

Homosexuals in Unexpected Places?

A Comment

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Laying foundations for future historians and theorists of gender and sexuality beyond the metropolis, these rising scholars demonstrate that the rural is complex physical and intellectual terrain, immensely productive, brimming with queer possibilities. I'll begin my comments by addressing Scott Herring's provocative paper, which employs theoretical concepts of use to all. Then, I'll comparatively assess aspects of Nicholas Syrett's and Colin Johnson's historical studies. I'll close with an attempt to put Mary Gray's vitally important contemporary study into conversation with these earlier treatments of gender transgressive, homoeroticized spheres—as well as a recent problematic series in the *Washington Post*, which suggests we must remain ever alert to the need to deconstruct urbanist accounts of queer life in the countryside.

In his stimulating and very smart readings of the photographs of Michael Meads, Scott Herring offers countless insights into the complex dialectics of the country and the city, rural and metro, the normative (both gay and straight) and the queer (hetero and homo), the here-and-now and the there-and-then. He productively theorizes anachronistic time. And he positions Meads's work as a crucial intervention into or perhaps against one clearly-discernible trajectory of representation. It "agitates a visual tradition of urban gay male spectatorship," "wrecking" it, scrambling it, muddling it. He concludes that the "anachronism" of Michael Meads's work challenges. Now, in hopes of enhancing Herring's incredibly helpful interpretations, I must say that I think both the anachronism and thus the challenge are just a bit overstated.

Certainly Meads, but I fear even Herring, may participate in a classic spatial and temporal othering of the South, equating the rural with the pre-modern. In an earlier version of his essay, Herring leaves “backwardness” outside of quotation marks and refers to the Confederate battle flag as a “dated icon of racial hatred.” Still incorporated within the state flag of Mississippi, still inciting controversy as far north as Gettysburg, and still appearing on thousands of bedroom walls, lawns, and automobiles, including those driven by Meads’s subjects, the symbol remains a red-hot issue in contemporary politics. And when rainbow-colored Confederate flags turn up at gay events from Atlanta to Pensacola, I’m not convinced that the white boys waving them are engaged in anti-racist activism. While Herring “acknowledges outright” what he previously has referred to as “the suspect trans-historicism that supports” Meads’s project, he still seems to endorse Meads’s contention that *Allen and Justin* had a rare bond that defies “analysis or classification”—i.e., that is *not* gay. I find this perhaps counterproductive, and I find myself much more interested in the way this disavowal is echoed in Herring’s assertion that Meads “pitches his photographs out of a discernable gay art history,” which in turn is echoed in critic John Paul Ricco’s writerly attempts, cited elsewhere, to exist on “the Outside of art history.”¹

I’m troubled by Meads’s sometimes sentimental, uncritical relationship to, and depiction of, the rural. In addition to these images of people he refers to as “friends”—some “of the most intelligent, charismatic people I ha[ve] ever known”—Meads displays on his website color photographs shot in a straightforward, direct style, of unpeopled landscapes of “beautiful” northeast Alabama as he laments “development”: “fertilized lawns, gated subdivisions, strips malls and . . . multi-million dollar churches.” Disavowing nostalgia, he nonetheless says he misses the studio he once had in Eastaboga, and another in Auburn. All this he does from his home in New Orleans. Just as critics have asked, to whom does the Virginia-born, New York-based lesbian documentarian Ellen Spiro *send* her Southern filmic *Greetings from Out Here*, I would ask of Meads, for whom does he construct these *Alabama Souvenirs*? Herring has said they have “little interest in *any* narrative of . . . sexual identity,” but I would assert they have a critical stake, a financial interest, in perhaps the most well-developed of gay meta-narratives: the rural-to-urban migration tale. For who are these Chelsea boys—lately viewing Meads’s work alongside that of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, and Wolfgang Tillmans—but the protein- and Testosterone-fueled refugees from the schoolyard bullies of Peoria, Eastaboga, and Brandon? Strikingly similar, but on a different class plane, photographer Louis Zoeller Bickett II snaps posed and simply composed images of shirtless Kentuckian George Haviland Argo III—amidst barns, fences, hills, and trees—for issue 12 of the Amsterdam-based *Butt*, “the international magazine for homosexuals.”²

All, in my view, are inextricably bound up in a prelapsarian representation of “a kind of fall,” as Raymond Williams has called it: in this case, a pastoral longing for, perhaps an S/M fantasy of, what might have been—say, what we might have got up to with those racist white country boys—had we not all been

compelled to head for the city and leave behind the rural spaces: always-already anachronistic in their agricultural past and depopulated present. With his frequent melancholy references to having now lost touch with these men, with his obsessive jottings about their marital status, Meads not only wonders what has become of them, but he also—seemingly unselfconsciously—suggests what has become of himself and those who view his work. Put simply, why try to de-queer this work when it is so saturated with gay or proto-gay historical references and so given to homoerotic viewings, as Meads implicitly concedes? Why not focus as well on mediation and reception, queer and otherwise? I trust Herring will, of course, in longer versions of this work, and I trust he'll have yet more impressive insights to offer.³

If the flag remains a key component and rich—indeed, richly problematic—symbol of this outsider art from what C. Vann Woodward called the “perverse section,” then perhaps it might be useful to put it into conversation with other Southern cultural producers concerned with legacies of racism, rural decline, and suburban sterility—say the early film and photography of William Eggleston and certainly the more explicitly anti-racist work of William Christenberry: his fetishized and ominously photographed Klan dolls, other images of white hatred, and his lovingly sculptural works of Southern vernacular architecture. When I first read a Herring assertion that this “‘redneck’ photography courts a historical master-narrative of ‘heritage’ only to undermine it,” I apparently mis-read it, thinking *not* that he referred to the way these images “fail standard classifications of *gay* art,” but rather to the way they *queer* the pervasive white *Southern* master-narratives of “heritage,” the word most frequently conjoined to the symbol that is the Confederate flag. That analysis I would very much like to see from Herring.⁴

Addressing the first half of the twentieth century, Colin Johnson and Nicholas Syrett suggest that we might look to two particular rural homosocial realms in search of *homosexual*—and gender transgressive—possibilities. Johnson points us to large-scale, peacetime, federal government mobilizations such as the Civilian Conservation Corps. Staged and everyday performances of gender prove to be revealing precursors of the World War II GI drag so perceptively analyzed by Allan Berube in *Coming Out under Fire*. Syrett likewise stresses the importance of theatrical cross-dressing and off-stage effeminacy and aestheticism in the context of small town and rural university settings—in this case, an Ivy League college—and the all-male spheres of fraternity housing, both on and off campus. To these, I would add that we might focus productively on federal land-grant universities, rural Historically Black Colleges and Universities, women’s colleges and sororities (as has already been undertaken),⁵ tribal colleges, and university towns generally—long bastions of liberal thought in sparsely-populated, otherwise conservative states. I’m reminded of Jesse Helms’s proposition that the North Carolina research triangle of Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill should be cordoned off with a big pink fence.

While Johnson has helpfully mined Pete Daniel's important cultural history of the South at midcentury, *Lost Revolutions*, to deconstruct all-male beauty pageants and womanless weddings, Syrett too could benefit from Daniel's discussions of fraternity life and the historical parameters of male gender-nonconformity—then and now. A marvellously suggestive photograph from midcentury Cleveland, Mississippi, of a couple effectively embracing—one cross-dressed, his Delta State College fraternity brother tight behind him—Daniel reprints as evidence of Greek-letter organizations' gender instability and fluidity. However, at the end of the twentieth century, the archivists at Delta State forbade my using the photo in a book addressed to *sexual* non-conformity, speaking volumes about institutional imposition and the limits of transgressive interpretation in our own day.

Johnson can and no doubt will, in expanded versions of this work, develop stronger linkages between gender insubordination and homosexual interaction among CCC enrollees. Seemingly first among historians to uncover documents establishing “the existence of gay sex in the CCC camps,” Martin Duberman, in *About Time*, published their elaborate passages about sexual intercourse among small town and rural men at three camps, two located in rural Texas. Informal estimates from those camps asserted that from 40 to 50 percent of enrollees engaged in oral and/or anal sex with other boys and men. Now based at Indiana University, Johnson informs me that access to the files of the neighboring Kinsey Institute—whose informant network supplied the uncatalogued reports Duberman cited—is augmenting and transforming the nature of his own project.⁶

With extraordinary care and judiciousness, Johnson discusses both the potential pitfalls and the promise of using innuendo as historical evidence. While styling his own appropriately campy and pithy prose, he further urges readings of transvestism that account for the transparency of the masquerade, particularly “intentionally garish and unconvincing” drag as compared to what historian Marybeth Hamilton more formally separates out as “female impersonation.” Whereas the CCC's “Roughhouse” Symanski and consequently Johnson invoke Mae West and *The Drag*, Hamilton cites another of West's works to further distinguish important queered, raced, class relations, likely of relevance to both Johnson and Syrett's work. Hamilton argues convincingly that “at the turn of the century female impersonation was deemed *particularly* [well] suited to middle-class taste, *particularly* fit for women and children. Emerging as a theatrical specialty in minstrel shows in the late 1860s, it was created with precisely that public in mind.” But “while vaudeville hailed impersonators as virile men transforming themselves through magical skills of performance, Mae West”—particularly in her even more controversial, 1928 play *Pleasure Man*—“suggested a far more sensational reading: that female impersonators were homosexuals engaged in an act of self-expression, a flamboyant display of their ‘womanly’ sexual selves. . . . [T]heir effeminacy extended to their taste in sexual partners.”⁷

Whereas Johnson concludes his impressive essay—slightly to my discomfort—by suggesting that its “most radical implication . . . may lie in what it says

about the history of white, male *heterosexuality* in America,” I would encourage him to consider another large synthetic argument, again with reliance on Marybeth Hamilton. For as she demonstrates, in the African-American performance cultures of New Orleans and, intricately interrelated, on the juke-joint road-show circuit, black musicians and their audiences, both urban and rural, could flamboyantly violate everyday gender norms, and further, as additional scholarship hints, could carve out enabling social spaces for taboo sexuality, especially with the aid of intoxicants—which Syrett rightly references. According to Hamilton, *all* these sins were connoted when Little Richard—*aka* Princess Lavonne—before his career as a recording artist routinely declared from the stage, “I’m the King of the Blues. And the Queen too.” In other words, once Johnson more fully evidences his as-yet necessarily underarticulated claims about the “folk traditions of female impersonation” rural men “brought with them” into dense arenas of male congregation, he can perhaps pinpoint, earlier than previously assumed, the emergence of a newly national, mass-mediated, syncretic performance culture, informed by—indeed, fundamentally fuelled by—both rural and urban, black and white, working and middle class, male and female gender-bending sensibilities.⁸

Class is certainly crucial to the understanding of Syrett’s more circumscribed gay or proto-gay community at Beaver Meadow, Vermont, across the river and up the road from Dartmouth. Though the limits of the sources are acknowledged in the notes, I would encourage him to pursue further the question of ownership of the house. For as he concedes, with admirable scholarly integrity, it was select students’ “money” that “had purchased for them the same sorts of pleasures and protection that others were finding in larger cities.” “Their class status” granted the “free[dom] to experiment.” Indeed, this may be less a middle-class than upper-class phenomenon, and may make Beaver Meadow less akin to agrarian queer networks and more in line with contemporaneous urban elite retreats from Taormina to Tangier, and contemporary A-gay destinations from Pensacola to Russian River. But to return to the local, I look forward to Syrett’s further speculations on the fraught class dynamics of gender and sexual transgression for house *tenants* beholden to house *landlords* or *landladies*, not to mention the occasional drunken reveller who stayed over, on the sofa or in someone’s bed, for only a night or two.

Mary Gray argues that “even within queer narratives of the recent rural past, private house parties” not unlike those discussed by Syrett “serve as the central location of queer possibility and gathering.” She builds on this historical literature—which *does* in fact find queer possibilities if not large collectivities in rural churches, schools, workplaces, and roadsides—by carefully documenting self-conscious LGBT appropriations of small town and rural establishments such as Christian bookstores, county libraries, gas stations, and other pliable spaces. This exciting work suggests that “we must rethink what constitutes ‘The Public’ in the rural United States.” Further, her study “challenge[s] the prevailing sense

that rural terrains are void of visible non-heteronormative genders and sexualities.”

With Gray, we should continually ask how and why this conventional wisdom persists, year after year, decade after decade. With her skillful interpretations, drawn from nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, she quickly unravels these logics, convincingly demonstrating that contemporary “queer identity work done in rural places is differently but not necessarily less declarative than the pronunciations associated with urban LGBT communities.” Indeed, I’m convinced that the problem lies less in failures of rural queer articulation than in failures of urban liberal attentiveness. Big city writers such as the *Washington Post*’s Anne Hull go off in search of rural queer affliction and inevitably “find” it—and discursively reproduce it.

In her September 2004 series, based on “hundreds of hours” of interviews and observation, Hull adopts the very rhetorical strategy that Gray critiques. With her focus on 17-year-old gay Oklahoman Michael Shackelford, who attempted suicide and wound up in Laureate Psychiatric Clinic and Hospital—as is explained in the first lines of her second day’s story—Hull “frames queer youth sexualities and genders as an individual mental health issue (or crisis) rather than as vibrant, collectively negotiated identities.” While I would not want to dismiss the increased statistical likelihood of suicide for LGBT youth in the country *and* the city, this writerly habit of individuating rural queers as the only gay in the village dies hard. It extends even into the psyche, with condescending outside observers claiming a keen awareness of the observed’s lack of awareness. Hull claims that Shackelford “doesn’t exactly know how to be gay in rural Oklahoma”; “he has no clue what to do or say”; he “can’t quite grasp the concept of same-sex marriage.” He “mistakes” the vanity of one boyfriend, we are told, for glamour. In gay social gatherings, his new boyfriend from Los Angeles is “a natural, but Michael is hopeless.”⁹

What is most striking for me in the *Post* series—confirming Gray’s perceptive account—is the way that rural queer collectivities constantly reassert themselves even when journalists fail to notice, even when the lonely-gay-county-boy narratives unwittingly expose them. On the one hand, Hull claims that “male butterflies [*sic*] are rare in Sand Springs” and that Michael Shackelford is in “new and unknown territory.” On the other hand, she mentions in passing that Shackelford has not one, not two, but three gay uncles. She laments that there is “no openly gay teacher at the high school” and only “a handful of openly gay students” but then can’t help but report that at the first meeting of the school’s Gay–Straight Alliance—launched with seed money from yet another local queer predecessor, Broadway star and alumnus Sam Harris—“twenty-two students attend,” about two-thirds of whom are gay. If we add those queer youth like Shackelford who are not yet prepared to show up to the meeting to the fifteen or so who do, along with their straight allies, then Charles Page High seems much more hospitable than Hull allows.

Choosing to focus on Shackelford's breakdown, his "Slow Journey from Isolation"—as she titles her story—Hull can spare only a few sentences for his friend, the school's "most unabashedly gay student," Brent Wimmer, an award-winning chicken breeder. Even as she enumerates the advantages of nearby Tulsa, only twenty-two miles away—the pride parade, the PFLAG chapter, the rap group and teen dances offered by Openarms Youth Project, the gay book section at Barnes & Noble—she concludes that Wimmer and Shackelford can only find community elsewhere, their "journey" can only end, successfully, in a bigger city. Meanwhile, to contrast with such clichéd narratives, we can only hope that increasing numbers of scholars will take up Gray's challenge—and her admirable assiduousness—in paying heed to organizations such as the Highland Pride Alliance and examining the complex dynamics of rural queer networks both in cyberspace and in on-the-ground daily interactions, from the weblogs, monologues, and dialogues of transgender story-tellers to the audacious aisle-walkers of Wal-Mart.

In closing, I return to the lesbian coming-of-age, rural-return, road movie, Ellen Spiro's *Greetings from Out Here*, which Ann Cvetkovich has productively and more empathetically assessed as a narrative of resistance to metropolitan and suburban homogenization, the "Wal-Martization" of contemporary small town America. As Mary Gray hints, while we must always be diligent in insuring that privatized spaces such as malls and superstores are made to respect the freedoms of speech and assembly once accorded the public squares and courthouse yards they have usurped, we can also appreciate the ways in which lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender persons can reappropriate the most nominally conservative and unaccommodating of spaces, for vibrant forms of self-assertion and renewal. From Vermont to Texas, Alabama to Kentucky, queer discourses and practices continue to proliferate.¹⁰

Notes

1. John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xxi. This quote and others in this section are taken from Herring's original paper presentation, portions of which now appear in his essay "Caravaggio's Rednecks," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12 (2006): 217-236.

2. Chris Cagle, "Imaging the Queer South: Southern Lesbian and Gay Documentary," in *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 30-45. John Howard, "Living Out Here," *Southern Changes* 15 (Fall 1993): 36-39.

3. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 96.

4. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), ix. Trudy Wilner Stack, ed., *Christenberry Reconstruction: The Art of William Christenberry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996). Yet more of Herring's important work in rural queer visual culture can be found in "Out of the Closets, Into the Woods: RFD, Country Women, and the Post-Stonewall Emergence of Queer Anti-Urbanism," *American Quarterly* 59 (June 2007): 341-72.

5. See Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke, "Sex, Smashing, and Storyville in Turn-of-the-Century New Orleans: Reexamining the Continuum of Lesbian Sexuality," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard, 54-72 (New York: New York University Press, 1997) and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, 1st ed. (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995).

6. Martin Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian, 1991).
7. Marybeth Hamilton, "When I'm Bad, I'm Better": Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 139, 141.
8. Marybeth Hamilton, "Sexual Politics and African-American Music; or, Placing Little Richard in History," *History Workshop Journal* 46 (1998): 160-176.
9. These and subsequent quotes are taken from Anne Hull, "Young and Gay in Real America: In the Bible Belt, Acceptance is Hard-Won," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2004, A01 available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A49856-2004Sep25.html>, and Anne Hull, "Young and Gay in Real America: Where I Come From: A Slow Journey From Isolation," *Washington Post*, September 27, 2004, A01, available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A52563-2004Sep26.html>.
10. Ann Cvetkovich, "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture," *Camera Obscura* 17, no. 1 (2002): 126.