exposure to queer literature and culture. In light of Wendy's love of reading books of which H.F. has never heard, for instance, H.F. refers to Bo and herself as "illiterate hicks" (71), fusing small-town slang with stereotypical notions of rural individuals as backward and uneducated, even after she has mentioned her appreciation for "book-learning" and her desire to finish high school (18). Similarly, in *Pushing On: Appalachian Resiliency in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People*, "[A] gay West Virginian reminds us that Appalachians are well-versed with stigma: 'They've been looked down upon themselves, you know, 'hillbillies' and things like that'" (Kline 34). H.F. is certainly aware of this stigma and demonstrates further self-deprecation after she and Bo have left home and she stands in a gay bookstore in Atlanta with Laney, scanning the spines for familiar names but finding only a few. H.F.'s lack of exposure not only to wider literary options in general, but to queer literature in particular, causes her to feel shame, as shown in the following exchange between her and Laney:

> "What's the matter, H.F.? Never seen naked women before?" Laney is laughing.
> "Not [. . .] not in a book like this."
> She grins. "Well, I guess y'all don't have a queer bookstore down in Hooterville, do you?" (Watts 229)

In this exchange, we can see H.F.'s realization of her limited knowledge of queer literature, a form of cultural capital. We can also see the good-natured though hurtful disdain that Laney demonstrates in return as she refers to H.F.'s rural hometown as "Hooterville." A few moments later, as she is processing the exchange, H.F. goes on to defend herself to Laney, even while she admits her shame at this lack of cultural capital: "'I need to read more. I'm downright ashamed of how ignorant I am. Except for homework, I ain't cracked a book since I read my way through all the Nancy Drew books in the Morgan Elementary School Library" (Watts 232-33). With the mention of "homework," H.F. once again references her commitment to her education and the accrual of cultural capital; yet within this new and urban space, even that commitment is not enough to bolster her confidence or to propel her beyond the limiting consciousness of her lower-class standing. It may be, in fact, that the contrast between her rural identity and experience, and this foreign urban space, only heightens that consciousness for H.F. and causes her, as Halberstam suggests (37), to devalue her life back in rural Morgan. Furthermore, it may cause her to view her experiences and relationships in her hometown as insignificant or inferior to everything that worldlier individuals like Laney, Dee, and Chantal, or more educated people like the Cooks, can see and learn in the city.

Unlike H.F., however, Bo no longer submits so easily to the metronormative mindset, nor does he let his relative lack of capital prevent him from dreaming of bettering himself. A little over halfway through the novel, the two teenagers arrive in Atlanta, just in time for rush-hour traffic (Watts 191). The congestion on the roadway gives them time to observe their surroundings, which are quite different from their home back in Morgan. At one point, they move past a hotel that, according to H.F., "must have 20 stories" (Watts 195). The two of them guess the price of a night in the upscale facility, with Bo declaring, "Well, someday I'm gonna stay in a hotel like that. I'll wake up in the mornin' and order eggs Benedict from room service. I don't know for sure what eggs Benedict is, but I reckon I'll find out" (196). Bo is similar to H.F. in that he readily acknowledges his lack of worldly experience, but unlike her, he does not allow it to define his worldview or limit his capacity to dream—at least, not in this moment. When H.F. responds with cynicism, telling Bo that "They don't build them hotels for people like you and me" (196), once again demonstrating her constant awareness of her socioeconomic status, he calls her "the most negative person I ever met in my life. There ain't a thing to stop me from bein' one of them people loungin' around in that there hotel. This is America" (196). With his dreams of a wealthier, and more sophisticated, lifestyle, Bo, at first glance, seems to uphold the value that metronormative thinking places on urban spaces; however, this is a far cry from earlier in the novel, when he shared H.F.'s fatalistic worldview, bemoaning the competitive nature of the UK scholarship and the seeming unlikeliness for him to win it (33). In this way, Bo may actually subvert the concept of metronormativity to some extent, as he no longer views himself as a "sad and lonely" queer or "'stuck'" in a dangerous, homophobic setting because of his rural and lower-class origins (Halberstam 36). Though he still expresses a longing to leave his rural hometown, he is no longer confined by his lack of social and cultural capital; in fact, he has stated his plans to accrue these forms of capital, despite his upbringing in rural poverty, and make a life in which he can pursue his dreams of music school and find happiness and liberation in ways that are meaningful to him.

Issues of class and capital also figure prominently in Fenton Johnson's short story "Bad Habits," as the author uses color and visual contrast in one of the story's scenes to show the discrepancy of capital between Nick Handley, a single, twenty-six-year-old man and closeted homosexual, and his older unmarried sister Frances, a nurse and the owner of the farm that Nick oversees. In this scene, Nick and the men he has hired to help him around the farm are sitting around a tree stump, playing a card game and smoking cigarettes (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 94-95), when Frances shows up unexpectedly "in her hospital whites, picking her way across the mud, and behind her, this scarlet

BMW" ("Bad Habits" 95). Indeed, her pristine work uniform stands in stark opposition to the "muck" (96) and tobacco stains (97) of her brother's world—a world that she owns. From these details in Johnson's text, we can infer that Nick's role, in which he and the other men do the manual labor around the farm, is associated with crude and dirty imagery.

Frances' role, on the other hand, whereby she carries out what is implied to be a more stable and respectable job as a nurse, is tied to a more ambiguous symbolism. Although the imagery of white evokes ideas of purity or innocence, which Johnson later reiterates when he refers to her as "clean and white as the angel of God" (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 96), the scarlet car may suggest themes of transgression or worldliness on Frances' part, especially when Paul Carter, one of the laborers and Nick's secret lover, suggests that she obtained the car from "[s]ome sugar daddy" (96). When Frances informs Paul that she is borrowing the car from Lexington realtor George Sikes, whom she treated for a sprained wrist, it is implied that Frances is responsible for breaking up George's marriage:

> "I'm curious as to what his wife would say to that offer," Paul Carter says.
> "He's getting a divorce," Frances says.
> "And here's his nurse to help make it final," Paul Carter says. (96)

Of course, we could view these visual differences as mere differences of personality or character between the siblings; however, the repeated mentions of the "mud" (95) or "muck" (96) of the farm—Nick's place of employment—and the whiteness of Frances' work uniform tie these images to the specific type of work in which each of them is involved. Of the two jobs, Frances' work in the medical field seems to hold privilege over Nick's manual labor. Moreover, as Frances tells Nick and the other men, she treated George Sikes, a realtor from Lexington, for a sprained wrist and believes she has found an opportunity to sell the farm (96), revealing that, of the two siblings, she has more of a head for the financial side of things.

Frances' new goal becomes a source of contention between her and Nick, who, unlike her, has no desire to leave the farm and move to a city; yet the difference in class and capital for the two siblings has ensured that the playing field between them is unequal. As Frances tells Nick, the farm is hers (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 96) and to do with as she pleases. Even Nick realizes this: "[T]welve years older than [him], she had the job and the salary and the nest egg to buy out the farm and so allow their mother to keep up appearances through her long and expensive dying" (96). Though Nick works hard himself, it is Frances' job as a nurse—a job that, unlike his, required her to go to school and further her education—that has yielded more economic *and* cultural capital. Frances' financial situation is significantly better than her brother's and has thus given her more power and opportunity in her life.

Despite the uneven playing field, however, Frances desires to share some of this power and opportunity with her younger brother. When Nick later snaps at her to "lay off of me," she tells him, "I'm not laying *on* you. I'm just trying to help you break a bad habit, which in this particular case is farming" (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 99). With this remark, Frances reveals her true assessment of Nick's job as a farmer and his desire to keep living in the country—namely, that they are holding him back from happiness and fulfillment. As she says, "I don't want to sit around watching my brother growing old alone. Why would a woman take up with a man with no money and four hundred acres of knobs dragging him down?" (100). Though she seemingly fails (or neglects) to realize that her brother is not attracted to women, Frances nonetheless moves toward a metronormative mindset as she privileges the ideal of the city and the opportunities she believes it can afford over the lonely, unmarried lives that she and Nick have made for themselves in this rural setting.

Despite his sister's pleas, Nick continues to resist her reasoning and, in fact, subverts this metronormative attitude. According to her logic, Nick would be far more satisfied if he were to move to the city, as he would hypothetically be freer to express himself and openly act upon his sexual desires. However, in a later scene, Johnson offers readers a glimpse into Nick's thoughts, wherein Nick reflects upon his adolescent guilt over his first sexual encounter with Paul Carter (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 101). At that young age, he had contemplated suicide, but once his father died, he had to take over the farm, a monumental task that, ironically, prevented him from killing himself because it gave him no time to think further about doing it (101). He reasons that in an urban setting "this would change" and that, yes, he would be free in the city, "free as a jaybird, nothing to live for but himself" (101). While this remark and imagery seem to support the mindset of metronormativity and its ideals of happiness and liberation for individuals like Nick, within the same sentence he turns the concept sharply on its head: "Any job he found [. . .] would turn him loose at five o'clock, free as a jaybird, nothing to live for but himself, *nothing but time and conscience on his hands [. . .] he is afraid of himself*" (Johnson, "Bad Habits" 101; my emphasis). The freedom, the life without demands, that the city could theoretically offer Nick would only leave him back in that dark place of self-loathing and despair, as the typical forty-hour workweek associated with more mainstream office jobs would leave him too much time with his thoughts, and too much opportunity to ruminate on his sexual identity—an identity with which he has never come to terms and about which he still carries immense shame. Frances is right when she suggests that the farm is holding him back; it is holding him back from the most self-destructive and self-harming act he could possibly commit. The farm has become Nick's coping mechanism, a twisted sort of refuge. While the denial and constant activity of the farm may not be the healthiest way for him to relate to his sexuality, this rural setting, with all its hardships and demands, has kept him alive from his adolescence until now. In this sustenance he has found in farming, Nick's desire to remain in the country certainly subverts metronormative expectations, as he shows it to be more than a desire, but also a true *need* for his own safety, to stay within the rural setting.

Another of Johnson's characters, Raphael Hardin, complicates metronormative expectations in the novel *Scissors, Paper, Rock*. In the book's chapter of the same name, Raphael has returned to his family's home in Kentucky, after years in San Francisco. Though he has recently been diagnosed with HIV, he has yet to disclose it to his family and instead spends the greater part of this chapter reflecting upon his first time away from his small hometown and the way in which he feels out of place amongst his relatives now. In fact, it was Raphael's mother, Rose Ella, who urged him to go to California in the first place (Johnson, *Scissors* 141). Similar to Frances in "Bad Habits," she privileged the idea of the city over that of the small town, at least for her son, as she told her husband, "[i]t's no place for this one [Raphael] around here" (*Scissors* 141).

That reality of otherness has always held true for Raphael, but it is exacerbated now by his years in an urban setting and the social capital that he accrued as a member of the community of queer friends that he found in San Francisco, as "[e]ach passing year [he] grew more distant from these parties, as he grew away from this place" (Johnson, *Scissors* 141). The passage of time and the increasing experience that he has gained within an urban space sets him apart from his relatives. Johnson also goes on to describe Raphael's clothing style as distinctive from that of his brothers and father and says that "[a]mong these country men he *was* the city boy, in city clothes and city ways [. . .] as out of place as he himself had once been on city streets" (141). There is no mention of Raphael's financial situation in this chapter; Johnson does not make it clear that Raphael is any wealthier, economically, than his family after his time spent on the West Coast. Nevertheless, he is defined by a sense of otherness in relation to his relatives, whether by Rose Ella calling him "city boy" (140-41), his brother Joe Ray addressing him (and their sister Elizabeth) as "you Californians" (145), or his father Tom proclaiming that Raphael came back from the city as "a damned hippie" (141). What Johnson *does* make clear in these characters' perceptions of Raphael is that he is different, not just by nature or personality (as Rose Ella implied when she said that the small town was no place for him [141]), but due to his life in the city and his membership of the queer community. In this way, Raphael has experiences that his biological family do not share, and it is not only his queer identity, but also the social capital he has accrued as a result of his urban life, that makes him different from them.

At the other end of that spectrum, however, Nick Handley shares a similar sense of otherness when he and Frances arrive at the Hardins' dinner party. Although the two siblings were distinguished from one another by the nature of their respective jobs and the discrepancy between each of their accrual of capital in "Bad Habits," *Scissors*, *Paper*, *Rock* shows both Nick and Frances residing near the bottom of the community's social ladder as they show up in Nick's "battered farm truck" (*Scissors* 145)—a far cry from the BMW that Frances borrowed from George Sikes in Johnson's previous text ("Bad Habits" 95-96)—and Tom accuses them of coming just for a free meal (*Scissors* 145). Though she is not nearly as direct as her husband, even Rose Ella others them as she expresses pity "for them out there on that poor little farm" (*Scissors* 137). Rose Ella may not possess the level of social capital that Raphael does, but her comment here seems to suggest that she and her family hold more economic capital, at the least, than the Handleys. Similar to her remarks about Raphael being a city boy, Rose Ella's sympathy effectively places Nick and Frances as outsiders amongst the rest of the Hardin family and guests.

Once again, Johnson draws distinct contrasts between characters to reveal issues of class and capital in the text; however, unlike "Bad Habits," in which he uses that contrast to distinguish the Handley siblings from one another, he uses it ultimately to highlight the similarities between Nick and Raphael and subvert the metronormative mindset. As events in the chapter continue to unfold and Nick and Raphael interact, Johnson presents the former man as the lonely farmer, who has spent years repressing his sexuality in the rural setting (*Scissors* 146, 167-68), and the latter as the worldly, experienced man who is, for all intents and purposes, comfortable with himself and his sexuality (168), even if he has not yet formally come out to his family. As representative figures of rural and urban environments, Nick and Raphael seem to support metronormative attitudes; yet, as Johnson shows, they share more similarities than one would think at first glance. For example, Raphael observes Nick upon his and Frances' arrival at the dinner party and is "struck by a newer, deeper sense of recognition [. . . He] knew this apartness" (146). For all his urban experience and the social capital that it has yielded him, Raphael can relate directly to Nick, a man who seems to lack such capital at this moment in the text.

However, as we see several pages later, the primary difference between Raphael and Nick is not necessarily that one is more urban and the other is more rural, or that one possesses social capital and the other possesses none, but that Raphael has simply accrued *more* of that capital. Take their subsequent conversation, for instance, when Nick says, "I'll bet you seen it all" (Johnson, *Scissors* 159), and Raphael responds that he has seen "Nothing you don't see here in Jessup County. Just different, *and more of it*" (159; my emphasis). When he admonishes Nick not to believe that the same things don't happen in their Kentucky hometown, Nick tells him, "I know that. I know that myself" (159). With this admission, Nick once again subverts the ideals of metronormativity, as he shows that rural queer individuals can, indeed, participate in sexual encounters and possess their own unique experiences, affirming Halberstam's observation that "we might find that rural and small-town environments nurture elaborate sexual cultures even while sustaining surface social and political conformity" (35). Moreover, Raphael deflates the idealized image of the happy urban queer to some extent. He shows that his social capital is not the result of seeing and experiencing things that Nick, a rural gay man, has not or cannot, but simply of seeing and experiencing *more* of those things. Similarly, Jeff Mann, a professor at Virginia Tech, writes of his youthful migration from West Virginia to Washington, D.C. as follows: "I taught at George Washington University during the fall semester of 1985, was dismayed by the coldness of the faculty, the mercenary obsessions of city dwellers [. . .] The gay world had disappointed me, so I returned to the only place I knew" (10). Similar to Raphael, Mann had subscribed to the metronormative belief that migrating to a larger urban space outside his Appalachian region would be his only chance at happiness and liberation, only to be disappointed by the materialism and prejudice against rurality that he encountered in the city. In Raphael's case, it is illness, rather than disappointment, that has brought him back to his rural hometown; even so, he still does not necessarily demolish the metronormative mindset, since Johnson continues to refer to him as the "man of experience" (*Scissors* 167-68). Despite that "experience," and his accrual of cultural capital as a result, Raphael nevertheless shares the same rural Appalachian background and upbringing as Nick—after this conversation, he and Nick still manage to strip that mindset of some of its luster as they show that rural and urban queer individuals may have more in common than one might initially assume, though the urban queer may ultimately possess more experience and social capital than their rural counterpart.

Johnson's and Watts' characters reveal the complex struggle of being queer *and* rural Appalachian and how these intersecting identities are further complicated by issues of social standing and the burden of metronormative beliefs. Queer identity is often fraught with difficulty and stigma, but in combination with an Appalachian upbringing or identity, the individual's struggle may be complicated by social class and the lack or acquisition of capital. H.F. and Bo show how lower levels of economic or social capital can further ostracize queer individuals in the rural community, when these individuals may already be dealing with the stigmatization of their sexuality;

Nick and Frances additionally show that class differences and discrepancies of capital can occur even in the closest of family relationships. Even so, some of the characters examined in this essay also subvert the expectations of the metronormative mindset. Indeed, Bo illustrates the ability to aspire toward a more fulfilling life in the city, even as he breaks free of the perception of himself as an unhappy rural queer. Raphael shows that, despite the social capital that he has accrued, life in an urban setting can challenge a rural queer's perception of themselves and their identities, as in H.F.'s case. It can also lead to further, rather than diminished, social and mental isolation, as Johnson implies it might have done for Nick had the "Bad Habits" protagonist migrated to the city. These texts, with the complex socioeconomic dynamics and sexual identities of their characters, subvert metronormative beliefs through their suggestion that urban life is not always the antidote for the suffering of rural queers and that remaining in the rural setting, despite its challenges and heartaches, is often a valid choice.

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Biography

Kristen LeFevers is a graduate teaching associate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She earned her MA in English at Marshall University in her home state of West Virginia, where she taught courses in first-year composition and Appalachian literature. Her research interests include Appalachian culture, language, and foodways, and she has presented her work on the region's dialects and identities at several events, including the Appalachian Studies Association Conference. She is currently studying for her PhD in English with a concentration in Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics and serves as a PhD representative for the Graduate Students of English.

Queer Landscapes:

New England Female Farmers and Masculinity in the Midwest

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Abstract

This article outlines expressions of female masculinity in writing from rural New England. An initial framing of the enclosed New England garden as symbolic of feminine normalization allows for an analysis of two forms of subversion of this norm in regional short stories from the nineteenth century. The article begins with an exploration of the figure of the female farmer (and the resulting rejection of the traditional True Woman) in short stories by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. It continues with a comparison to newly emerging depictions of the masculine New Woman symbolically situated in the open expanse of the Midwest, as found in Willa Cather's short story "Tommy, the Unsentimental." Such a comparative line of questioning enables deeper reflection on regional literary expressions of female masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century.

Keywords Female Masculinity; Inversion; Mary E. Wilkins Freeman; Nature; New England Regionalism; Sarah Orne Jewett; "Tommy, the Unsentimental"; Willa Cather.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.4

The French figure of the female *flâneuse*, embodied by people such as George Sand, reveals the connection between female masculine freedom and the modern city streets during the nineteenth century. Likewise, in the United States, the traditional emphasis on feminine domesticity began to be increasingly questioned by women who aspired to differing ideals of autonomy; a gendered rebellion that often played out against the backdrop of the cityscape.[1] From Plato and Aristotle to the Middle Ages, female bodies have been traditionally representative of the private realm, the natural world, passivity, and the biological immanence of reproduction, with male bodies affiliated with public culture and reason. This gender dichotomy was increasingly complicated in the nineteenth century, evolving toward new figurations of cultural femaleness in which the feminine "True Woman" of the early and mid-nineteenth century came under threat from changing attitudes to the politicization of gender. As the more masculine figure of the "New Woman" strode out to take her place in what had been previously considered the male domain (through economic independence, politics, and suffrage), she served to transcend traditional spaces of femininity: private domestic space, flower gardens, and the ever-symbolic hearth.[2]

Jack Halberstam's quintessential *Female Masculinity* (1998) catalogues the diverse gender expressions of masculine women across history (and thus the construction of masculinity itself), reimagining masculinity through queer and female bodies. With her bobbed hair, independent spirit, and masculine-tailored attire, the fin-de-siècle New Woman is often thought to be an early queer figure, and the city her domain.[3] An intrinsic product of modernity and civilization, she is an exponent of urban contexts, and thus her placement within agrarian locales appears somewhat curious. The following article will nonetheless underline the depiction of two forms of the rural "New Woman" in various short stories by three nineteenth-century writers: Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Willa Cather. It will move chronologically from a contextual framing of the traditional True Woman—as symbolized through the feminized enclosed flower gardens of New England—toward the figure of the female farmer, arguably a form of New Woman found in the rural US East. It will extend further outward, both figuratively and geographically, via a close reading of Cather's depiction of the New Woman in the rural Midwest in "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (1896). Cather's story is not only an example of emerging questions of queer sexual identity in regards to the New Woman, it also contains references to queer sexual desire. Such a line of questioning will provide a deeper understanding of regional literary expressions of female masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century, moving the argument away from the urban New Woman as the only turn-of-the-century figure of queer female masculinity in the United States and therefore adding to criticism on the myriad transgressive gender expressions from the period.

"Planting potaters . . . jest like a man": The Female Farmer

Flowers have traditionally been gendered feminine in Western culture, while domesticity (including floriculture) is also considered a conventionally feminine domain. From the traditional gender roles delineated in gardening and housekeeping manuals to the constructed notion of separate spheres, the horticultural practice of an enclosed New England flower garden was commonly associated with the figure of the feminine True Woman in the early nineteenth century. In 1966, the critic Barbara Welter derived the social concept of the "Cult of True Womanhood," in which the middle-class True Woman was considered sentimental and submissive, pious, and pure. Certainly, by the early nineteenth century, the work role of domestic labor that had previously determined a woman's lot had now come to define her very "womanhood," one demarcated by traditional "feminine" virtues. New Hampshire-born Sarah Josepha Hale, writer and editor of *Godey's Ladies Book* from 1837 to 1877, wrote that young women should "cultivate those virtues which only can be represented by the fairest flowers" (v). The early nineteenth century thus drew a clear connection between the feminine woman of what Welter calls the "Cult of True Womanhood" and the beauty of a bloom. J. Samaine Lockwood points out how, more specifically, the region of New England was "repeatedly personified" by the end of the nineteenth century "as feminine and spinsterly" (6). The flowers of a New England garden were reflective of this, assemblages of symmetrical borders, enclosed by high walls, and planted according to popular taste in the early nineteenth century: the "old-fashioned flowers our grandmothers loved," such as phlox, larkspur, pansies and hollyhocks (Thaxter 44-45).

While the flower garden was indeed considered part of the feminine sphere, the rougher activities of vegetable gardening and farming were thought to be of the masculine domain. The delineation between the feminine flower garden and the masculine vegetable garden is made clear in Jane Wells Webb's *Gardening for Ladies* (1840), in which the author notes that "whatever doubts may be entertained as to the practicability of a lady attending to the culture of culinary vegetables and fruit-trees, none can exist respecting her management of the flower garden, as that is pre-eminently a woman's department" (qtd. in Davidoff and Hall 374). This is reflected in New England fiction, as Jewett's "A Garden Story" (1886) details how although Old Mike O'Brien is unable to take care of Miss Ann Dunning's flower garden he nevertheless "might be trusted to take the whole care of her six short rows of beans and forty hills of potatoes" (106). There is clearly a gendered distinction between flowers and vegetables in Jewett's writing, and while flowers are feminine, farming is not, meaning that masculine female farmers of New England fiction are considered "queer" in a way that often invites suspicion from the local community.

The motif of the female farmer can be found throughout US fiction. Janet M. Labrie's "The Depiction of Women's Field Work in Rural Fiction" (1993) outlines the importance of agricultural tasks and independent farming to the autonomy of female characters in novels of frontier rural life written by US women writers. Female farmers find "satisfaction" in agricultural work that is "freely chosen," and a positive connection to the landscape, with rural landscape "offer[ing] women a potential for escaping gender limitations" and removing them from "the centers of socially constructed relationships and behaviors" (Labrie 119, 120). Labrie further argues that farming allows these girls and women to "transcend [their] otherwise limiting domestic role" and that these female farmers take pleasure from the work as "a creative effort and as a method of self-enablement" through which they are able to "slip past the restrictions of the typical female role" (123, 130). While Labrie's examples are taken from early twentieth-century novels based on the frontier rather than New England, gender role-defying female farmers can be traced back even further to the regional short stories of Jewett and Freeman, published half a century earlier.

In Jewett's "Farmer Finch" (1885), the failing family farm and the subsequent threat of starvation means that Polly must leave her job as a schoolteacher to become a vegetable farmer. The pleasure she takes from the change in situation, as well as her repeated wish that she had "been a boy" ("Farmer Finch" 63), allows the narrator to outline her "queer" nature: "'I always had a great knack at making things grow, and I never should be so happy anywhere as working out-doors and handling a piece of land. I'd rather work with a hoe than a ferule any day,' and she gave the queer little laugh again" ("Farmer Finch" 64). Domesticity as the antithesis of farm work is emphasized by Polly herself, who replaces "house-keeping" with "farm-keeping" ("Farmer Finch" 65). In a further step away from traditional femininity, she becomes increasingly distant from her previous courtship with her neighbor to the point that she is "repulse[d]" by him ("Farmer Finch" 71). Polly's mother's fears concerning her daughter's rejection of the suitor are clearly based on her understanding of traditional gender values, as she tells Polly, "[a] woman's better to have a home of her own" ("Farmer Finch" 71). It is another neighbor, a woman this time, who offers Polly an alternative source of hope through the story of a woman named Serena Allen: "she run [sic] the farm, and lived well, and laid up a handsome property. She was some years older than I, but she hasn't been dead a great many years. She'd plow a piece of ground as well as a man. They used to call her Farmer Allen. She was as nice a woman as I ever knew" ("Farmer Finch" 75). Farmer Allen's transgressive masculinity is emphasized through language such as “handsome,” alongside her ability to work “as well as a man,” and Polly, excited by her own possibility to become “a boy,” readily vows to become “renowned as Farmer Finch,” choosing to farm instead of the alternative option of marriage (“Farmer Finch” 76).

Much like Farmer Allen who farmed “as well as a man,” Polly becomes increasingly less of a “woman.” She is described as having “uncommon shrewdness and business talent” and beats the men at the market with her haggling (“Farmer Finch” 81). Her body becomes more masculine, a “capital of strength,” and her hands grow bigger (“Farmer Finch” 79). The narrator’s ambiguous language both compares Polly to a man and names her as one: “[t]here never was a young man just ‘out of his time’ and rejoicing in his freedom, who went to work more diligently and eagerly than Polly Finch, and few have set their wits at work on a New England farm half so intelligently” (“Farmer Finch” 79). While “out of his time” here implies an apprentice who has completed his training and is ready to go into business, it might also be understood as Polly being “out of her time” in her refusal to adhere to the traditional gender roles of her era.[4] The ignominy of such gender transgression is underlined when the narrator notes that “some people laughed a good deal, and thought she ought to be ashamed to work on the farm like a man” (“Farmer Finch” 80-81). Social criticism does not deter Polly from her task to turn the farm around, however, and she does so with great dedication.

Polly’s masculinization enables her to position herself as the son of the family.[5] At first, any discussion of newfangled crop methods inspired by the *American Agriculturist* enrages her ailing father, who is unconvinced by her talk and angry with the exorbitance of the land she wants to sow, believing it to be “his daughter’s imprudent nonsense” (“Farmer Finch” 77).[6] However, when he sees Polly’s ability to take charge, her enthusiasm to make decisions, and her hopes to turn the fortunes of the farm around, her father grows confident: “‘Polly’s got power,’ he told himself several times that day, with great pride and satisfaction” (“Farmer Finch” 78). She discusses the farm with her father and he begins to treat her like the son to whom he was never able to pass on the farm. Instead of relying on inherited knowledge, Polly is self-educated, eventually teaching her own father in a form of gender and generational inversion. Her knowledge of new farming methods and her diligence in emulating them results in her ability to claim a stake in the landscape and achieve “power.”[7] For Jack Halberstam, masculinity is the connection between maleness and power and can be accessed through drag-king performances, butch identity, or trans identity (2). Polly’s emulation of a farmer, and thus power, emphasizes her queer subversion of the True Woman, for while she initially adopted this role to save her family from poverty, it nevertheless also allows her to achieve her repeated wish that she had “been a boy” (“Farmer Finch” 63).

If flowers are indeed feminine, Polly's loss of femininity through farming is reflected by the lack of flowers in the surrounding landscape, which is desolate with the "leafless bushes and fluffy brown tops of the dead asters and golden-rods" and the "tattered bits of blackberry vine" that grow stark against the winter sky ("Farmer Finch" 40). Nonetheless, it is ultimately the barberry bush that symbolizes the breakdown of uniform understandings of the world. Initially, Polly sees the bush as "gray and winterish," but when looked at from a different direction it is "glowing with rubies" in the evening sun ("Farmer Finch" 40). The plant symbolizes Polly's escape from binary thinking when she concludes that "[t]here are two ways of looking at more things than barberry bushes" ("Farmer Finch" 41). While this is initially understood as a message of hope in the face of poverty, it might also reflect on Polly's gender transgression in her decision to become a farmer. The sterility of the landscape, as well as its concealed berries, also represents Polly's decision to step into the boots of the farmer's son, for it underlines further how she has chosen to discontinue (or at least complicate) notions of inheritance. Polly refuses marriage and the potential promise of a future son, choosing instead to nurture the fertile earth.

The figure of the female farmer is repeated in sketches by Freeman, Jewett's acquaintance and contemporary. In "Louisa" (1890), Louisa Britton's decision to farm instead of marrying a rich local suitor queers her in the eyes of her mother, who is livid at her daughter's rejection of Jonathan Nye's courting:

> Once in a while her mother, after a furtive glance at Jonathan, engrossed in a town book, would look at her and gesticulate fiercely for her to come over, but she did not stir. Her eyes were dull and quiet, her mouth closely shut; she looked homely. Louisa was very pretty when pleased and animated, at other times she had a look like a closed flower. One could see no prettiness in her. ("Louisa" 714)

Louisa's floral femininity is replaced by the masculinity of a farmer, as she works the earth to feed her family. The odor of the farm begins to permeate her body, and she smells earthy, "[l]ike a breath from a ploughed field," her face is "as sunburnt as a boy's," and her hands are "brown and grimy with garden-mould" ("Louisa" 714). Knowing that her suitor could save her and her ailing family from abject poverty, Louisa stubbornly prefers to plant "potaters [. . .] jest like a man" or to rake hay "with the men" ("Louisa" 714, 715). Her masculine attire and departure from femininity is a direct contrast to her mother's expectations:

> Mrs. Britton had turned white. She sank into a chair. “I can’t stan’ it nohow,” she moaned. “All the daughter I’ve got.”
>
> “Don’t, mother! I ain’t done any harm. What harm is it? Why can’t I rake hay as well as a man? Lots of women do such things, if nobody round here does. (“Louisa” 715)

This example of such other women who “do such things” hints at women’s changing expectations while underlining the peculiarity of Louisa’s step from farmer’s daughter—or potential future farmer’s wife—to farmer herself. Her mother’s stricken face, her weakness as she needs to sit down, and her pained moans are all a response to the symbolic loss of her daughter (“[a]ll the daughter I’ve got”). While Labrie notes that the pleasure girls and women take in participating in active farm work depends on whether they are forced to do this field labor by their fathers or husbands, Jewett and Freeman’s female farmers Polly and Louisa farm specifically in order to *escape* marriage. Likewise, they take a certain pleasure from masculinity, undaunted by the changes in their bodies and in the ways in which they are ostracized by the community that surrounds them.

Freeman’s Mrs. King in “A Modern Dragon” (1887), on the other hand, suffers particularly deeply for her masculinity due to the opinions of her community. The “King,” one might say, of her domain, she is a farmer who “worked in the field and garden like a man” and is described by the narrator as “coarse and unwomanly” (“A Modern Dragon” 71, 72): “an odd figure, short and stout, with a masculine width of shoulders. Her calico dress cleared her thick ankles, her black hair was cut short, and she wore a man’s straw hat” (“A Modern Dragon” 63). Her masculine clothing, short hair, and unfeminine build result in her “oddness,” which inevitably ostracizes her—and as a result, her daughter Almira—from society. As the narrator notes, “[p]retty as Almira was, no Dover young man had ever paid her the slightest attention, beyond admiring looks. They were kept aloof by the peculiarities of her mother” (“A Modern Dragon” 67). This becomes clear when Almira falls in love with a local man whose mother, Mrs. Ayres, refuses to allow the match. Her disapproval is due to Mrs. King herself, and when the latter asks the former’s housemaid why, she receives the following response: “‘Wa’al, I guess it’s on account of your wearin’ your dresses half-way up to your knees, and them cowhide shoes, and that hat, and hevin’ your hair cut so short’” (“A Modern Dragon” 73).

Mrs. King’s masculinity distances her from domestic femininity and she decides to change in order to persuade Mrs. Ayres to agree to the match. The next time the Ayres family sees Mrs. King is in church, where she has considerably “feminized” herself through her clothing and a clipped-in braid. The very performance of these gestures is emphasized by the narrator, who notes that she does it in order to be seen:

> [s]he had on a decent long black dress and a neat bonnet. Her short hair had given way to a braided knot. She sat in the pew and listened solemnly to the sermon, regardless of the attention she excited. All she took pains to notice was that David Ayres and his mother were there. She made sure of that, and that they were looking at her. (Freeman, "A Modern Dragon" 74)

Mrs. King eventually worries herself to death over her daughter's unhappiness over the rejection, and Almira is only reconciled with David Ayres on her mother's deathbed. While Polly and Louisa are thus able to farm their way out of marriage, Mrs. King is forced to feminize her body in a sacrificial attempt to provide social acceptance and a betrothal for her daughter. It is only her death that enables Almira's marriage, and indeed the death of queer characters is a queer trope that spans centuries.[8] It certainly seems that masculine women for Jewett and Freeman, while powerful in their strength of body and mind, are at risk of ostracism, rejection, and death.

Constructions of Womanhood: From the New England True Woman to the New Woman of the West

Having to feminize oneself in order to be socially acceptable is a time-worn tactic. Early figurations of the New Woman, which developed throughout the nineteenth century, took the form of proto-feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose genteel aesthetic afforded them a certain amount of protection from public admonishment. Their caution was most likely a result of early attacks in the press, which continued throughout the nineteenth century. Journalists such as Harry F. Harrington wrote in "Female Education," published in *The Ladies' Companion* in 1838, that women who aspired to education were "mental hermaphrodites" and "semi women" (qtd. in Welter 173), while Edward H. Clarke argued several decades later in 1873 that educating women led to "a dropping out of maternal instincts, and an appearance of Amazonian coarseness and force," linking this to "[a]cute or chronic disease" and an "abnormal brain" (93, 92, 96).

By cultivating femininity in a conventional sense, as well as emphasizing the pious nature of their activities, this early generation of proto-feminists attempted to avoid the smear of "abnormality." However, these feminine-feminists hung on to feminine gender constructions to such an extent that for the next wave of "New Women," it became the very battlefront on which they engaged. This resulted in a new form of "New Woman" by the end of the nineteenth century, a figure who had begun to challenge what it even meant to be a woman at all. Gender, indeed, had become political, with the gender-based backlash reaching a peak by the 1880s and 1890s, as the newly *masculine* figuration of the "New Woman" stepped into the public sphere.

When one imagines the typical New Woman, it is indeed her end-of-the-century incarnation that first comes to mind. Through their expectations of social equality and independence, these bicycle-riding women in breeches overturned traditional understandings of gender, fully embracing the "New" over the "True." In the 1904 essay "The Passing of Dora," the American novelist (and contemporary of Jewett and Freeman) Margaret Deland uses the example of Charles Dickens's Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield* (1850) to mount a scathing attack on the "modern girl" who has never heard of the "silly, pretty, useless" Dora (66). Nor does she care to meet her, Deland adds, who writes of "sniff[ing] at the mention of [her], and declin[ing] to read about her" (70). Deland notes further how "[i]t is evident that the feminine ideal of which Dora was the embodiment has gone out of fashion as completely as her hoop-skirt or her shawl or her queer little poke-bonnet!" (73), going on to comment on the new "fashion": namely the "masculinity" of modern girls. She writes that the modern "Jane" has "done her best to eliminate femininity. She dresses as much like the boys as she dares; she uses their slang; she plays their games; she imitates their hare-brained pluck, their apparently stolid indifference to prettiness and daintiness; she dreads being ladylike quite as much as they do" (75). For Deland, the symbol of "Jane" is a threat to femininity, her "artificial" emulation of masculinity both undesirable and untenable (80-81). Cather's "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (1899) offers a literary example of just such a "Jane" that Deland outlines so scornfully. Much like another infamous Jane, Cather's is tied firmly to the masculine-identified West.

The West is traditionally configured as a "masculine space" in literary and cultural discourse, and the realities of frontier life meant that gender roles were notably fluid. Cather's pioneer trilogy—with its demarcation of town and farm, an often sexualized emphasis on the laboring bodies of women, and references to masculinity and queer desire—is a rich source when considering questions of queer rural space (see Lindemann and Neill). Annette Kolodny notes that the literature of US women writers published between 1630 and 1860 viewed the Western landscape as space ripe to be converted into the domesticated space of the garden. Labrie notes this motif in Cather's *O Pioneers* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), in which the land is "gardened into a domestic center" (126).[9] Cather's Ántonia is the obvious comparison to Jewett's Polly and Freeman's Louisa and Mrs. King. However, instead of treading over already-furrowed ground through a queer reading of Cather's titular character (see Adams, Fetterley, Gonzales), this article will analyze a short story by the author in which female masculinity is not just linked to the open expanse of the landscapes of the Midwest but is also compared to the New England True Woman in its depiction of sexual intimacies between women.

Michelle Ann Abate notes how "Tommy, the Unsentimental" aligns with modernist forms of queer sexuality, and indeed the figure of Tommy embodies these new conceptions of masculine women, particularly in the West. Tommy's masculinity is evident. She has been brought up by "old speculators and men of business" who have "been her advisers on many points upon which men seldom feel at liberty to address a girl" and have thus "taken her mother's place" (Cather, "Tommy" 6). This upbringing underlines Tommy's contrast to a traditional nineteenth-century middle-class American childhood in which girls were brought up within the intimate female sphere of their mother, and thus serves to question Tommy's departure from traditional "natural" concepts of womanhood.

Tommy's father has "big land interests" in Wyoming, his need to visit frequently resulting in Tommy's own increased autonomy as she is left to take care of his business, aided by the more common integration of women into public life in the West: "[p]eople rather expect some business ability in a girl there, and they respect it immensely" ("Tommy" 6). The notion of "big land" is what represents Tommy's masculinity, as expressed against the backdrop of the Midwest. Unlike the feminine, domesticated, enclosed gardens of the East, Tommy operates within the open expanse of "sun-parched bluffs" and "scorched corn fields and grazing lands" ("Tommy" 6, 7). The spatial metaphor of the landscape expands Tommy's corporeal limits and suggests the notion of pushing boundaries, whether in relation to land interests or, on a much deeper level, to gender and sexual desire. The comparison of gendered private/public space is often employed, yet here it is inarguably applicable: the Midwest allows Tommy freedom in the form of masculinity.

Like Cather herself, who masculinized her name from Wilella to "Willie," "William," or "Billy," Tommy aligns herself with a name that underlines her masculine proclivities (like Tommy, Cather adopted a masculine style, cutting her hair and wearing tailored clothing and ties). Etymologically, a "Tom" denotes a "rude, boisterous boy" while "Tomboy" has meant "wild, romping girl, girl who acts like a spirited boy" as well as "strumpet, bold or immodest woman" since the sixteenth century (*OED*). By the nineteenth century, its meaning was closer to the former than the latter, and Cather's character certainly "acts like a spirited boy." Cather describes Tommy as "of a peculiarly unfeminine mind," "logical" and oblivious to the attractions of men, taking "no particular interest in them, probably just because they were practical and sensible and thoroughly of her own kind" ("Tommy" 6). She plays whist and billiards, "distinguish[es] herself in athletics," and makes cocktails for her companions, an unfeminine activity that wins her a place in male society: "professional compounders of drinks always bowed respectfully to her as though acknowledging a powerful rival" ("Tommy" 6). Tommy is boyish, with her "lank figure of an active half grown lad" and her "shrewd face, that was so like a clever wholesome boy's" ("Tommy" 6). The terms "boy" and "half grown lad" emphasize not just her masculinity but also her youth, a factor that allows her to be masculine within the unthreatening figuration of the "tomboy." Like the Midwest itself, Tommy is "mid," in-between; a "lad," but only a "half grown" one.

Labrie writes that "women soften the wilderness" in their ability to create comfort, "with their skills at making soap, candles, quilts, clothes, homes, herbal medicines, and babies" (121). To Labrie, this contribution to frontier family life provides women with equality, however Tommy does not choose such an egalitarian path. Instead, Tommy emulates the men who surround her, choosing to ignore the women who are only interested, in Tommy's opinion, in "babies and salads" (Cather, "Tommy" 6). It is upon her return from her schooling in the East, older, and with another girl in tow, that Tommy's masculinity poses a problem to her community: "it was a bad sign when a rebellious girl like Tommy took to being sweet and gentle to one of her own sex, the worst sign in the world" ("Tommy" 7). The very Western Tommy and the very Eastern Miss Jessica are a solid contrast, the gender difference between the two women exaggerated by Cather. Unlike the masculine Tommy, Miss Jessica is "a dainty, white languid bit of a thing, who used violet perfumes and carried a sunshade" ("Tommy" 7). Miss Jessica thus emulates the New England True Woman—and her enclosed garden—through Cather's reference to the floral feminine. Tommy is baffled by Miss Jessica's genteel nature, as symbolized by the flower: "a maiden most discreet," she is modest and a shrinking violet (emphasized by her violet scent and her recoil from the sun). This modesty results in Tommy finding her difficult to read, and indeed "Tommy sometimes wondered if [Miss Jessica] were capable of having any [feelings] at all" ("Tommy" 7).

Miss Jessica does have intense feelings, however, and they are firmly directed toward Tommy. When out riding their bicycles, Tommy is cruel to Miss Jessica and the reader is allowed some insight into the latter's thoughts:

> It flashed upon Miss Jessica that Tommy was not only very unkind, but that she sat very badly on her wheel and looked aggressively masculine and professional when she bent her shoulders and pumped like that. But just then Miss Jessica found it harder than ever to breathe, and the bluffs across the river began doing serpentines and skirt dances, and more important and personal considerations occupied the young lady. (Cather, "Tommy" 7)

Any keen cyclist will be quick to note that a ride in what Cather describes as the "sickening, destroying heat" of the Midwestern United States wearing heavy nineteenth-century skirts would make anyone out of breath ("Tommy" 7). Nonetheless, Miss Jessica's breathlessness in the face of Tommy's "aggressively masculine" posture on the bicycle implies more lust than lassitude ("Tommy" 7). The serpentine nature of the river suggests temptation and the "skirt dances" the figure of Salomé. Miss Jessica is flustered by her attraction to Tommy, the use of the word "pumped" teasingly sexual. Tommy notes Miss Jessica's romantic inclinations as she remarks the following to a friend: "I think the lack of romance in the escapade did her up about as much as anything; she is essentially romantic. If we had been on fiery steeds bespattered with foam I think she would have made it" ("Tommy" 7). Here we can find the New England modest violet, withering in the Western sun, contrasted with Tommy's masculine "indifference." Tommy's inability or lack of interest in Miss Jessica's "romantic" nature is underlined in the title of the story. She is, in fact, "sentimental" (a word closely tied to femininity), while Tommy, as clearly stated by the title, is not. "Tommy, the Unsentimental" thus underlines the clear distinctions between a feminine "violet" from the East as compared to a more masculine "New Woman" from the Midwest. The opposition between East and West is stated clearly, as not only do Tommy's companions consider the East "a sign of weakening," the vast rugged expanse of the West is also directly contrasted to the feminine floral culture emphasized in New England.

Miss Jessica's eligibility and unmarried status are underlined through the repeated emphasis on "Miss," in a way that the singular title "Tommy" avoids. Although the story concludes with a heterosexual marriage plot, in which Miss Jessica is linked to Tommy's acquaintance Jay Ellington, there are clues throughout the story as to the queer subtext. When Tommy assumes Miss Jessica's feelings for Jay, for example, she mutters to herself, "[w]ell, your kind have the best of it generally, but in little affairs of this sort my kind come out rather strongly. We're rather better at them than at dancing. It's only fair, one side shouldn't have all" (Cather, "Tommy" 7).

Another clue as to Tommy's queer "nature" might again be found in her name. Tommy was born Theodosia, a potential reference to Theodosia Burr Shepherd (1845-1906), also known as the "Pioneer Seed-grower" or the "Flower Wizard of California." Shepherd is considered the first female horticulturalist of the United States, her specialty being floral hybrids. Cather's choice of name may therefore be a subtle reference to the unnatural process of hybridization in the context of the potential masculine invert. By the end of the nineteenth century, the ideas and values of these New Women were increasingly subject to ridicule in the press, with medical and psychological discourses attacking their rejection of femininity through the vocabulary of "natural" and "unnatural." Sexologists such as Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal and his disciple Richard von Krafft-Ebing created the notion of the "congenital invert" or "urning." In a description similar to Deland's "Jane," Krafft-Ebing noted the invert's exterior masculinization through cutting her hair, dressing "in male fashion," and participating in "manly sports" (264). She is a "rival" to boys, "preferring the rocking-horse, playing at soldiers etc., to dolls and other girlish occupations" (Krafft-Ebing 264). This "unnatural" figure was used to scare women away from any women's rights activism, as her existence thrust relationships between women that had been previously presumed innocent into a new spotlight of suspicion. Instead of presenting the role of Tommy as "unnatural," however, Cather's sketch serves to humanize her.

For Cather, both the East and flowers are used to express femininity, whether for men or for women. While Miss Jessica is described as a "violet," the character of Jay Ellington Harper, her eventual spouse, is communicated through the flower in his buttonhole. Jay is a Wildean "cad," with "charming methods" and "inclinations," who "had made a sad mess of his college career, and had spent too much money and gone at too giddy a pace down East" (Cather, "Tommy" 6). Tellingly, he wears a "white carnation in his buttonhole," symbolic of Oscar Wilde's own green-petaled statement ("Tommy" 6). Tommy tells Jay to marry Miss Jessica in what seems to be a marriage of convenience, or a "lavender marriage," and he does so, even if he is unhappy about it: "Jay Ellington Harper dropped into a chair and turned a shade whiter. 'Theodosia, what do you mean? Don't you remember what I said to you last fall, the night before you went to school? Don't you remember what I wrote you—'" ("Tommy" 7). What is the reader supposed to understand from this m-dash? Presumably that Jay is in love with Tommy. However, if one considers the white carnation in his buttonhole, a glaring reminder of Jay's "inclinations," it might be suggested that this epistolary revelation was a confession of homosexuality, with Tommy replying as follows: "we have been playing a nice little game, and now it's time to quit. One must grow up sometime" ("Tommy" 7). As Jay goes to propose marriage to Miss Jessica, his carnation is left crumpled on the floor. When Tommy picks it up, she "bit[es] her lip" in a gesture of silence that symbolizes the increasing difficulties of expressing queerness. Here queerness takes the form of gender subversion, as illustrated by Jay's conclusion, when he wearily remarks to Tommy, "You almost made a man of even me," to which Tommy replies, "Well, I certainly didn't succeed" ("Tommy" 7).[10]

Emerging Queer Expression: From New England Marriages to Masculine Masquerade

"Tommy, the Unsentimental" is a story of queer desire and gender subversion, an exploration of both female masculinity and male femininity through the use of rural space and, more specifically, the flowers that can be found in it. Nevertheless, Cather was wary of depicting blatant homosexuality in her writing. The reason for this can be found in a 1908 letter to Cather from Sarah Orne Jewett. The letter underlines the clear transition from so-called feminine writing to a more "masculine" kind, and the significant generational shift it signifies. It also highlights Jewett's connection to femininity in her understanding of desire between women, as the author was curious as to why Cather felt the need to hide behind a masculine-signifying narrator:

> [W]ith what deep happiness and recognition I have read the "McClure" story,—night before last I found it with surprise and delight. It made me feel very near to the writer's young and loving heart. The lover is as well done as he could be when a woman writes in the man's character,—it must always, I believe, be something of a masquerade. I think it is safer to write about him as you did about the others, and try not to be he! And you could almost have done it as yourself—a woman could love her in that same protecting way—a woman could even care enough to wish to take her away from such a life, by some means or other. (*Letters* 246-47)

The "McClure' story" is "On the Gulls' Road," published in 1908, in which Cather's narrator falls in love with a woman [he] meets on the boat from Italy. The narrator is known as the "Ambassador," implying [his] role as representative of something else, potentially a female protagonist passing as a man.[11] Cather here marks the shift in attitudes toward female masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though she was indebted to writers like Jewett (her mentor while she lived in Boston), she nevertheless publicly distanced herself from "feminine" characters in her preference for male narrators (and later also from Jewett's own "confined" work; see Woodress). Sharon O'Brien notes how Cather "had to resort to male masks," because she "never completely freed herself from male constructions of femininity" ("The Thing Not Named" 596). Heather Love suggests that Cather's "virulent misogyny" (166) was born from what Love calls the "labor pains of a newly public 'homosexual identity'" (92). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls Cather an "effeminophobic bully," noting that she had publicly excoriated Oscar Wilde's "reprobated, putatively feminine love of artifice" (167).

Was Cather's need to use such a mask indeed due to changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality in late nineteenth-century New England society and her attempt to freely write about desire for women without fear of retribution? It certainly seems so, since as the masculine "New Woman" replaced the feminized "True Woman" it became less and less possible for women to love each other "in that same protecting way," as Jewett puts it, in literature (*Letters* 247). It seems that Cather was unable to write of love between women in the way that Jewett—a woman from an earlier generation of writers—was only suggesting, implying the growing anxieties surrounding such desire. It was no longer possible to be explicit, an idea expressed by Cather herself as she writes of the "inexplicable presence of the thing not named" in her own writing ("The Novel Démeublé" 6). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that Cather used this "masquerade" precisely to "question her precursor's more utopian association of women and nature" (197), while Melissa Homestead writes that "Cather and [her partner Edith] Lewis lived in a different historical era from Fields and Jewett, one in which love between women was labeled as deviant and pathological and in which lesbians could be subjected to discrimination and brutal repression" (27).

Nonetheless, these writers still overlapped in their publication dates, and while Cather's correspondence shows her struggling with her own sexual feelings, Fields and Jewett were in an openly loving relationship until Jewett's death in 1909, only a year after the publication of "On the Gulls' Road." Homestead writes that it would be "a mistake to read, in circular fashion, the absence of literary representations of romantic love between women in Cather's fiction back onto Cather's life as evidence that she was afflicted with shame and lived a secret life in the closet" (27). Cather's relationship with Edith Lewis from 1908 to 1947 was known to many: "Cather and Lewis's relationship was open and visible to their biological families, their professional colleagues, and their circles of friends and acquaintances" (Homestead 21). Nevertheless, Cather was clearly anxious about portraying such desires openly, and thus her queer characters are either concealed, masked, or suffer an unhappy ending.

Fields and Jewett's tolerated coupledom implies that the acceptability of middle-class female relationships in New England accordingly hinged on their perceived femininity, with the notion that women were able to caress one another under the pretext that it would not extend beyond that into a sexual relationship. The emphasis on the "femininity" of New England is derived from the economic and social specificities of the region in the nineteenth century. Jennifer Bailey notes that while "[m]ale New England was the provincial utopia of Emerson and Thoreau [. . . w]hen the cultural and commercial world ebbed away, it became a woman's world by default" (284). This "woman's world" (and thus a lack of men) resulted in the development of intimacies between women at a pace different to the masculine-identified West, and the domestic arrangement of the New England (or Boston) marriage was intrinsic to its regional connection. If a woman began to dress and act in a masculine way, this changed the nature of such intimacies. A feminine woman, even if she was living with another woman, even if their letters were loving, even if they wanted to be buried together, was thus beyond suspicion. Critic

Lillian Faderman writes that Jewett's letter to Cather "must have made Cather blush—but Jewett probably would not have known what she was blushing about" (202). While such a claim delineates the necessary performative femininity practiced by women such as Jewett, the assumption that Jewett, in her sexual naïveté, would "not have known" is thoroughly disproven by her use of sensual language in myriad letters and diaries.[12]

Jewett's relationship with Cather has been explored by various Cather biographers: Judith Fryer, Hermione Lee, Sharon O'Brien, and James Woodress write about the friendship between both women and the impact this had on the latter's writing. Nevertheless, in both the expanded version of the preface entitled "Miss Jewett" and in "148 Charles Street," which is contained in the 1936 volume *Not Under Forty*, Cather states that Jewett "confined herself" (91) to her depictions of New England life within the narrow context of a short story, her "little volumes" for "a limited audience" (92). However, it is arguable that New England writers such as Jewett and Freeman, in their general emphasis on femininity, actually protected themselves from the glaring light (or Midwestern sun?) that shone on intimacies between women due to the masculinity of those like Tommy (and Cather herself). In Jewett and Freeman, therefore, femininity allows queer desire space to grow, as undetected and protected as a violet, as well as providing shelter from changing assumptions about intimacies between women. Jewett's Polly and Freeman's Louisa stand alone, masculine farmers who nevertheless strive to avoid marriage and who take pleasure in their own autonomy.

In order to fully understand the alternative roots of contemporary queer and lesbian identity, it is essential to take gender into question. Thus, while the notion of a separate female sphere in the nineteenth century has been rightly questioned by critics including Kathryn Kent (3-5) and Sharon Marcus (30-31), it does allow one to analyze the emphasis on womanhood and femininity in New Englandly writing that allows for such queer nuances to blossom. A more comprehensive study of queerness in rural America might face inwards rather than outwards, toward the enclosed private gardens of feminine New England rather than masculine-identified public space, whether in the Midwest or New England itself. The rural settings of Jewett, Freeman, and Cather allow for the symbolic potential of nature to question nineteenth-century understandings of "unnatural" gender and sexuality, while also underlining the safety of concealing specific desires within the protective arms of femininity. However, while masculine women are shown to lose their lovers like Tommy, be ostracized like Polly, be shamed by their family like Louisa, or even die like Mrs. King, they are nevertheless depicted as the heroines (or perhaps heroes) of their own stories.

Notes

[1] For more on how domesticity was extended by publicly-minded women into civic housekeeping as well as women's clubs, see Sarah Deutsch's *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston* (Oxford UP, 2000) and Christine Stansell's *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York*, 1789–1860 (Knopf, 1986).

[2] Before constructing an argument using terms such as "woman," "female," and "feminine," it is necessary to define each term. While "male" and "female" are no longer straightforward operable categories, they are nevertheless useful terms for a study of nineteenth-century writers who operated within strictly gendered modes. While I considered using the terms "AFAB" or "womxn," I eventually decided to use the term "woman" when discussing the writers under consideration who were assigned female at birth in an attempt to remain as close to nineteenth-century vocabulary as possible. These writers and the characters they created are understood through historical conceptions of "womanhood": whether "New Women" or "True Women," during a period in which notions of gender representation were undergoing significant change. This study consequently aims to avoid essentialist notions of womanhood but instead points out its very constructed nature, the words "man" and "woman" joining "masculine" and "feminine" as socially determined and historically contingent signifiers.

[3] I use the term queer instead of lesbian throughout the text for both critical and historical reasons. The official entry of the term "queer" in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as denoting same-sex attraction was made as late as 1913, in which it is defined as "[a]t variance with what is usual or normal; differing in some odd way from what is ordinary; odd; singular; strange; whimsical; as, a queer story or act," "[m]ysterious; suspicious [and] questionable" and "homosexual." Jewett wrote in a diary entry from January 1872 that the presence of her intimate friend Kate Birckhead gave her "the queerest feeling" (n.p.). By the 1890s, Cather was calling *herself* "queer" in letters to (or about) her lover Louise Pound (Lindemann 12). To Marilee Lindemann, Cather's use of such a term was a "private, terrified [act] of self-naming" (12). This marks the contrast between portrayals of New Englandly queerness and Cather's apparent anxious relationship with herself at the end of the nineteenth century.

[4] This might also be an indication of queer time, namely Polly's refusal to commit to heteronormative teleology (marriage, for example), which queers her and casts her out of normative time. See also Tommy's comments in Jewett's "Tommy, the Unsentimental," where she is described as a "half grown lad" (6), later telling Jay that "[o]ne must grow up sometime" (7). For more on notions of queer time see Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005).

[5] Labrie notes that several female characters in US novels written by women happily take on the role of farmer's son: Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical Laura in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), as well as characters in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925), Hope Williams Sykes's *Second Hoeing* (1935), and Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* (1935).

[6] The *American Agriculturalist* was an extremely successful magazine and was in print from 1842 until 1921. For more on the history of the publication, see Mott (728).

[7] Both Polly and Louisa face difficulties and objections from their male relatives. While Polly's father is merely initially skeptical of her ideas, Louisa's sick grandfather literally unearths her carefully planted potato crop.

[8] The symbolism of the "dead lesbian," initially inspired by French novels, was

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used increasingly throughout twentieth- and twenty-first century lesbian writing, continuing with the contemporary “Dead Lesbian Syndrome”/”Bury Your Gays” trope. For more on these tropes, see Liz Millward, Janice G. Dodd, and Irene Fubara-Manuel’s *Killing Off the Lesbians: A Symbolic Annihilation on Film and Television*, McFarland and Company, Inc., 2017.

[9] Although Labrie notes the appearance of independent farming women in novels such as *Plow-Woman* (1906) by Eleanor Gates, *O Pioneers* (1913) by Cather, *So Big* (1924) by Edna Ferber, *Barren Ground* (1925) by Ellen Glasgow, and *Gone with the Wind* (1936) by Margaret Mitchell, she is careful to note that these characters remain secondary characters. Labrie additionally notes that there have been various autobiographies of women homesteaders, notably *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1913) by Elinore Pruitt Stewart and *Land of the Burnt Thigh* (1938) by Edith Eudora Kohl.

[10] While “Tommy, the Unsentimental” takes place in the rural Midwest, with the subversive influences of the urban East only alluded to, Cather’s “Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament” (1905) takes the reader to the city. The titular character’s femininity is expressed through flowers. Paul works at the theatre, wears jewelry and velvet, and threads violets and carnations into his buttonhole; indeed, “there was something of the dandy about him” (Cather, “Paul’s Case” 74). When he steals a large sum of money to escape his impoverished home for New York, his liberation is marked by flowers. He surrounds himself with violets and jonquils in his hotel room, and admires the flower-sellers on his walks through the city: “[h]ere and there on the corners were stands, with whole flower gardens blooming under glass cases, against the sides of which the snow-flakes stuck and melted; violets, roses, carnations, lilies of the valley, somehow vastly more lovely and alluring that they blossomed thus unnaturally in the snow” (81). For Paul, it is the unnatural quality of the blooms that gives him pleasure. When he takes his own life after fleeing the city, his death is represented by the fleeting life of flowers, and the death of the vibrant blooms he had admired on his walks: “[t]he carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed, their red glory all over. It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the glass cases that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass, and it was a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run. Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up” (83). Like the carnations, Paul’s “glory” is “all over.” His burial of the carnation symbolizes his weary acceptance that any resistance to the norm, or, as Cather puts it, “the homilies by which the world is run,” is “a losing game.” Paul would rather have “one splendid breath” than never experience the beauty he adores, and, like Wilde, he dies for his difference. When one reads Jay Ellington Harper alongside the example of Paul, it is clear that male femininity cannot survive, whether in rural or urban space, in Cather’s writing.

[11] I am grateful to Stéphanie Durrans for pointing out to me the queer potential of the word “ambassador” in this context.

[12] The relationship between Jewett and Fields is indeed often desexualized by critics. Jewett biographer Margaret Roman writes that Jewett and Fields were in a relationship of “support and comfort,” and she bases her argument against the existence of any further intimacy on modern conceptions of butch/femme dichotomies by making the claim that “neither Fields nor Jewett took on a specific male or female role in their association” (145).

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Biography

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Beyond the Imperial Metropole:

Queer Anglophone Representations of the Haitian Revolution

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Abstract

This article uses a queer lens to analyze textual-visual representations of the Haitian Revolution. Anglophone texts and their accompanying images often characterize Saint-Domingue's transformation into Haiti through disaggregated bodies and extreme violence. Focusing on two Anglophone texts as case studies, this article shows how Leonora Sansay's *Secret History; or The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) and Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805) elicit a desire to escape empire's regulation of metropolitan normativity through spectacles of bodily disaggregation. Neither Rainsford nor Sansay were queer authors. But both works feature characters who forged queer relationships to the ground-level tumult they allegedly witnessed. Recognizing a lesser-studied tenant of queer theory known as the deformative, this essay examines how both authors' representations of the Haitian Revolution attest to the allure of escaping from patriarchal power and white dominion. At stake is a reparative reading of Anglophone texts regarding Haiti's establishment in which the collapse of normative social order became erotic and even desirable.

Keywords

Deformative; Haitian Revolution; Leonara Sansay; Marcus Rainsford; Queer.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.5

Focusing on two Anglophone representations of the Haitian Revolution, this essay employs queer epistemology to enrich our understanding of English representations of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Scholars have long grappled with the ways European writers addressed the first successful uprising of enslaved persons that yielded an independent nation. Susan Buck-Morss's attention to the absence of Haiti in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's understanding of the relationship between the lord and bondsman, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's analysis of archival silences, and Sibylle Fischer's concept of disavowal are amongst the most well-known examples. However, Anglophone representations of Haiti's establishment have received less attention. This might be attributed to a frequent positioning of Haitian independence as the French Revolution's double. Of course, Britain's failure to exploit Saint-Domingue's tumult and attempt to seize the colony from France (1793-1798) are also among the most under-studied aspects of the Age of Revolutions.[1] This essay shows how the Haitian Revolution registered as a queer aesthetic in Anglophone visual culture. Queerness in the case studies I explore functioned as an anti-metropolitan longing that sparked white readers' desire to escape from normative relationships and complicated the relationship between rural and urban environments. Attending to queerness in English textual-visual representations of the Haitian Revolution reveals the profound ways the first successful uprising of enslaved people shaped Anglophone understandings of the entanglements between place, sexuality, and gender.

The two works I have in mind are Leonora Sansay's *Secret History: or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) and Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805). These genre-defying texts combine elements of the sentimental novel, travel writing, and romanticism to narrate what the authors experienced as Saint-Domingue became Haiti. Although Sansay and Rainsford were heterosexual authors, queerness does a whole lot more than merely serve as a synonym for gay identity. While the term "queer" originally functioned to challenge normalized genders and sexualities, it has since grown to recognize empire, globalization, and sovereignty (Halberstam et al.). Queer epistemology divulges how hegemonic social structures define normativity and produce "perverse" others. The expansive inquiries about normalization and intersectionality at the center of queer thought help analyze a representational problem at the cores of *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*. As much as Sansay and Rainsford described the Haitian Revolution through deviations from normativity to epitomize its grotesque horrors, their textual and visual representations did not characterize the new Black Republic as uncivil, violent, or worthy of disavowal. The deviant sexualities and departures from normative constructions of gender these authors described also bolstered the erotic appeal of absconding from empire's social order.

In my readings of *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*, the demise of imperial power in Saint-Domingue is entwined with the beckoning allure of experiencing non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. *Secret History* is grounded in a "dalliance" between an American woman named Mary Hassel and Aaron Burr (Dillon). Mary and her sister Clara are based on the author's own experiences in Haiti (Drexler). Organized around fictional letters written to the third Vice President of the United States, *Secret History* divulges the experiences of a female traveler to Saint-Domingue who escapes her abusive husband by fleeing to the rural mountains. *An Historical Account* combines elements of history, natural history, and autobiography to chronicle Rainsford's experiences as a British soldier who arrived in Saint-Domingue (1797) with aims of seizing the French colony for Britain. Little is known of his personal life.[2] Beyond loose historical facts and fictitious elements, *An Historical Account* catalyzes around Rainsford's longing for an eroticized Black woman he encountered while escaping from condemnation to death. Both authors discovered the allure of absconding from normative understandings of sexuality, gender, and race through the Haitian Revolution's violence.

Sansay's and Rainsford's works conform to broader representational patterns about Haiti during the early nineteenth century. Because the Haitian Revolution did not easily conform to the glorification of whiteness and heterosexual reproduction foundational to global dominion, European writers struggled to chronicle its key events and principal actors.[3] Language impeded contemporaries from understanding revolt in its own terms. As Michel-Ralph Trouillot famously argued, the Haitian Revolution "entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened" (73). Trouillot elaborated that "[t]hey could read the news only with their ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution" (73). Europeans neglected Black revolutionaries because they did not easily conform to particular categories of gender and race needed to define normative Man. The events also unfolded in a location where the division between rural and urban zones did not easily hold. However, Black revolutionaries complicated these understandings of normativity predicated on imperial power. Black forces not only agentively contested imperialism by taking up arms in ground-level combat but also by unsettling the very terms Europeans employed to describe and geographically position themselves. Like other writers, Sansay and Rainsford tied Black Revolution to contestations of the patriarchal and heterosexual power integral to imperial dominion. But their works differ from a broader visual repertoire. Their attention to sexual promiscuity and deviations from heterosexual performances of gender, which signal a failure to understand revolution through its own terms, becomes appealing and even erotic. Ultimately, these authors' textual-visual descriptions of departures from normativity can be read in the reparative. They gesture toward an erotic desire to flee the metropole as a material place and as an embodiment of colonial ideology.

This essay does not neglect the ways authors, including Sansay and Rainsford, employed divergent sexualities to downplay colonial loss and represent imperial contestations. Like Moreau de Saint-Méry's famous *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1797-98), Sansay and Rainsford employed portrayals of promiscuity to assert white dominion and solidify imperial power. Yet closer scrutiny of deviations from normativity brings palpability to histories of colonial resistance and Black agency.[4] For Doris Garraway, legible libidinal dynamics on the surface of colonial relationships are linked to displacements, wishes, and fears in the white colonial unconscious (32). Sexuality may express unsayable anxieties about the loss of hegemonic power and interracial sex. As much as colonial sexual fantasies constituted white European subjects by blocking shameful memories about imperial losses or asserting white patriarchy, sexual relations also led to resistance. Enslaved women and free women of color used their sexuality to obtain advantages and, quite possibly, their freedom (Geggus, "Saint Domingue" 259-78). Of course, Michael Drexler has compellingly demonstrated that sexual dominion and spectacles of gore "drained" the political and historical importance of rebellion (Drexler 10-37). However, Drexler refuses to let go of the contention that sexual economies helped articulate struggles for political and caste status in Saint-Domingue (10-37).

Some readers would have undoubtedly been disturbed by Sansay's and Rainsford's gruesome descriptions of disaggregated bodies. One might argue that their extreme foci on violence functioned to justify imperial power. Indeed, Edward Long is a particularly well-known example (Burnard 202-23). He advocated for Jamaican planters to follow Saint-Domingue as an example of a more cohesive social structure. Unity around a shared understanding of Britishness and imperial rule curtailed the complete breakdown of a desired social order. Printed fifteen years before Dutty Boukman's 1791 Bois Caïman ceremony in which the Haitian Revolution's first revolt was planned, Long could not have predicted the events that would undermine his claim. However, *Secret History* and *An Historical Account* were printed after Jean-Jacques Dessalines's announcement of Haitian independence on January 1, 1804.[5] Imperial power failed to thwart the debauchery and corruption Europeans associated with the Caribbean by the time Sansay's and Rainsford's works were printed. Sexuality and gender could no longer be understood in relationship to uncontestable imperial power. As Europeans confronted the spectacle of losing Saint-Domingue, the relationship between deviations from normativity and Black revolutionaries assumed richer, stranger, and more complex meanings. I contend that the authors' gruesome depictions of disaggregated bodies become erotically alluring because they became wrapped up in an unspoken desire to abscond from metropolitan ideologies as empire collapsed.

Secret History and *An Historical Account*'s scenes that obscure revolution through extreme violence also transformed Haiti into a place outside the divide between rural and urban environments where Euro-Americans could imagine their own escapes from empire's regulation of normativity. A queer vantage point reveals how Sansay and Rainsford's depictions of the annihilated colony signaled a fascination with departing from white heteronormativity. Both authors unwittingly instigated pleasures only accessible beyond the performances of metropolitan understandings of whiteness and masculinity. While helping to unpack a moment when understandings of Black and white bodies failed to hold, queer epistemology also helps analyze a crucial paradox. Euro-American audiences began to embrace the supposed abhorrent sexualities and perverse genders that Black Revolutionaries opened up. Queerness affords a reparative reading in which hyperbolic tumult functioned as a mode of escaping from possessive governance (Halberstam 10-12). The collapse of rigid social structures gave way to the erotic desire for "perverse" sexualities available outside the imperial metropole.

Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in the authors' experimentations with alternative ways of chronicling their experiences. The organization of selective retellings of their experiences through letters and printed images divulges how Sansay and Rainsford attempted to reconcile the desire for colonial power with the desire for intimacies only available beyond empire's regulation of normativity. By using letters, Sansay emphasized the extreme sentiments surrounding the carnal breakdown of differences between Black and white Creole women. Rainsford drew on printed images to articulate an erotic desire for the annihilation of normativity through imagined scenes of violence. After addressing specific terms from queer theory, I turn to *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*'s illustrations. Their textual-visual representations of the Haitian Revolution transcend scenes of extreme violence and demonstrate how the Revolution's instigation of "perverse" genders and sexualities became desirable.

The Deformative and Creative Shame

To analyze the complex relationship between the allurement of "perverse" sexualities and empire's demise in *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*, I draw on one of the lesser-studied tenants of queer epistemology—the deformative. Scholars of gender studies are familiar with Judith Butler's landmark contention that gender is produced through juridical systems of power (*Gender Trouble*). Instead of being natural or innate, gender is performatively produced through reiterated utterances. However, Butler's emphasis on the instabilities and variations that can also be generated through the performative has received substantially less attention. She refers to these unpredictable and uncontrollable processes as the deformative. Butler explains the deformative in the inaugural issue of GLQ, "If the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which 'queers' those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction" ("Critically Queer" 18). The deformative signals a "queering" misappropriation of the performative power of gender. This queer appropriation of the performative "mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability*" ("Critically Queer" 22). In the central example of drag, the very norms meant to be obeyed are twisted or "queered." It reveals the disavowed attachments or identifications that ground normativity. The deformative operates through the very terms of the performative that govern regulation to destabilize power. At the base level, what propagates a normal social field can also be misappropriated or deformed. This is exactly what happens in *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*. White heterosexuality unravels through performances of gender.

In the same edition of GLQ, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considers the deformative in relationship to shame and its creative pleasures ("Queer Performativity"). Sedgwick modifies J.L. Austin's well-known "I do" statement at the center of his analysis of performativity to "shame on you." This statement enables her to elaborate on those whose subjectivities are lodged in refusals or deflections of the heterosexual marriage, which is integral to Austin's formulation. Grammatically, there is a "you" but no "I." The "I" is withdrawn, but "shame on you" records the place of an "I" who projects shame onto another pronoun. By hurling shame onto another subject and recirculating it through interpersonal figurations, shame becomes a "near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" ("Queer Performativity" 4). Shame becomes the most potent affect through which a sense of self develops. Moreover, shame is contagious. Someone else's embarrassment, debility, blame, or pain can "so readily flood me" ("Queer Performativity" 5). This contagiousness is facilitated by the susceptibility to new grammatical expressions.

Of course, the deformative and its links to shame may seem unrelated to *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*. Leonora Sansay and Marcus Rainsford were not really minoritarian subjects. Leonora Sansay was well-known by distinguished gentlemen as a coquette, but she was certainly not a celebrity. Upon Aaron Burr's suggestion, Leonora married Louis Sansay, who sold his plantation in Saint-Domingue to Toussaint Louverture. Louis and Leonora Sansay returned to Saint-Domingue in 1802 as France appeared poised to recapture the colony.[6] Marcus Rainsford was also an idiosyncratic figure (Youngquist and Pierrot xxiv-xxx). For their political loyalty, the Rainsford family was gifted a considerable tract of land. Marcus joined the fight to protect Britain's North American colonies during the American War for Independence after attending Trinity College in Dublin. He relocated to Jamaica when his regiment was moved to Fort Augusta near Kingston in 1781. Before resuming active military service in Saint-Domingue, he returned to England, where he was indicted and began pursuing a career as a celebrity poet.

But the deformative can help to investigate how the Haitian Revolution instigated other ways of understanding normative sexualities and genders. As Jill Casid has shown, queer theory offers a critical vantage point to look into the Black revolutionaries who contested the heterosexual and patriarchal power integral to empire (xvi-xvii). Queerness divulges the imaginings and longings for countering the master's plantation with counter-normative relationships and desires. Of particular importance are those who were forcibly displaced through the Middle Passage and enslaved. For them, longing registers as an inextinguishable desire to destabilize the heteronormativity of imperial power and imagine an anticolonial social order. Thinking with Sedgwick's analysis, I show how diasporic Africans' colonial resistance at the ground level that instigated Europeans' depictions of the Haitian Revolution as extreme violence also transformed these same representational practices. Sansay and Rainsford's descriptions of the Black revolutionaries who longed for Haiti's establishment ended up obfuscating the authors' own longings for colonial dominion. This created space for European audiences to find certain aspects of the dream of a free Black nation, namely the departure from heteronormative relationships in the metropole, to be erotic and alluring. *Secret History* and *An Historical Account* offer compelling examples of the intersections between diasporic Africans who dreamed of freedom from European power and Euro-Americans who dreamed of living outside empire's sphere of influence in a rural terrain.

Sedgwick's recognition of the complexity of queerness in her analysis of the deformative helps attend to this precarious intersectionality. Turning to Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*, Sedgwick considers the sticky relationship between queerness and sexual difference by focusing on the author's shame ("Queer Performativity" 6-8). Queerness is not merely a synonym for "gay" or James's sexuality. Instead, James's queerness is generated through shame. Shame in *The Art of the Novel* functions as a disruptive moment in a circuit of identificatory communication. Sedgwick takes James's performance of blushing (the externalized image of shame) as a desire to reconstitute interpersonal bridges. James's dramatization of shame becomes narratively, emotionally, and performatively productive. For Sedgwick, "the flush of shame becomes an affecting and eroticized form of mutual display" ("Queer Performativity" 11). James's attempts to articulate his blush strengthen the relationship between the writer of the present and the writer of the past. Readable shame is recirculated through intimate interpersonal figurations and produces meaning. By focusing on the triangulation between shame, sexuality, and gender, I unpack how shame rearticulated the relationships between Euro-Americans and diasporic Africans.

Secret History and *An Historical Account* thematize the coupling between shame and departures from normativity while transcending categories of racial difference. Shame is even further inextricably linked to the colonial losses Europeans struggled to articulate. In *Secret History*, one letter fully displays the embarrassment of European military generals whose incompetence led to the deaths of their soldiers at the hands of Black forces (Sansay 17). Another letter dramatizes Clara's shame for prompting her abusive husband's anxiety (Sansay 55). Later, she flees to the mountains, where she finds herself alongside diasporic Africans. Clara's embarrassing loss and humiliation for failing to serve her husband position Clara outside empire's governance of metropolitan normativity. In *An Historical Account*, Rainsford displays the shame he experienced as a Black tribunal condemned him to death for alleged spying. He exclaimed his "contemplation of the shame, rather than the terror of an ignominious death" (Rainsford 231). Rainsford's imprisonment intensifies his shame even further, but a Black female visitor interrupts and even spurs a recirculation of his intense sentiments. By analyzing the dramatization of shame in both authors' works, I reveal the complex ways diasporic Africans as both real and fictitious actors challenged Anglophones to depart from normativity and even made "perverse" or "shameful" relationships erotically appealing.

Although the diasporic Africans in *Secret History* and *An Historical Account* were based on the authors' ground-level experiences, Sansay and Rainsford undoubtedly re-imagined and represented them as part of the effort to obscure histories of colonial loss. Authors from this period often used romance to disguise colonial conquest and exploitation. John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a five years' expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) is one of the most well-known examples. Like *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*, *Narrative* delineates the first-hand experiences of a white traveler to the colonial periphery. A defining moment in the illustrated text is Stedman's marriage to the mulatta Joanna, which arguably evidences her subjugation to hegemonic rule. However, recent scholarship has complicated understandings of Stedman's fetishizations of Joanna's sexuality and bondage (Pratt 94-95; Wood 92-94). Of particular importance are William Blake's accompanying illustrations of disaggregated and open bodies (see Figures 1 and 2). Indeed, these illustrations are striking because they point towards a fascination with bodily vulnerability and even shame. They challenge sentimental fantasies in which a corpus remains impervious and cannot become imbricated with an outside (Allewaert 18-19). Blake "gets blood everywhere" and consequently sentimental fantasies disguising imperial relationalities break down (Gurton-Wachter 126-49). Spilled blood is evidence of severe social disorder (Festa 5-6).

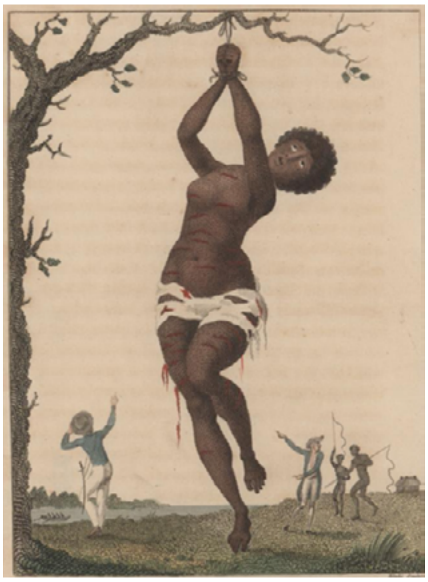

Figure 1: William Blake, *Flagellation of a Female Sambre Slave* in John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative*, 1793, John Carter Brown Library, D796 S812n /1-SIZE, 12.9 x 29cm.

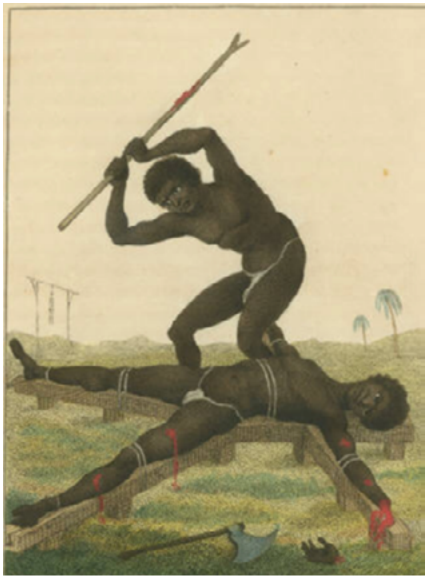

Figure 2: William Blake, *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack* in John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative*, 1793, John Carter Brown Library, D796 S812n /1-SIZE, 17.7cm x 13cm.

In my close readings of *Secret History* and *An Historical Account*, I emphasize how scenes of disaggregated bodies unsettle conventions of traditional romances. Bloodshed paradoxically slips into a different kind of sentimental fantasy associated with a distinctly anti-metropolitan ideology. Bodily fragmentation is a complex manifestation of the beckoning allure of absconding from normative sexualities and genders. Because spilled blood becomes wrapped up with the deformative, the shame associated with sexuality is an articulation of the shame associated with profound imperial losses. Attention to the ways in which sex helped convey colonial loss discloses how Black forces also performed revolutionary work by dampening urban appeal and its respective understandings of normativity. Ultimately, Sansay's and Rainsford's texts evoke a different kind of romance about the collapse of patriarchal relationships and white hegemony.

Secret History

Mary's first letter describes Saint-Domingue as a "heap of ruins" and a "terrible picture of desolation" (Sansay 3). Conditions do not significantly ameliorate throughout the thirty-one other letters. From enslaved persons who were burnt alive for setting fires to plantations to Frenchmen who were "dragged" around by mulattos, the French colony resembled a site of savage destruction. No wonder *Secret History* is often approached as a meditation on Black violence and white death. However, violence and destruction are also productive because they facilitate the unraveling of normativity. These horrors are complexly linked to Mary and Clara's liberations from patriarchal relationships.[7] As Drexler pointed out, "the black revolution on Saint Domingue triggers Clara's escape from her jealous and increasingly abusive husband" (33). I suggest that this complex coupling of flights from patriarchal relationships and the Haitian Revolution's threats of corporeal disaggregation is a queer problem. The Haitian Revolution's destruction is entangled with the destruction of normative relationships. In this messy intersectionality between the sisters and the Black revolutionaries, shame facilitates the expression of corporeal disaggregation as an alluring way of being outside empire's regulation of normativity.

At one level, shame divulges another way of knowing white masculinity. Attributing the failure to curtail Black forces to General Leclerc's cockiness, *Secret History*'s second letter delineates Black revolutionaries who overwhelmed the European guards, entered town, and massacred all the white inhabitants (Sansay 16). The author continues by exclaiming, "the pusillanimous General Leclerc, shrinking from danger of which his own imprudence had been the cause, thought only of saving himself" (Sansay 16). Leclerc ultimately dies of a fever that Sansay associates with being "ashamed of the weakness which had led to this disastrous event" (16). While fully displaying the embarrassment of Leclerc's humiliating defeats, Sansay also attends to the sufferings of white Creole women through shame. Napoleon's failure to reclaim Saint-Domingue further underscores Mary's vulnerable position. Tying unmanageable Black populations to the failure of white masculinity, the letter transforms the Haitian Revolution into a story beyond "barbarous" Black forces versus "sophisticated" colonial planters. Haiti's establishment also creates space to critique the white normative masculinity and heterosexuality that Euro-Americans used to describe Haiti's establishment and to supposedly safeguard a desired social order.

At a second level, shame uncovers another way of knowing white femininity. Mary characterizes white women as envious. She asks whether "the rage of the white ladies still pursued them with redoubled fury, for what is so violent as female jealousy" (Sansay 79). While cutting across customary representations of "decorous" white women and "savage" Black revolutionaries, Mary also indicates that white women experienced and even grappled with "abnormal" or unacceptable sentiments. Mary even surprisingly positions the mulatto women as the "successful rivals of the Creole ladies" (Sansay 79). Elaborating on the mulatto women, she exclaims, "[m]any of them are extremely beautiful; and, being destined from their birth to a life of pleasure, they are taught to heighten the power of their charms by all the aids of art, and to express in every look and gesture all the refinements of voluptuousness" (Sansay 79). Mary's descriptions blur the distinctions between white and Black creole women. She opens up the possibility that Black creole women might become more beautiful and charming than white women. Between jealous white women and sensualized mulatto women, the embarrassing possibility that mulatto women could perform whiteness better than their European counterparts underpins the jumbling up of racialized distinctions.

Such muddying of race-based differences leads to spectacular scenes of destruction. In the first letter, Mary concentrates on white women who flee from Cap-Français to the surrounding mountains where runaway slaves hid and revolted. They climbed over "rocks covered with brambles, no path had ever been beat, their feet were torn to pieces and their steps marked with blood" (Sansay 4). With the town in flames and exploding powder magazines repleting the scene, the collapse of corporeal boundaries becomes enthralling. Mary recounts how "[l]arge masses of rock were detached by the shock, which, rolling down the sides of the mountain, many of these hapless fugitives were killed" (Sansay 4). Fugitives appear to refer to these white women as much as the island's Black population.

Literary scholars often approach this scene as a stunning example of the complex parallels between white women and diasporic Africans (Dayan 174-75).

As Monique Allewaert has asserted, Clara's flight from her abusive husband to the El Cobre mountains is symptomatic of how white femininity reconstituted itself through Afro-American political and cultural forms (Allewaert 155-60). Clara mimed diasporic Africans by putting herself in their positions in the mountains while also working to disavow these relations. Far from a cross-racial alliance or utopian communitarianism, *Secret History* foregrounds the plight of Anglo-American women and puts Black revolutionaries in the background. But Allewaert also shows how the author strains to maintain these separations. The text can be read against authorial intent. Consider the following line: "when a woman, like Clara, can fascinate, intoxicate, transport, and whilst unhappy is surrounded by seductive objects, she will become entangled, and be borne away by the rapidity of her own sensations, happy if she can stop short on the brink of destruction" (Sansay 224). This potential for annihilation indicates how imaginatively putting herself in the positions of diasporic Africans opens her up to exteriorities that challenge her stability and coherence as an impervious body. Building on Allewaert's analysis, I argue that Clara's incoherence and instability become a queer problem concerning the relationship between shame and carnality.

Clara's miming of diasporic Africans yields a queer and erotic corporeal form. Emerging from the mountains after her escape as a disaggregated body, Clara demonstrates Sedgwick's central contention that shame is "available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *trans*figuration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation" ("Queer Performativity" 13). Shame is found in Clara's lack of decorum and the loss of control in a tumultuous environment. In *Secret History*, the author remarks that "I was bare-headed, without stockings:—my shoes were torn to pieces by the ruggedness of the road, and I had no other covering than a thin muslin morning gown" (Sansay 192). Clara's full corporeal display helps articulate how shame simultaneously binds Clara to her husband and to diasporic African cultural practices. On the one hand, Clara blamed herself for her husband's abuses. The letter explains how, "Clara, affected by his pain, or ashamed of having so tormented him, — or fatigued with their eternal broils, leaned over him, and mingled her tears with his" (Sansay 192). On the other hand, shame constitutes Clara's identity through her own misconstrual and misrecognition. Closing the space between white and Black Creole women, Clara noted her close proximity in the mountains to inhabitants who were "little better than a horde of banditti" (Sansay 190). Clara's disaggregated appearance articulates her position as a victim of a patriarchal relationship while resembling the diasporic Africans more than a "proper" white woman. However, this incredibly carnal illustration of Clara's body is erotic because her liberation in Saint-Domingue's mountains marks a departure from normative understandings of white femininity.

Secret History ends with the return to Philadelphia. However, this repudiation of Saint-Domingue's unsuitability for the sisters' habituation is inseparably linked to the contagion of Clara's corporeal form. *Secret History* concludes with the following line: "if I can only infuse into your bosom those sentiments for my sister which glow so warmly in my own" (Sansay 225). It is difficult to ignore how playful sentimental promiscuity disguises a powerful affective charge that can no longer be bound to a single figure and may even spread to other subjects. Recalling Butler and Sedgwick, the disaggregated subject hurls shame onto another subject who is anamorphically susceptible to being moved or altered by extremely potent affects. This signals a desire for a different social order that is generated through the deformative. Although the sisters absconded from the island, the shame associated with the Haitian Revolution's powerfully disaggregating affects still lingered as an unrestrainable and generative force. An extremely contagious and powerful affect tied Clara, Mary, and Aaron Burr together more than a shared sense of white dominion or exceptionalism.

Sansay's decision to organize *Secret History* around letters might be understood as an attempt to control or mitigate the effects of shame to uphold the white dominion that helped preserve normativity. Letters separate *Secret History*'s different figures and enable them to appear to control their own affective performances. The fifth letter opens with the following passage: "Three of your letters arriving at the same time, my dear friend, have made me blush for my impatience, and force me to acknowledge that I have wronged you. But your friendship is so necessary to my happiness that the idea of losing it is insupportable" (Sansay 39). Clara's blush is spurred by the multiple letters rather than Colonel Burr himself. The letters distance the "I" of the letter writer while also providing a vehicle to project her elicited shame towards another subject. Blushing, to borrow Sedgwick's terms, is dramatized and becomes productive because it prompts an erotic "way of coming into loving relation to queer or 'compromising' youth" ("Queer Performativity" 8). The shame circulating between letter writer and letter recipient prompts the author's meditation on a former manifestation of her white femininity that becomes undone in Haiti. Clara continues by remarking that she has been "[c]ast on the world without an asylum, without resource, I met you:—you raised me—soothed me—whispered peace into my lacerated breast" (Sansay 40). Although Clara never self-effaces her "I," she hurls shame from her disaggregated body onto another "you" whose presence can only be felt through the letter. Her eagerness to recognize and even "spectacularize" the link between "lacerated breast" and blushing provides an important analytical clue into the queer uncanniness surrounding Clara's corporeal disaggregation derived from her escape to the mountains.

In the complex "intersectionality" between white women and diasporic Africans, certain understandings of white femininity needed to uphold the patriarchal power central to the imperial enterprise are evoked to then be undone or at least complicated. Her disaggregated breast is not a harbinger of a fuller disaggregation as much as a fragment of a sentiment that becomes less controllable in the mountains alongside diasporic Africans. Sansay's hyperbolic dramatization of cultural representations of white women as too emotional and too erotic, as Clara blushed, indicates how diasporic Africans played a crucial role in unsettling Clara's performance and recirculation of shame. By the time Clara returned, powerful sentiments could no longer be confined to her breast. Clara's openly available and carnal corpus spread shame to other subjects. Shame gets everywhere. Besides making Clara's unbounded identity erotically desirable, the text implies that Haiti's establishment became wrapped up with the desire to escape imperial understandings of normative genders and sexualities. This is the central issue of Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account*.

An Historical Account

Like *Secret History*, *An Historical Account* demonstrates how Black figures agentively interrupted white protagonists' abilities to control and manage their performances of shame. Rainsford's illustrated book catalyzes the complete usurpation of the author's power. After his vessel springs a leak, Rainsford is forced to land ashore. He is then confronted and arrested by Black soldiers who suspect him of being a spy. Rainsford is kept in a prison cell while awaiting trial and awaiting his condemnation to death. In short, the laudable Toussaint Louverture rescues Rainsford. But the shame associated with Rainsford's tumultuous experiences also created space for Black subjects to intervene within and modify Rainsford's understanding of normativity. Black forces appear to make "perverse" sexual relationships desirable in Rainsford's representations of his experiences in Saint-Domingue. As I will show, their interventions prompted another mode of being at odds with empire's regulation of normative understandings of sexuality and gender. Black figures instigated other ways of knowing uncontrolled and unmanageable sentiments or passions that transformed into erotically beckoning instances of becoming undone through the deformative.

In one of *An Historical Account's* tensest moments, an unnamed Black woman visits Rainsford as he awaits death. She interrupts his third-person meditation on his impoverished state and impending annihilation:

> After lying two nights on a couch, formed of dried sugarcanes, with a very slender supply of food, the prisoner had resigned himself to the

> vacuity of despair; he was stretched out in silent agony, when, as the night closed in, and the mirthful troops had progressively retired, a gentle female voice, with the tenderest accents, aroused his attention. How long the benign object had been there, he could not ascertain; but, when he looked up, and beheld her, his feelings were indescribable: she was a fine figure, rather tall, and slender, with a face most beautiful, and a form of symmetry, improved by the melancholy air which the scene had given her. She was dressed in a superior style, and possessed all the elegance of European manners, improved by the most expressive carriage. She held a basket, containing the most delicate food, with the finest fruits: she entreated him to receive them silently, and to destroy any remnants as a discovery would be fatal to her, and prejudicial to himself. He was about to reply with the ardour of gratitude, when, in an instant, she was gone! (Rainsford 234-35)

Comparisons to European mannerisms and dress help render the Black woman with visual palpability. Crossing race-based categories of difference, she becomes visible through defining characteristics of stereotypically beautiful white femininity, including symmetry, tenderness, and gentleness. But the Black woman's specter-like presence and immediate disappearance belie Rainsford's ability to possess her, while also emphasizing a failure to understand her form through ready-made categories. Furthermore, Rainsford loses the powerful ability to express his autonomous sovereignty by creating disinterested observations based on "scientific" principles of taxonomy.[8] The boundaries between "objective" descriptions of the woman's physical appearance and Rainsford's "indescribable feelings" collapse. Struggling to articulate the "shame" of his imprisonment and impending death next to an ostensibly free Black woman, Rainsford entangles contemplation of his annihilation with the allure of a figure who was located on the cusp of empire's regulation of normativity (231).

When Toussaint frees Rainsford, the latter does not celebrate his liberation as much as mourn the absence of his visitor. In an extended passage, Rainsford remains enraptured by the Black woman even though he no longer needs her company and she even functions as a reminder of his extreme anguish:

> To describe his feelings on such an unexpected reverse, would be difficult and useless. Reversed to himself once more, he did not long remain on a part of the island where his sufferings would have tended to efface the agreeable impressions received at Cape François. Once he tried to trace the haunts of his benevolent incognita, but in vain.

> She was impervious. He again bade adieu to this interesting soil, and at length reached his long desired destination, the island of Martinique. (237)

Rainsford succumbs to the shame of inarticulable feelings as the Black woman visitor becomes even more erotic by remaining outside the scope of his possessive power. Rainsford's inability to let go of his desire for the Black woman becomes a queer representational problem elsewhere in *An Historical Account*. As I will show, Rainsford's encounter with the woman is symptomatic of a desire to experience modes of being outside of empire's regulation of normativity. Her introjection in Rainsford's meditation on his shame of being sentenced to death by Black forces instigated other ways of seeing the extreme corporeal disaggregation associated with the Haitian Revolution.

Like Sansay, Rainsford aimed to uphold the differences between white and Black bodies central to imperial dominion. He went to extraordinary lengths to downplay his involvement in Britain's disastrous attempt to seize Saint-Domingue.[9] As literary scholars Paul Youngquist and Grégory Pierrot note, *An Historical Account* cannot be understood as an unadulterated or eyewitness account of what Rainsford experienced at the ground level (xxxiv). Rainsford intentionally changed the date of his arrival to place himself in Saint-Domingue after British General Thomas Maitland's surrender to Toussaint Louverture in 1798. Moreover, Youngquist and Pierrot suggest that these changes index a mode of "Britishizing" the Haitian Revolution. Rainsford's changes make Haiti the "heir of British liberty and Britain the executor of Haitian freedom" (Youngquist and Pierrot xxxix). Focusing on the glory of the Haitian Revolution tricks readers into thinking Rainsford and the British Empire supported Haiti's establishment despite Britain's failed attempt to seize the French colony and nineteenth-century Britons' mixed opinions about it.[10] However, Rainsford strained to uphold the powerful masculine dominion central to empire's regulation of normativity. Succumbing to the erotic allure of the Black woman, which is sparked while contemplating the shame of his impending death, and being unable to let go of his desire for her points toward the limits of these efforts.

Scholars have been particularly attentive to Rainsford's employment of violent imagery in the text because they appear to cement white dominion by transforming Haiti into an obfuscation of extreme horror (see Figures 3 and 4). Yet ostensible acts of incivility may not be so easily synonymous with ideas of colonial power. For Jeremy Teow, these images ask readers to consider whether Haiti could truly be a civil nation. Although the pictures shade closely to an illustration of Saint-Domingue's unsuitability for white habituation, they also indicate how Europeans perpetuated the real incivility.

Teow contrasts the Black soldiers' "controlled form of violence" with the white soldiers' lack of restraint (Teow 92-95). Others have seen violence as what minimizes Black agency. As Laurence Brown has argued, violence erases the Black revolutionaries' actual actions. Describing the Haitian Revolution solely through violence helped foreground Rainsford's plight while putting Haiti's establishment in the background. However, a queer lens divulges another way of reading Rainsford's textual-visual illustrations. Violence is not easily reducible to the colonial logic of a dichotomy between savage diasporic Africans and civil white Europeans. Recognizing Rainsford's encounter with the Black woman and efforts to downplay his involvement in General Maitland's defeat, spectacular scenes of corporeal disaggregation signal a pleasurable bewilderment only accessible outside the scope of empire's regulation of normativity. *An Historical Account*'s textual-visual representations of racialized violence slip into fantastical imaginings.

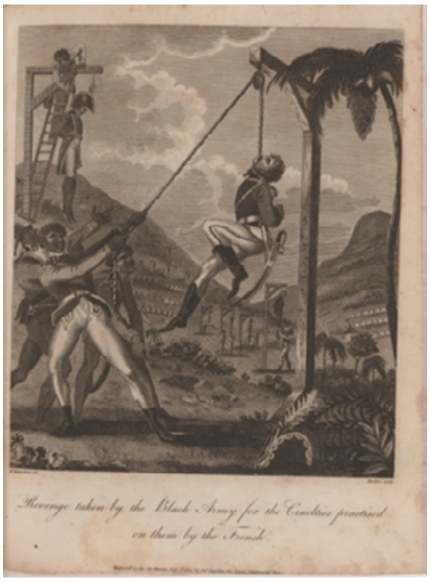
Revenge taken by the Black Army for the Cruelties practised
on them by the French.

Figure 3: Inigo Barlow, *Revenge Taken by the Black Army for the Cruelties practised on them by the French* in Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, 1805, engraving, John Carter Brown Library, D805 R158h /1-SIZE, 20.6 cm x 17.9 cm.

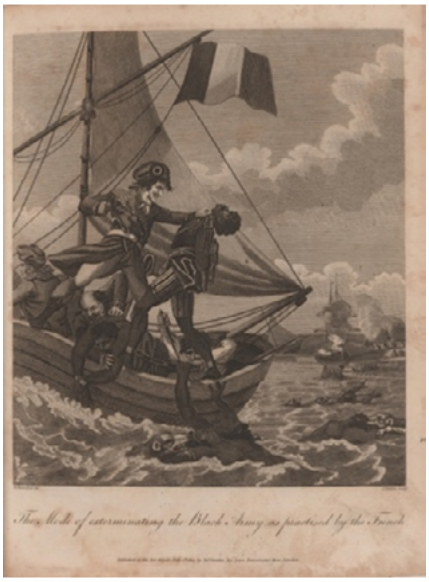

Figure 4: Inigo Barlow, *The Mode of exterminating the Black Army, as practised by the French* in Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, 1805, engraving, John Carter Brown Library, D805 R158h /1-SIZE, 20.9 cm x 18cm.

According to the illustrations' accompanying text, the scenes represent the "barbarous methods" Frenchmen employed during a final attempt to curtail the Black revolutionaries (Rainsford 327). This included bloodhounds. Two bloodhounds in the latter print's foreground are even seen devouring floating Black corpses at sea. The text continues by explaining how the "miserable cargoes were discharged into the sea in such quantities that, at length the tide (as if the mighty Arbiter of all, meant to hold their shame before them) brought the corpses into the bay, and rolled them on the very beach" (Rainsford 328). Shame generated through the corpses helps dramatize the scene and make it productive by spurring complex intimacies that cross racial categories of difference and deviate from Euro-American understandings of normativity. Indeed, Rainsford's text continues by describing struggles to identify the victims who washed ashore "under the dark concealment of night" (328). These open and disaggregated corpses raise a serious question about the body's incoherent or unstable relationship to an extreme sentiment. As I will show, these spectacles of disaggregated corpora become powerfully beckoning scenes of absconding from metropolitan normativity.

Hounds reappear in one of *An Historical Account*'s most complex images (see Figure 5). With a backgrounded mountain and breadfruit tree growing from the right side, the landscape frames hounds devouring a Black woman and her infant. A Black Man's torso flails immediately behind the Black woman and her infant, while a hound has almost entirely consumed a different corpus. Furthermore, another hound, which maintains a closer resemblance to a fantastical monster, eats a three-armed Black man. But no bloodhounds were ever used to attack diasporic Africans in Saint-Domingue. If the bloodhounds' deformities and unequivocal departures from physiological precision were not enough to signal how ground-level violence slipped into the European imaginary, Rainsford admits that he conjured up the entire spectacle. Rainsford confesses that the hounds were a "successful, yet [. . .] dangerous experiment" tried by British soldiers on Jamaica during the Second Maroon War (327). Moreover, he admits that bloodhounds are included in the text as a way of bolstering *An Historical Account*'s appeal to British audiences. He explains how "[s]trange as it may appear to those who had an opportunity of knowing the fact, the public mind [. . .] has never been satisfied that the Maroons were not really hunted down, and destroyed by blood-hounds" (Rainsford 327). Pleasures from viewing taxonomically inspired representations of bodies slip into fantasies about the deformative here.

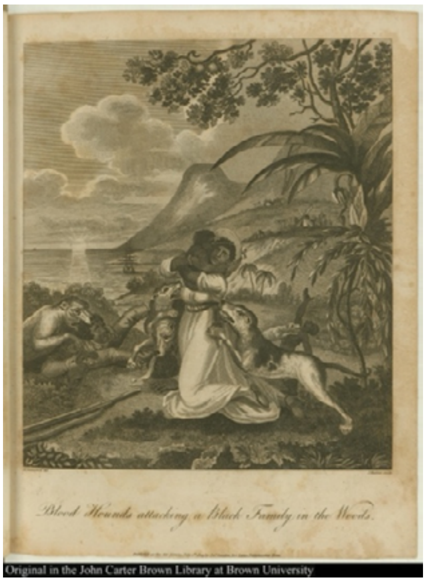
Blood Hounds attacking a Black Family in the Woods.
Original in the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

Figure 5: Inigo Barlow, *Blood hounds attacking a Black Family in the Woods* in Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, 1805, engraving, John Carter Brown Library, D805 R158h /1-SIZE, 20.9 cm x 17.9 cm.

This thematization of beastly hounds indicates how Rainsford's representations of the Haitian Revolution held on to and even amplified the imagining of other ways of being that the Black female visitor instigated. Like her interruption of Rainsford's meditation on his impending death, these hounds interrupt descriptions of the Haitian Revolution through more familiar categories of white dominion, Black savagery, or patriarchal power. The bloodhounds are salient reminders of the inability to comprehend the Haitian Revolution through existing categories. However, they also signal a struggle to fix or secure normativity.[11] Rainsford could not let go of his erotic attachments to deviant figures who unsettled his powerful position as a white male Anglophone writer. Ultimately, the desire to uphold colonial power by preserving white dominion through violence became too wrapped up with the beckoning allure of the deformative. The corporeal disaggregation associated with the Haitian Revolution made it possible to imagine bloodhounds and forge erotic attachments by creating space for Euro-American audiences to access the breakdown of normativity.

Coda

This article examined how two different Anglophone works situate the Haitian Revolution's events as an erotic departure from the normative relationships that constituted metropolitan identity while imperial power waned. Problematizing a simple disparagement of Haiti's establishment as an isolated series of events that were unconnected to the metropole, Clara's flight from her husband and Rainsford's erotic desire for a Black woman are inextricably linked to Black revolutionaries' ground-level efforts to contest white dominion. *Secret History*'s concluding letter about Clara's corporeal openness and *An Historical Account*'s final engravings about imaginary bloodhounds signal a pleasurable detachment from the normativity associated with the imperial metropole. Both works highlight how queerness in the colonial periphery was experienced through relationships that oriented bodies in bewildering ways. In short, Anglophone textual-visual representations of the Haitian Revolution show how queerness took on stranger forms and tropes as colonials clung to imperial power in the periphery.

For scholars seeking to overcome the metropolitan bias in queer epistemology, *Secret History* and *An Historical Account* show how queerness in the Caribbean unsettles the bifurcated relation between rural and urban environments. The pleasurable bewilderment Anglophones experienced in Saint-Domingue indicates that yearnings to escape the hegemony of the metropole did not immediately or easily result in attachments to the quiet or tranquil pleasures of rural life. Anglophones were often enthralled by the Haitian Revolution's more tumultuous instabilities that questioned defining features of metropolitan normativity and transcended investments in specific geographical terrains. Perhaps Sansay's and Rainsford's voyages to places outside the metropole demonstrate the necessity of grappling with queerness as a spatially unmappable longing. The authors and their audiences wanted to go beyond the very binary frameworks of heterosexuality versus homosexuality, masculinity versus femininity, and urbanism versus ruralism.

Notes

[1] To date, Patrick David Geggus's *Slavery, War and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Dominque*, 1793-1798, written over forty years ago, is the only historical study of Britain's attempt to conquer Saint-Domingue.

[2] For more on Marcus Rainsford's biography see Paul Youngquist & Grégory Pierrot, "Introduction."

[3] See Marlene Daut's reading of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's understanding of "silence" as that which was only made available through more complex forms of narration (1-19).

[4] See Doris Garraway's understanding of libertinage (xiii-xiv). Moreover, see Marcus Wood's understanding of pornography (12).

[5] Bryan Edwards's *An Historical Survey of the Island of Saint Domingo, Together with an Account of the Maroon Negroes in the Island of Jamaica* is an example of an illustrated book about Saint-Domingue composed by another Anglophone writer. However, his work was published as the Haitian Revolution's events unfolded and before the Declaration of Haitian Independence.

[6] For more information about the plantation, see Michael J. Drexler, "Introduction," pp. 27-28.

[7] See Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "The Secret History of the Early American Novel: Leonora Sansay and the Revolution in Saint Domingue" and Tessie P. Liu, "The Secret beyond White Patriarchal Power: Race, Gender, and Freedom in the Last Days of Colonial Saint- Domingue."

[8] One might consider Mary Louise Pratt's understanding of the British travel narrative.

[9] For a historical account of Britain's failure to colonize Saint-Domingue, see David Patrick Geggus's *Slavery, War and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Dominque, 1793-1798*.

[10] For historian David Patrick Geggus, Britons possessed a wide range of opinions about Haiti's establishment (123-49). Some were pleased to see Black forces drive out Frenchmen, while others experienced the chagrin of recalling Britain's own failure to seize the French colony.

[11] I am thinking with Kathrine McKittrick's understanding of the "demonic ground" to consider the problems of depicting bodies that were understood as "ungeographic" (xxiv).

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Biography

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“Be the red worm in the dirt. Be the honeysuckle on the vine”:

Queer Southern Place-Making in A *Dirty South Manifesto* (2020)

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Abstract In light of homonormative narratives that privilege the urban as a future place of freedom, *A Dirty South Manifesto* (2020) by L. H. Stallings represents the manifesto’s function of disrupting hegemonic narratives in its reconfiguration of thinking futurity and its spatial dimensions for marginalized Southerners. I read Stallings’s manifesto as employing a place-making practice that condemns moral authority and aims at dismantling narratives based on Christian white heteropatriarchy and settler colonialist chronotopic social orders. Queer narrative temporality is the pivotal point through which linear progress can be countered. The manifesto’s case studies of sexual resistance in Southern hip-hop and activism create a queer archive of the South which merges artistic and political imaginations and rural and urban spaces into Southern places. *A Dirty South Manifesto* invalidates hegemonic linear progress narratives such as metronormative narratives and instead can be read to follow Judith Roof’s call for story systems. By prioritizing long-form discourse and literacy while embracing “obscene” sexual expressions, the text aims at utopian radical reinterpretations of what it means to be situated in the South.

Keywords Creative Place-Making; Dirty South; L. H. Stallings; Manifesto; Narrative Systems; Queer Narrative.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.6

Introduction: Metronormative Narratives versus Hip-Hop?

In contemporary media representations of the US South, the rural is the focus of prevalent stereotypical tropes, which are used as shorthand in a media landscape that is affected by an economy of attention (Nunn 187). Specifically, when put in relation to queerness, the South is typically depicted in an essentializing way as white, backward, and often hostile. In contrast, queer futures are depicted as a possibility in a liberal, urban North. It is framed as the place to flee to where one can finally progress toward a more authentic lived identity, according to what Jack Halberstam calls metronormative narratives in his book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005). These narratives privilege the urban as the quintessential place for coming out, thereby signaling a future of freedom for queer people, which contributes to hegemonic idealization of progress away from a stereotyped, othered rural United States “made to function as a closet for urban sexualities” (Halberstam 37). Meanwhile, the South, both rural and urban, remains home to queer folks, and their daily life is harmed by the structural inequalities that fuel these tropes. Metronormative narratives certainly do not contribute to improving the everyday lives of marginalized queer, poor, and BIPOC groups of people in the South and instead may more likely cement their feeling of isolation in rural areas, from which most could or would not move away due to a number of possible reasons, such as not having the economic means to do so. The South needs better narratives that depict it more accurately as a region characterized by rural as well as urban landscapes, by bigotry as well as compassion. Furthermore, new narratives are needed that offer perspectives for political and social change, which is desperately needed in the US in general and southern states in particular.

Hip-hop music is one medium through which southern BIPOC artists—mostly urban, and increasingly also queer—have been able to address and influence the mainstream pop culture of the US. L.H. Stallings takes the genre of Southern hip-hop—or Dirty South hip-hop—as inspiration for Southern practices of social transformation, which she formulates in her book *A Dirty South Manifesto: Sexual Resistance and Imagination in the New South* (2020). In this article, I will discuss the subversive potential of manifestary place-making through a narrative analysis and queer reading of this multifaceted text. According to the author, the book’s premise is to “[comprehend] the significance of southern hip-hop to political and artistic imagination, as well as to the terrain of sexuality and gender studies” (Stallings 4). It uses styles, themes, and philosophies of the Dirty South hip-hop subculture in a way that counters hegemonic depictions of the South and simultaneously centers the urgent need for political and social change.[1] The author pinpoints the normative claim to moral authority as the origin of the contemporary (and historical) “sexual dystopia” (Stallings 10) of the South. The two recent examples given in the text are the 2013 Texas HB2 bill to restrict abortion rights within the state and the 2016 North Carolina HB2 “a.k.a. the bathroom bill” (Stallings 27), which prompted several other southern states to attempt or even implement similar measures. I would add that Ron DeSantis in Florida is another major exponent of the South as a sexual dystopia, whose policies since the publication of the book exemplify fearmongering policies against queer culture and critical race theory that led to the introduction of discriminatory legislation, such as his so-called Stop-Woke Act. Stallings wants to counter the political trend towards further oppression in this dystopia by theorizing a new South, the Dirty South, as a place that is present, self-aware, and committed to practices of social resistance.

Therefore, the titular term dirty is not only used in the context of hip-hop but expanded into a larger multilayered metaphor of dirt. This usage marks sexual resistance as a dirty anti-thesis to the harmful demand for some ideal of sexual purity propagated in the South by moral authoritarianism. Early on the author maps out two modes—”above” and “below”—of sexual resistance in the South, for which the manifesto is a rallying cry. These modes are discussed mostly through subordinated images connected to the overarching metaphorical dirt: red worms and honeysuckle. Although as a tunnel-building animal and a vining plant the associations seem clear at face value, when one takes a closer look both images align with the two modes. This drives Stallings’s point home that both modes are interdependent: Red worms practice geophagia (meaning they eat earth or soil) and are, therefore, utilized in the manifesto to represent the important factors of participation (here specifically in the context of place-making), of making something out of nothing, or of being nourished by what others may discard (from “above”). At the same time, the worms produce underground tunnels through their “dirty” sustenance, the mode of “below” is metaphorically engaged as well. Honeysuckle as a vining, parasitic plant native to the US represents unconventional, possibly illegal, acts of protest or solidarity against the institutions of moral authority (“below”). But their vines are also mentioned as being capable of building bridges to embrace and connect, which represents the aspect of collaboration (“above”). These metaphors are explored in six smaller manifestos within the book, each of which has a dedicated chapter that elaborates on the various layers of meanings: the Slow Tongue Manifesto, Dirt Manifesto, Geophukit Manifesto, T.R.A.P. (The Ratchet Alliance for Prosperity) Manifesto, WeUsIOurU Future Pronouns Manifesto, and Honeysuckle, Not Honey Sucka! Manifesto (Stallings vii-viii). The explanatory sections use an intersectional analysis to pinpoint the structural oppression of people based on sexuality or gender and also describe cases of activists exemplifying sexual resistance in the South.

I understand the conceptualization of the Dirty South as a practice of creative place-making, and in this essay, I discuss the queer potential of the narrative form employed by this manifesto as a place-making practice. The form the book employs is crucial in regard to place-making, and therefore, I also want to contextualize Stallings's work within conventions of the manifesto form, which lend themselves to Stallings's practice of dirty place-making. In a second step, I propose a reading of its narrative structure as representative of Judith Roof's concept of queer narrative systems, which she formulates as an alternative to conventional narrative paradigms. Therein I localize the queerness of the narration of the Dirty South.

A Dirty South: Manifestary Writing and Place-Making

In her introduction to the book, Stallings calls the manifesto “suited for dystopias” (9), and this approach to the form, as a leading medium of political imagination in the face of dystopian domination and discrimination, is consistent with the work of other manifesto writers, scholars, and critics in the contemporary and past periods of increased manifesto publication. The fact that Stallings comments on the choice of genre is exemplary of the self-referentiality inherent to the manifesto. Breanne Fahs expresses a similar notion to Stallings in her tellingly named collection of feminist manifestos, *Burn It Down! Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution* (2020), by stressing the necessity of manifestos “in times of great social stress. How else are we to make sense of our own anger, our sense of confusion and implosion, our imminent feelings of doom and stifled possibilities?” (3). In general, the manifesto is a politicized text, which can effectively platform and channel emotions, and often directly demands emotional (re)actions from the reader.[2] I want to follow the trace of Stallings's premise by asking: If this manifesto's theses are suited to the political needs of Southern dystopia, how do the processes of manifesto formulation and emplacement come together and intersect in the creation of a Dirty South? By asking this question, we can conceptually relate manifestos and place to marginalization.

The Phenomenology of Marginalization and Place in the US South

Based on her research on the function of manifesto texts in modernism, Laura Winkiel views the form as indicative of “a crisis in narratives of progress” (2). I argue that Stallings's work undermines the essentialist narrative of progress away from a rural South. Current cultural scholarship on the US South agrees that there is a prevalent normative narrative that positions the South as a rural place where past unfortunate “missteps,” such as homophobia and racism, are still belatedly present but also safely contained (Holland 168). The

South as an allegory for US sins has led to processes of Othering as well as a “memorialization” (and therefore also a romanticization) of the geographical place of the South, creating a myth of Southern exceptionalism (Bibler 154). Sharon P. Holland argues that mainstream narratives that mythologize the South in this way contribute to a disjointed Southern temporality. Being placed in this “removed” time in turn feeds narratives that are saturated with “a history that cannot be overcome” (Holland 168) back into the mainstream. This is how they bolster current political agendas that further discriminate against and erase southern Blackness, brownness, and queerness as well as effacing the multifacetedness of the South as a place comprising rural and urban cultures. These political trends in Southern states lead to legislative changes that further disadvantage those who are already marginalized by white heteropatriarchy.

Stallings’s A *Dirty South Manifesto* articulates a crisis of hegemonic narratives about white rural individuals in the South: the author condemns the ways in which Christian moral authority shapes (and has shaped) US institutions of state and culture to enact systemic violence towards women and queer people. This violence crystalizes in the South, and Stallings develops a new framework for practices of creative place-making that resists increasing attempts to make the South unlivable for people with non-normative gender and sexual identities, especially when they are racialized as non-white. As Edward Casey reiterates: “*boundaries are where places happen*. If history is to occur as place, then it will do so most effectively in the boundaries that belong to places” (509; original emphasis). Therefore, I argue that the possibility for historically significant social change seems to be crucially mediated by marginalized people’s relation to place. By taking the specific genre of southern hip-hop as a basis and foregrounding the works of women and queer people within this form, Stallings undoubtedly thinks political change from the perspective of the margins: to alleviate the suffering of marginalized people, the South as a place needs to be remade.

The history of theorizing place is long, including philosophical and human-geographical approaches,[3] and informs the comparatively much younger concept of creative place-making. It was proposed as a term in 2010 by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, and in the recent *Routledge Handbook of Placemaking* (2021), a variety of approaches that have since been developed in different disciplines are presented. In the context of this dynamic research field, Cara Courage’s introductory definition in the handbook offers a useful theoretical framework: place-making is participation in “communities of practice” and demonstrates how arts and politics can merge to advance positive social change.

Communities of practice refers to a group of people who are connected through three dimensions: sharing concern about a joint interest, or what Courage calls its “domain,” collaborating in an engaged community, and creating a repertoire of practices, which ideally create value for the community by following ethical principles (Courage 4-5). One of the principles of this community concept is to create “a rhythm for the community” (Wenger qtd. in Courage 4). Stallings does this in the very first smaller manifesto of the book by introducing the practice of the slow tongue. This recurring method of the Dirty South, based on hip-hop artist Millie Jackson’s performance style and oeuvre, fundamentally shapes the framework of the Dirty South as a place. Manifestos are firmly located in the same triangulation of arts, politics, and social change as communities of practice, making the form a fitting communication tool for these practices that form communities. The conceptual overlap of the manifesto and pamphlet as forms (pamphlets often use manifestary rhetoric and many manifestos have been distributed as pamphlets) also highlights the manifesto’s engagement on the local level—it is close to the ground, if you will.

In the Dirty South, red worms and honeysuckle are metaphors for place-making practices of resistance, which also consist of taking on obligations for each other. Place in general can be understood as an amalgamation of three dimensions as well: “materiality, meaning, and practice” (Cresswell 169-70). Since these three concepts share a complex relation, which can reinforce “systematically asymmetrical power relations” (Cresswell 173), creative place-making may in turn subvert these exact normative spatial forces that saturate the dynamics of places. Moving through places in a marginalized body, and relating to other bodies through such movement, is shaped by discriminatory power imbalances in practice, meaning, and matter, which influences both bodies and places.[4] Resistance against social injustices in the South can therefore challenge hegemonic orientations on the level of place through practices. When it is practiced communally and embodied in the places we want to re-make, all three dimensions of creative place-making that are geared towards more ethical Southern places are addressed. That can feed back into the other two dimensions of place (matter and meaning) through embodiment and continued collaboration in practice. L. H. Stallings gives this place-making community the label Dirty South and uses the textual format of the manifesto. In this form, she combines art critique, academic theory, social activism, and intersectional analysis in one literary work. The manifesto was chosen deliberately as a communicative tool to introduce the Dirty South, creating meaning through the subversive potentialities of the form.

The Manifesto and Time

Manifestary texts aim to disrupt dominant historical narratives to resituate the here and now, enabling reconfigurations of thinking about futurity and its spatial dimensions. In a recent article, Carsten Junker has observed an increase in manifesto writing and publishing since 2015/2016 specifically in the US context (1-3). These contemporary manifestos cover a wide variety of themes, but they mostly discuss social, cultural, environmental, and economic crises of the moment. The manifesto in general is characterized by performativity (Fahs 5), not only on the side of the author but also on the side of the reader (Yanoshevsky 264). For the political subgenre, this means there is a focus on initiating certain changes in the beliefs or behaviors of readers (even direct calls-to-action). Influential manifesto scholar Janet Lyon understands the genre historically as indivisible from the idea of the modern public sphere (8). Nonetheless, due to the form’s wide cultural valences and dependence on historical conditions, it must always be contextualized within its respective time period. The temporality of the manifesto historizes the present, often creating alternative histories as well as signaling possibilities for future change. According to Lyon, the ambition of the form has been to “[break] up statist versions of ‘progress’ that justify modernity’s historical narratives” (16), and Stallings continues this by countering homonormative progress narratives in A *Dirty South Manifesto*. An important aspect to stress, however, is the relation of manifestos to the realities they depict: they always maintain distance, an imaginative threshold, to the “real world” (Caws xxvii). Despite this, the texts aim to change reality, and I agree with Galia Yanoshevsky that “the manifesto may be viewed as a programmatic discourse of power because it aspires to change reality with words” (264). Stallings follows this pattern by integrating suggestions of utopian practices of communal place-making, but she is also self-aware about their utopian character, encouraging literacy not only for “reading” oppression but also for putting up resistance.

One of the “minor manifestos” (Stallings 5), titled WeUsIOurU Future Pronouns Manifesto, is arguably the most utopian of them all and uses the titular array of pronouns as a placeholder for whatever concept will supersede present pronouns in the future. WeUsIOurU makes the complications and paradoxes of queer temporality apparent without giving concrete solutions: it sparks reflection about different possible scenarios for the future cultural and social developments of pronouns. The text enacts a destabilization of temporality directly in the text through the use of grammatical tenses, specifically by using the empty, futuristic label WeUsIOurU in the present as well as the past tense (Stallings 135). This communicates the complications of queer temporality on an additional level. Furthermore, it represents the complex narrative temporality of the manifesto. Only the last line of this speculative text again circles back to the present by employing the metaphors for the two modes of emplaced sexual resistance in the much-repeated line:

“*Be the red worm in the dirt . . . . Be the honeysuckle on the vine*” (Stallings 137; original emphasis). Once more, a call materializes to actively participate in the imagination of futurities and thereby to also potentially shape the emerging future.

In recent years, scholars in Southern studies have also contributed to the general upsurge of the genre of manifesto: The journal *PMLA* published a collection of commissioned manifestos under the premise of imagining “other Souths”—”manifesting southern studies” (Bibler 156)—in a 2016 volume consisting of nine short texts by Southern studies scholars, including Kathrine A. Burnett, Keith Cartwright, Pippa Holloway, and R. Scott Heath.[5] Similar to *A Dirty South Manifesto*, many of these manifestos critique the progressivist narratives of “overcoming the South,” such as Holloway’s rejections of “a positioning of the South as a ‘backward other’ against which the supposed progressivism of the rest of the county is measured” (185).

As chair and professor of African American studies at Georgetown University, Stallings is firmly established in the academy and might be expected to produce a work with more similarities to other academic manifestos. Yet, the stylized *A Dirty South Manifesto* diverges, for example, from the *PMLA* manifestos by centering active participation through its focus on literacy and interaction. For Stallings’s manifesto, the central question is how the subversion of normative narratives of the South can be achieved and it provides an answer by imagining a Dirty South: the guiding concept of the book. The author wants to enable critical negotiations of Southern cultural hegemony and simultaneously present practical options for disruptive resistance. To that end, the Dirty South is constructed as a queer archive of the South comprising case studies of sexual resistance in art, specifically urban Southern hip-hop, and local activism, as well as the minor manifestos themselves and their use of the rural metaphors of red worms and honeysuckle. I argue that this structure not only merges artistic and political imaginations but also, crucially, links rural and urban spaces into joint Southern places. The activist groups used by Stallings as examples are mostly based in urban spaces, while the scope of their practices also reaches into the rural. For example, BreakOUT! is a New Orleans-based organization advocating for LGBTQ youth in general, Atlanta’s SisterSong advocates for reproductive justice for BIPOC people in Georgia, and Southerners On New Ground (SONG) from Durham, North Carolina aims to build and maintain infrastructures between specifically Southern LGBTQ organizers (Stallings 82, 191-92). In the explanatory chapters, Stallings analyzes the protests and campaigns of these organizations in her manifestos, which often center around acts of defiance against hegemonic moral authority.[6]

For example, through the Geophukit Manifesto, the author also directly addresses the audience, another manifesto convention, in an array of angry non-rhetorical questions asking readers to relate their own position to the societal grievances of the South. Stallings asks, "[w]hat is your relationship to the land?" (67) and demands that readers think about their own accountability: "Did your ancestors steal people, or hang Black bodies from trees? // Or just watch the ones that did?" (68). These questions stir emotions and aim to activate readers to participate in the resistance practices of their communities, with the interjecting repetitions of geophagia and the neologism of geophukit conjuring up nauseous frustration. Like the already mentioned WeUsIOurU, as well as the multiple connected metaphors I have described so far, the *Dirty South Manifesto* repeatedly produces an image-laden style. This is a formal convention in manifesto writing (Kaplan 76), with the text often using a simple, "strong central image" (Caws xxiii), be this a tree (Klee 13), a spectre (Marx and Engels 14), or dirt. The meaning of dirt is manifold, shaped by its central surface-level reference to Southern hip-hop culture, as well as other allusions discussed throughout the explanatory chapters. Stallings uses dirt as an identifier for soil, land, and, most significantly, the nurturing of people who are marginalized due to their gender or sexual expression on the basis of moral authoritarian rhetoric and legislation. Because the conception of land in the US is inherently tied to the ongoing oppression of Indigenous communities, who in intersectional analyses always seem to be the most disenfranchised in any state, Stallings takes a clear position early on. The purpose of the South is found in "dismantling and reinventing southern public spheres largely erected out of the sexual economy of slavery and sustained by settler colonialism" (5). She explicitly criticizes settler colonialism in the same breath as slavery. The cultural and political heritage of enslavement and settler colonialism has a complex related history in Black and indigenous studies. In the introduction to *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness* (2020), the editors state that the lived realities of Black and native communities are both characterized by suffering under white supremacy, and they urge readers and scholars to "think with one another about what healing and redress would look like on otherwise or decolonial and abolitionist terms" (King et al. 8). A *Dirty South Manifesto* follows this line of thinking by condemning the idealization of white-settler sexuality still present in institutions and cultures based on moral authority. The manifesto does this "work from the perspective of the land" (Stallings 7) and calls its readers to follow in its footsteps, to also "work" with and through the land—or more specifically, the dirt. This general metaphor and its connection to the images of honeysuckle vines and red worms center the rural South as essential in imagining an alternative place and different political futures. Thus, Stallings emphasizes an inherent cultural connection between Southern modes of identification and rural landscapes that nurture resistance.

The concluding chapter is preceded by the Honeysuckle, Not Honey Sucka! Manifesto. In this section, “calls for a moral revival” (Stallings 157) are the tempting honey of the Old South, and “Female, Queer, and Trans Insurgency” (Stallings 158), outside of a moral–amoral binary, “[must] grow, sometimes wildly, above ground and below ground” (Stallings 158). The closing phrase visualizes the final insight of the manifesto in the last chapter:

> if we begin with the premise that decolonial sexuality and gender are as important to insurgency as weaponry and intelligence gathering, especially as it relates to what have been classified as asexual or nonsexual political issues, then maybe the foundation of insurgency becomes a type of vigilante justice that understands that law and legal measurements are already corrupt and cannot be the basis of change alone. (Stallings 169)

The author reasons that unlawful but ethical measurements, which openly center issues of gender and sexuality, might be required when oppressive laws fail to bring about necessary change. This point is most perceptible in the T.R.A.P. (The Ratchet Alliance for Prosperity) Manifesto, which focuses on one of the most pressing current issues facing the rural South, the lack of access to abortion. With this issue, there is not only a need for sexual resistance from “above” (for example, legal activism) but also from “below”—outside of the systems Stallings assumes are contaminated by moral authoritarian thinking, such as the legal system. This is achieved by the author’s framing of the manifesto: it is written as a duet, a “ratchet” alliance, of the fictional hip-hop artist personas Lil La Laveau of Natchez and Midwife Mary. In the subsequent explanatory chapter, midwifery is identified as a historically important shadow institution that improves reproductive health with female practitioners employing “witchy” practices in the South (Stallings 121-24). On the manifesto track, therefore, Midwife Mary is the supporting featured act of an angry Lil La Laveau and their exchange is presented in the style of a genius.com page. Lil La Laveau introduces them, then gives shout-outs to a list of allies, and then proceeds to bemoan the intersectional discrimination that leads to a lack of bodily autonomy for queer people, BIPOC, women, and everyone in between (Stallings 99-103). This takes the form of a trap song, a hip-hop subgenre from Atlanta—trap here, however, also gestures at the metaphorical “entrapment” of people in need of reproductive health care by moral authoritarianism in the South.

By referencing this historical alliance of women seeking to broaden access to reproductive healthcare and bodily autonomy in adverse circumstances, the manifesto encourages self-reflective engagement with moral authority. Due to such instances, I read Stallings’s manifesto as employing and promoting creative place-making practices in the South; its goal is to resist notions of moral authority and dismantle narratives, which are based on harmful community practices in the South. Ultimately, what Stallings’s template for creative place-making challenges, explicitly and implicitly, is Christian white heteropatriarchy. Within this structure, social orders are based on a settler colonialist chronotope, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense, which Stallings acknowledges and addresses.

The Narrative System of the Dirty South

What actually inhibits a narrative from including marginalized experiences? One much-discussed aspect is the issue of narrative temporality, specifically the conceptual gap between queer temporality and narrative temporality. In the following section, I want to contextualize the *Dirty South Manifesto* within this discourse. Therefore, I compare Stallings’s work to another manifesto about the US-American South that has been published recently. Charles M. Blow’s *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto* (2021), similar to Stallings’s text, expresses an urgent need to change the current reality of the Southern states. He also presents a possible model for Southern futurity: a reverse Great Migration. *The Devil You Know* presents an interesting foil to Stallings’s manifesto, not only because of their close publishing dates but also in terms of the Southern narratives they both promote based on their knowledge of and approaches to the South. Blow’s text makes the case for a new Great Migration, a “reverse migration” (39), arguing for its potential to empower Black people politically. The wording “reverse” is telling when put in the context of Judith Roof’s conceptualization of narrative structure. Although Blow’s manifesto is a counter-narrative to metronormative narratives, it proposes only an inversion as an alternative, but it is still paradigmatic. *The Devil You Know* again frames Black success as a linear narrative and neglects the intersectional aspects of gender and sexual orientation by obscuring their relevance.

Black studies scholar Michelle Wright uses the term “linear progress narrative,” which I apply here as well, and notes that advocating for equal rights conceptually aims to be included in this narrative (293). However, Wright also shows how queer temporality is incompatible with linearity due to its inherent processual quality, its composition as a “multitemporal moment rather than a linear narrative” (301). In the field of narrative theory, Jesse Matz sees possibilities for queer narratives in the conceptual decoupling of linear narrativity— which is characterized by a narrative sequence, for example by watching audiovisual media frame by frame—and linear narrative temporality. The narrativity of a story, meaning the recipient’s experience of an array of narrative elements, does not necessarily presuppose linear progress within the narrative meaning. Jesse Matz theorizes this split using Paul Ricoeur's model of readers' narrative engagement based on processes of narrative mimesis (Matz, "Narrative and Narratology" 284-85). Elsewhere, Matz claims that "if we uncouple narrative temporality and teleological futurity, we may discover that the former can subvert the latter in the spirit of queer oppositionality itself—that the allegorical act opens futurity to antinormative alternatives" ("Queer Prospects" 233). Therefore, it seems to be necessary to find sustainable ways of engaging with non-linear narratives and the understanding of queer temporalities may be very helpful here. However, Matz does not really give a concrete approach or a practical implementation as to how this can be done in practice.

Roof's approach to narratives as systems is positioned at this vital intersection of queer narrative engagement, narrative temporality, and non-linearity, and I argue that A *Dirty South Manifesto* is a narrative that lends itself to and benefits from such a conceptual reading. Roof calls for a change in how narrative structure should be understood, from a paradigmatic to a systematic approach (47). Instead of tracing a linear paradigmatic narrative, at the end of which all tensions of the plot are resolved, in our analyses we should understand narrative as systematic. Roof draws on Deleuze and Guattari in her definition of narrative systems, more specifically from their concept of assemblages, insofar as we should always see their potential to already be or become self-repetitive. In other words, systems have affordances that develop versions and generate sets of narrative practices for future use. Roof summarizes narrative systems as "amalgamations of desires, significations, interactions, and transient meanings and functionings" (55). A narrative system consists of morphing nodal points, defined as moments when the narrative enters a meta-level of heightened self-referentiality, and these nodal points relate to each other based on "a system 'rule' or generating principle" (Roof 47). I argue that the generating rule of the structure of A *Dirty South Manifesto* is the metaphor of dirt, which, crucially, is also explained in the text itself. Dirt is examined in its own small manifesto, but it is also distributed throughout the other minor manifestos—the author's fractured vignettes on religious conservatism, dispossession and displacement, bodily autonomy, queer utopian thinking, and the nature of resistance in the South. The decision to write multiple shorter manifestos in different styles decentralizes the narrative to express and represent the multiplicity of narratives and practices needed to found and cultivate a Dirty South and resist injustice.

A multiplicity of narratives also needs multiple literacies, if we want to decode layered meanings, therefore the minor manifestos reiterate in practice what Stallings stresses from the beginning of the book. The author dedicates the first and shortest manifesto to the topic (Slow Tongue Manifesto) but also makes clear that all of them are highly stylized and at times also difficult to read. The reader practices the same method that Stallings theorizes as being necessary: that "the marginalized and dispossessed require literacy practices situated in techniques of the arts to produce an imagination that will facilitate their survival and liberation" (19).

Therefore, with dirt as the generating principle, Stallings makes demands for literacy in word and deed: reading the meanings of the manifestos is intentionally challenging, which leads to a thorough interaction with the text, and the reader immediately engages with the manifesto's direct call for (multi)literacy in order to consider the multifacetedness of the South. The call for action in the narrative is not limited to participation in resistant place-making. Implicitly, the process of reading itself is an exercise of interaction with a communicative medium in a long-form and nuanced way.

Roof states that "story systems easily produce nonbinary, nonoppositional, nonhierarchical, and even potentially nonideologically driven dynamics of telling" and imagines future variations of narrative systems without any attempts at catharsis (49). Because there is no resolution on the ground, meaning the Southern sexual dystopia is an ever-present reality, there can also be no conventional narrative resolution. This tension and its affects remain.

Conceptualizing narratives as systems can lead to a better understanding of queer narratives that focus on individual representations of guiding concepts and generating principles in terms of narrativity, sequentially reiterated in each minor manifesto. Therefore, when the readers reach a textual nodal point, they alternate between a more active mode and a more passive mode. In practice, that means they switch from deciphering the metaphor in the manifestos by themselves to reading the author's elaborations on their potential overarching meanings. To indulge in a visual metaphor myself: Stallings zooms in—on the aestheticization of politics in the minor manifestos—and zooms out—to arrive at and anticipate a political interpretation of her poetry in the following chapters. One example of this, which I have already mentioned, is the T.R.A.P. Manifesto's use of two specific narrative voices, which aesthetically reflect the collaborative solidarity between midwives and people with unwanted pregnancies. It is the generating principle of dirt that keeps the *Dirty South*'s system so dynamic and avoids a fallacy that Lyndsey Ogle warns creative place-making thinkers against:

> Creative placemaking [. . .] cannot simply be concerned with the ways in which art may open the hearts and minds of those resistant to a progressive truth. Rather it must consider how the contexts and circumstances of those thought to be "the opposition," open space to

> question the essentialist narratives that exacerbate political divides. (127)

Stallings accomplishes this mainly through the openness of her narrative structure, which not only invites variation and reiteration but may in fact need both features to adequately accommodate queer temporalities. Overall, the metaphor of dirt is the key to reading each of the minor manifestos and the sexual resistance based on Dirty South music invites others to join in a dirty-deviant rebellion against the oppression of moral authority.

A Concluding Outlook into System Variations

The Dirty South Manifesto not only formulates an overarching framework for Southern activism and art, but it also encourages literacy and sexual resistance through direct engagement and theorization as well as by cultivating new reading practices for the minor manifestos. Narrative systems are prone to variability, and *A Dirty South Manifesto* actively invites engagement on multiple levels, within and outside the text. The conceptual disconnect between the narrative and queer temporality in general, I argue, is circumvented, because Stallings opens up meta-levels of reading and of practices in place, as Judith Roof's concept of narrative systems demands. Ricoeur's narrative theory, which is based on a process of mimesis and has been further developed by Jesse Matz, can be embedded in creative place-making and entails flexible literacy. In other words, by "equipping" readers with multiple reading lenses, political imagination on the basis of place can be furthered, wherein the separation of narrativity and narration is achieved. The meta-repetitiveness of the mimetic process follows the generating principle in places but enjoys freedom of variation.

The Dirty South has been picked up as a theory by Adeerya Johnson and is practiced in Dirty South music by artists such as, I would argue, GloRilla. Johnson highlights one topic connected with sexual resistance that gets somewhat drowned out by the tone and thematic focus of Stallings's manifesto: Black girls' and women's bodily expressions of pleasure, joy, and creativity independent of their connection to sexuality such as dance, which is also one of the essential elements of hip-hop culture. Meanwhile, GloRilla's summer hit of 2022 "F.N.F. (Let's Go)" embraces exactly the dirty ratchetness Stallings calls for to counter the sexual dystopia of the South (see Mamo and GloRilla). Basing a manifesto in hip-hop culture seems even more relevant now than in 2020, as the mainstream impact of contemporary icons from the South such as Megan Thee Stallion has grown since the publication of the manifesto. In a comparative discussion of Megan Thee Stallion and the music icons "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, Nikki Lane asserts that the cultural influence of hip-hop on Black studies and feminisms is analogous to that of blues (514). It is exactly the choice of hip-hop as material that makes Stallings's manifesto a challenge to ideas of a Southern place considered "backward" and possibly illiterate, marked both by deep-seated racism and (Christian) moral authoritarianism against queer people.

By collectively employing the minor manifestos, which each represent different facets of Black Southern culture, the author also furthers readers' literacy, which produces nuanced reading practices fundamental to this new Dirty South. This multiliteracy can be reiterated endlessly. Therefore, the last sentence of the final minor manifesto is again a variation of the recurring call to action: "Be the red worm in the dirt. Be the honeysuckle on the vine. / Honeysuckle . . . Not a Honey Sucka!" (Stallings 158). With this wordplay, a twofold meaning is conveyed: Firstly, it is a final call to action not be a "sucka" for moralizing honey, not to fall for the arguments of moral authoritarianism. Secondly, we see in practice that a narrative system rejects paradigmatic conclusions by exaggerating the fact that narratives always already contain new beginnings within an ending. It is the suspended "middle" of a narrative, where non-normative sexualities can be located, because narrative endings, death, and heteronormative orgasm always imply each other. The first part of Roof's book *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (1996) is based on this very triangulation.

The Dirty South Manifesto embraces "dirty" sexual expressions, whether "obscene," absurd, empowering, or simply cathartic. It calls on its readers, Southern or not, to radicalize their imagination. Especially in the ways the narration of the Dirty South concept invites variations, the text engages readers' utopian reinterpretations of what it could mean to be situated in the South. This gestures at the political potential it holds for queer and feminist place-making.

Notes

[1] The term "Dirty South" was coined by the rap group Goodie Mob in 1995 and was always artistic as well as political to some degree from the beginning: it stood for a new understanding of Southern cultural and socio-economic historical contexts through a Black lens. As more diverse representation of artists in terms of gender and sexuality has increased since the 1990s, the influence of the Dirty South on mainstream music has led to a broader visibility of Black Southern people's self-expression.

[2] This essay is part of my larger project on the manifesto form at the intersection of affect theory, queer-feminist politics, and narrative theory within the context of the current US-centric upsurge of the (literary) manifesto.

Notes

[3] See, for instance, Casey, Edward S., *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, U. of California P, 1997; and Cresswell, Timothy, “Place,” *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift, Elsevier, 2009, pp. 169–77.

[4] This point about the embodied effects of marginalized people living in and moving through places and encountering objects, which are not suited to them, is taken from my reading of Sara Ahmed’s work on orientation in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).

[5] See PMLA, vol. 131, no. 1, 2016, pp. 157-92.

[6] A notable example Stallings uses is the case of the “Cocks not Glocks” campaign initiated by Jessica Jin at the University of Texas, Austin, which protested the open-carry campus gun laws in Texas by open-carrying dildos to the university campus and therefore exposing the fallacies of moral authority through obscenity and absurdity.

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Biography

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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, Midwestern 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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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.7

> "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

Joshua Parker is an associate professor of English and American studies at the University of Salzburg, with interests in place and space in American literature, transatlantic relations, and narrative theory.

A Conversation between Contemporary Queer Writers for *AmLit*’s Special Issue on “Queer Ruralisms”

Chris Belcher and Carter Sickels
University of Southern California, North Carolina State University

Biographies

Chris Belcher is a jointly-appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies and the Writing Program at the University of Southern California (USC). In 2016, she completed her PhD in English at USC, where she wrote about class, whiteness, and the queerness of rural America across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since then, under her working name, Natalie West, she edited the acclaimed anthology *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival* (The Feminist Press, 2021). Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, *Catapult*, *BOMB*, *Electric Literature*, *Autostraddle*, *Public Books*, and *them*. She is broadly interested in sexual politics and sexual labor, and the history of feminist thought and activism as it intersects with both. Born and raised in West Virginia, she now lives in Los Angeles. Her debut memoir, *Pretty Baby* (Simon & Schuster/Avid Reader Press, 2022), is a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Memoir.

Carter Sickels is the author of the novel *The Prettiest Star,* published by Hub City Press, and winner of the 2021 Southern Book Prize and the Weatherford Award. *The Prettiest Star* was also selected as a Kirkus Best Book of 2020 and a Best LGBT Book of 2020 by *O Magazine*. His debut novel *The Evening Hour* (Bloomsbury, 2012), an Oregon Book Award finalist and a Lambda Literary Award finalist, was adapted into a feature film that premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. His essays and fiction have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Atlantic*, *Oxford American*, *Poets & Writers*, *BuzzFeed*, *Joyland*, *Guernica*, *Catapult*, and *Electric Literature*. Carter is the recipient of the 2013 Lambda Literary Emerging Writer Award, and has earned fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, the Sewanee Writers’ Conference, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and MacDowell. He is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at North Carolina State University.

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DOI: 10.25364/27.4:2024.2.8

Chris's debut memoir, *Pretty Baby* (2022), begins where she did: in Appalachia. The book moves with her, from her hometown in rural West Virginia to coastal Los Angeles, where she began a career as a professional dominatrix to make ends meet while she earned her PhD. Her memoir is what scholars of queer rural America have called "metronormative," in the sense that it is a narrative of flight: a queer kid leaving rural America for a purportedly freer life in an urban, coastal elsewhere. And yet, the book challenges that narrative as well, showing how the (sex) life she lives in LA echoes many of the lessons in desirability, labor, misogyny, and feminine value that she learned as a teenage girl in Appalachia.

In an opposite trajectory, Carter's second novel, *The Prettiest Star* (2020), follows a young gay man, Brian Jackson, who learns of his seroconversion in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and returns home to be with his family in his rural Ohio hometown. After living for six years in New York, Brian loses his partner, Shawn, as well as a number of friends, and returns to a family that has experienced HIV/AIDS in the way that many families in rural and middle America did: at a distance (or so they assumed), through media coverage that misled Brian's own father to believe he should be eating off separate plates and hateful campaigns waged behind pulpits, railing against a gay community thought to have lived in sin, and now paying the price. But Brian's homecoming is also punctuated by shimmering moments of compassion and care, and his hometown will be forever changed by his return.

Chris: Thank you for embarking on this conversation with me, Carter. I would like to kick off this dive into both of our "queer ruralisms" with a question about home. My home for over a decade has been Los Angeles, but I grew up in a place that feels like its opposite in almost every way: New Haven, West Virginia, a tiny town of 1,400 nestled into a bend in the Ohio River, near the place where West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio meet. Can you tell me a bit about your "home" now, and where you came from, and how the two relate?

Carter: I grew up in a small rural town in south-central Ohio—mostly pastures and fields, churches, and country roads. We had about seventy students in my high school graduating class. Football reigned and any kind of difference made you a target. It was the 1980s and early 1990s—I didn't know any gay people, certainly no trans people. After college, I moved to New York City for almost a decade, and then spent about six years in Portland, Oregon. Then, in 2015 I accepted a job at Eastern Kentucky University to teach, and a couple of years ago, I moved to Cincinnati. I never thought I'd come back to Ohio, but now I live just a couple of hours away from where I grew up—sometimes it's very surreal.

I've always felt at home in cities and I've spent much of my adult life in them—the diversity, queer community, access to art, all of it makes me feel alive and safer. But I've also missed the place I came from—not so much the town itself where I grew up, but southeastern Ohio, the Appalachian part of the state, where my grandparents and most of my extended family lived, a place that had always felt like home to me. Those contradictions—feeling stifled and oppressed by a rural place, but also a profound connection—drive my fiction. In my writing I'm trying to shine a light on queerness in rural spaces, to complicate the dominant narratives around rural places and the people who live there.

How do you think growing up in rural West Virginia shaped you as a writer, or can you say more about what it's like now to leave your home in LA and visit West Virginia?

Chris: There's a growing movement of anti-intellectualism in my home state: suspicion about college professors, critical race theory, gender studies, books that might open minds. Of course, I'm seeing this as an outsider now—and the living embodiment of all of those fears! I try to keep up with left-leaning news sources from Appalachia now, in addition to the ways that mainstream journalists paint the region and its people, and while I know, rationally, that there are plenty of folks who challenge this narrative, I've also listened to right-wing talk radio on the long drives I've taken across the state when I've gone home to visit, and I know the hold that those voices have over the people who grew up like I did. The seeds of those suspicions about writers and intellectuals were there when I was younger. Much of that was structural, not as ideological as it seems today. I went to pretty severely under-resourced schools growing up, and there was that mistrust of those who were different, as you mentioned. "Writer" signaled *difference*. While my parents encouraged me to go to college—and I went to a state school in West Virginia where I *was* able to write for the first time and make that central to who I was—it wasn't until adulthood that I felt I was able to fully embrace the creative parts of myself.

As a result of that delay, and this is a product of where I'm from, it took me a long time to see writing as work. I grew up knowing work as something that's done in a hard hat and steel-toed boots, that you leave for with a lunch box, that you clock into and come home tired. It took me a while to see the time I put into writing as valuable and productive. When I go home now, this still makes me feel like an outsider, which I guess was always part of my experience there. But still, I have some kind of guilt, or shame around not returning, as you have, to be one of those writers like those I met when I went to college, who were absolutely monumental in my formation of self. Despite it, returning is a difficult thing for me.

Speaking of returns, *Entertainment Weekly* has called *The Prettiest Star* a "brutally fresh kind of homecoming novel" (Canfield and Sollosi). Can you talk about the place that your protagonist, Brian, calls home, and why you think he was called to return?

Carter: Brian grew up in a very small town in southeastern Ohio, which is not far from the West Virginia border. It's a beautiful part of the state, replete with rolling hills and forested land, but also quite isolated. Brian came of age in the 1970s and couldn't wait to get out. He made it to New York in 1980 and found the queer and artistic life he'd been dreaming about. He discovered community, freedom, sex, joy. That's not an uncommon story. We all know—and many of us have lived—that story of the queer exodus to cities, these places that have taken us in when our own hometowns and families wouldn't. It wasn't hard for me to imagine why Brian had to leave his small, conservative town, but I also think he felt a deep, inexplicable desire to return to his first home. He returns partly because he's lost his boyfriend and so many friends to AIDS, and he's tired of the ghosts and doesn't want to be in the city. But he also misses the home where he grew up—the woods, the hills, the trees. He also wants to reconcile with his family. He wants to be seen, to be loved by them.

I've always loved homecoming stories, how the best ones dig into the uneasy, contradicting feelings people hold toward home, but I think especially for queer people, the homecoming story is so much more potentially complicated and fraught. For this story, I also wanted to tell a story about the AIDS crisis that looked at rural America and the queer men who returned to the small towns they'd once fled, to the rural communities and families who'd rejected them.

In *Pretty Baby*, you write perceptively and candidly about how difficult it was growing up queer in a rural place. In one scene, after you and your queer friends are run out of a roadside bar, you write, "I wasn't sure if it took a lover or fighter to survive being gay in the country, if you needed to take shit or give it to make it out alive. I did know that whatever it took to stay, I didn't have it. [. . .] I wanted nothing to do with it. I wanted nothing more than a way out" (Belcher 115-16). Can you talk more about how you came into your own queerness in a place that didn't offer many queer models or support, or how maybe the idea of leaving that very place was tied into your queerness?

Chris: I came into my queerness in the ways I think many folks growing up in isolating places do: through pop culture. I was coming of age in the late

1990s, early 2000s, so the portals to queerness that I had available to me were pre-Internet-as-we-know-it and not exactly the best representations, but they mattered a lot to me: MTV's *The Real World*, daytime talk shows like *Jerry Springer*, the few movies I'm sure I'd now find to be highly problematic, like 1992's *Ladybugs* about a boy who dressed up as a girl to play on a failing girls' soccer team, and 1985's *Just One of the Guys*, in which a high-school girl masquerades as a boy to be taken seriously as a high school journalist. These aren't exactly positive queer representations, made by and for queer viewers, but I took what I needed from them. They were lifelines to worlds where people could do gender and sexuality differently than what I saw around me. When I first read José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification—his way of understanding how folks with minoritarian identities exist within majority culture, not always by creating or even accessing subculture and fringe cultures, but by taking mainstream culture and transforming it for themselves—it really resonated with my experiences of queerness growing up (Muñoz). This is why these recent movements to ban books and stifle queer speech and cultural production in many places across the country are terrifying on the one hand, in their movement toward Christofascism, but on the other hand, I know that they can never truly stifle us. The kids and teens who need those portals to queerness will find them, one way or another. We are resilient, even though we shouldn't have to be.

Carter: All of this resonates so much with me. Queers are experts at existing and surviving in that kind of liminal space you talk about—and creating identities and finding representation wherever we can, even when we may not yet have the language or understanding for it. When I was a kid and a teen, there weren't any books with openly queer characters, at least none that I came across. But I remember being obsessed with S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967). I think I found something in that book about tender masculinity and alternative families (there are no parents, just a crew of boys) that spoke to me in ways that I didn't yet understand. Like many queer kids, I learned about the world, and about myself, through books, discovering these possibilities for other ways of living. And now, as you point out, it's no surprise that, tied into all the anti-trans and anti-queer legislation, we're seeing this organized effort by conservatives to ban books, to stifle ideas and free speech. It is terrifying and deeply damaging. But I do believe they'll fail—they can't stop us from thinking or creating, or existing.

Chris: I actually want to dig into those organized efforts to stifle queerness, but first I'd like to talk about the *disorganized* efforts to do the same: the homophobia, racism, and misogyny that were simply in the air I breathed throughout my early life. I write about it in *Pretty Baby*, and Brian experiences it firsthand in *The Prettiest Star*. It may not seem like it, since that's such a presence in the book, but it was really difficult for me to write about these hard parts of growing up in Appalachia. I felt like I was betraying the place that raised me, or airing dirty laundry, as my grandma would have said. In *The Prettiest Star*, Brian faces extreme forms of homophobia, and fear of HIV/AIDS, when he returns to his rural Ohio hometown. Could you speak a bit about your experiences representing the problems of Appalachia for a readership that might come to your work with negative stereotypes and assumptions of their own about the people who live there?

Carter: I probably struggled more with questions about representing Appalachia, especially around questions of my insider/outsider status, with my debut novel *The Evening Hour* (2012). It's set in the coalfields of West Virginia—where I've never lived—and looks at the opioid epidemic, rural poverty and its ties to extraction companies, homophobia, and violence and intimacy between men. I experienced some anxiety writing and sharing that story, but ultimately I think it's critical that writers don't gloss over or romanticize the more difficult realities. Part of a writer's job is to pay close attention and to bring the reader inside, as close as possible. Intention also matters—to not sensationalize poverty, for example, but write the place and characters with complexity and nuance.

I do hope my books reach a wide cross-section of readers, but I'm especially writing for that queer person who grew up or lives in Appalachia or in another rural place and needs to see their life represented and recognized, who needs to feel seen. With *The Prettiest Star*, it sometimes felt challenging to write about the community and family's homophobia, especially since I was also writing from the point of view of one homophobic character, Brian's mother. I had to step into her shoes, to develop her as a vulnerable and empathetic person, but not justify or excuse her bad behavior. For inspiration, I turned to many of my literary queer influences who write so intimately about their lives or take the readers into these uncomfortable spaces, many of them nonfiction writers: Paul Lisicky, Melissa Febos, James Baldwin. Dorothy Allison, of course, writes about rural queerness and exposes familial homophobia and violent misogyny. She says—and I think of this as the gospel of Dorothy Allison—that you have to tell the hard stories, you have to write what scares the shit out of you.

You also write the hard stories in *Pretty Baby*, and since this is a memoir, you're making yourself even more vulnerable. You're writing about sex work, class, and academia, and about growing up queer in West Virginia and all the shame that came with that. I would love to hear you talk more about how you negotiated being vulnerable on the page with the work of examining these issues with such clarity and complexity, or can you say more about how you reconciled telling these stories with your fear around "airing dirty laundry?"

Chris: In order to do that thing you describe—to live by the gospel of Dorothy Allison and write what scared the shit out of me—I had to forget about the reader until I finished a draft. I know that probably sounds terrible coming from a writer who feels a responsibility to the often-maligned community she's representing, but I think honesty sometimes requires the quieting of an anticipated response so that you can hear the truth of your own experience. And the truth of my experience doesn't always reflect so well on that community. I've also received emails from some people from my past—like my high-school guidance counselor, some acquaintances from my teenage years—who have told me that they had no idea I was experiencing the kinds of violence I experienced as a teenager, and if they had, they would have done more to stop it. That's a testament to how confined we are to our own perspectives—how we are living in our own stories—and our stories don't represent everyone who moves through them. That makes the question of representation all the more difficult. It has meant a lot to me to receive those emails.

But I think it's crucial if you're going to take on the responsibility of holding a mirror up to your community to depict it for what it is to also hold the same mirror up to yourself. In *Pretty Baby*, I wrote about the ways that I too am implicated in the harms that were done in the place where I grew up. For instance, I wrote about bullying another queer girl in my high school before I came out. It's something I'm ashamed of, but that shame is mine to hold and to reveal if I want to write an honest story. I imagine that representation must get even more complicated when writing fiction, as you don't really have the option to hold that mirror up to yourself.

If you'll allow me to dip into the queer theory archive, *The Prettiest Star* had me thinking a lot about Jack Halberstam's 2005 book *In a Queer Time and Place*, particularly the ways he follows Michel Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life" toward the claim that queerness is, primarily, an "alternative temporality" that allows queers to imagine futures according to logics that lie outside of the markers of a heteronormative "good life"—birth, marriage, reproduction, death—a life that Brian's parents expected him to live. Halberstam claims that these alternative temporalities emerged most obviously in cultural productions related to HIV/AIDS. Brian, like other queer men you mention, returned home to the place he once fled, when he knew that he was dying, when that future he could imagine for himself was cut short. Could you speak about the relationship Brian has to both place and *time*, and perhaps how the two intersect?

Carter: Oh, please do dip—and I love that you're bringing Halberstam into the conversation. His work was formative for me, especially that book, in which he also writes about the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and trans embodiment in rural spaces.

My character Brian lived in that alternative temporality in New York, living a queer life outside of those heteronormative markers you mention. It was a time of love, sex, community, and art—and he was living and envisioning a future for himself, which is cut short by AIDS, as it was for so many queer men and for the larger queer community. Brian goes back to his small town, very much a heteronormative space, but that space is ruptured—expanded—when Brian's best friend Annie, a queer woman, comes from New York to help take care of him. There is also a gay man, Andrew, who never left the area and joins their little group, and they're carrying each other through. Brian builds a community of caretakers, which also includes some members of his biological family.

As I'm thinking about how this intersects with time, I'll turn back to Halberstam, who says about the effect of AIDS on temporality, "The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now" (2). When he's home, Brian uses a video camera to record himself, and his chapters are constructed as video diaries. He knows he's dying—there is that terrible clock—but at the same time, he emphasizes the present. In these videos, he's speaking to the viewer—the reader—in present tense. Sometimes he's talking about his boyfriend, his memories of New York, while he's in the space of his childhood home, which was where he first began to recognize his queerness. Maybe this is one way that he's able to hold onto that queer temporality and also queer the home?

Chris: When I was younger, and I'm guessing it was similar for you, as you mentioned *Boys Don't Cry*, queerness and rural America were decidedly marked by tragedy: the killings of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard were at the center of a story about rural America as a hostile place for queers, and those queers who didn't or couldn't leave the country were presumed, by many, to lead lives of sadness and danger. I feel like there was a moment, perhaps in a post-hate crimes legislation, pre-Trump America, when it felt right to challenge those narratives and reclaim the country for queers. I felt some of that when I read *The Prettiest Star*, particularly in that community of care that rose up around Brian, to hold him upon his return to southern Ohio. Do you think, given all the anti-trans and "don't say gay" legislation that's sweeping conservative state legislatures, that that time is over? That it's more difficult to imagine communities of care rising up within and around queer folks in rural America today?

Carter: I hope it's not over. I think we always need to challenge the reductive narrative that queers living in rural areas are doomed, and, at the same time, we can't look away from the horror we're witnessing right now—the fascist, anti-trans legislation in Republican-led states and the intense transphobia that's being spewed regularly, not only on Fox and all over social media, but in editorials in the *New York Times*.

I think this also comes back to this issue of representation and the need to tell more queer and rural stories. When I was kid, I remember watching this episode of *Oprah* about Mike Sisco, a gay, HIV-positive man who was kicked out of the swimming pool in a town in West Virginia, and this was one of the seeds for writing *The Prettiest Star*. I remember the shame I felt watching the episode—everyone in the audience viewed him as a monster and didn't care that he was sick, and some of them wanted him to die. I was learning that to be queer was to die young, or to live a lonely life in which you were shunned by family members or your community. But, now, looking back, I also think this episode stuck with me for another reason—it was the first time I'd ever seen a gay man who lived in a town like mine, who wasn't wealthy or living in a city, on television. He went on the *Oprah* show, with his sisters sitting next to him in support, in front of millions of people, to declare that, as a gay man with AIDS, his life had value.

I was in my early twenties when Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena were murdered, and those stories reiterated the narrative that so many of us already knew, that to be queer in a rural place could only end in a violent death. I remember going to see *Boys Don't Cry* when I was living in New York, years before I came out as trans, and how the film undid me. I felt this mix of dread but also a kind of excitement because it was the first time I'd ever seen a trans-masc character on the screen, someone who looked like me or who I wanted to look like. But at the same time, it was horrific—another story about what happens to trans and queer people, especially if you're in rural America.

I think most queer and trans people are experiencing this intense undercurrent of fear and anxiety right now: what is next? Especially if you're living in a red state. But that's why I think it's so important to keep telling these stories. Queer and trans people have always been in rural places—with all different levels of visibility and hiddenness—and often living full lives, creating homes and communities and families and collective spaces. And, in response to this onslaught of transphobia, there is major resistance all across rural America. I'd love for more LGBTQ+ organizations and communities in more liberal states or cities to understand this, and offer more help and resources to the queer and trans activists living in rural America who are fighting every day. For people interested in learning more about queer and rural existence, please check out the work of my friend Rae Garringer—they started the oral history project Country Queers almost a decade ago. It's now a fantastic podcast that gives a much-needed platform to queer and trans people living in rural America.

Chris: I agree—those of us who have the privilege to tell our stories, we have a responsibility to counter the narratives that queer kids everywhere, but especially in Red states, are hearing about themselves in the media and, I'm sure, in their schools and churches, and even their own families. When I was coming out, the gay marriage debate was being waged all around me, and I'll be forever marked by the adults in my life talking about my civil rights—my right to love and be loved in the same way as those around me—as if I weren't right there, absorbing all of it. Every time an anti-trans bill passes, my heart breaks for the queer and trans kids, especially in rural America where they have fewer allies and resources, who must understand, like I did then, that the elimination of trans people is understood by many in this country to be a desirable outcome of their politics, that the suppression of trans lives is at very least a political strategy, that there are those who would rather see them die than help them live. What else are we to do but tell our stories, to show those kids that we are out here living, and they will live too.

My hope is that, despite the efforts on the right to suppress queerness and transness in public life, kids will find oral histories like Country Queers, now that these kinds of projects have moved out of academic libraries and into the podcast sphere. I'm heartened by the thought that if I was able to drive a few towns over, rent gay movies from Blockbuster, and watch them with the volume low at midnight when my parents were sleeping, that queer kids today can access these kinds of stories on their phones, with their headphones on. The mission of the Country Queers project is to decrease isolation by pushing back against the notion that the only way for queer people to find happiness is to flee for a city. And to tell a diverse set of stories about small-town queer life, across race, class, age, ability, gender identity, and religion. I could have used that as a kid, and I'm grateful to those creatives who make these stories available for rural queer kids today.

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ISSN 2789-889X