Southern Strategies

An Architectural Rapprochement of Queer Ethics and Rural Space in Alabama's Black Belt

Justin Wayne Lutz
Communication Studies
McGill University, Montréal
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ABSTRACT

The Rural Studio is a design and build architectural program at Auburn University in Alabama. The studio was co-founded by Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth in 1992 with the mission of building an "architecture of decency" for families in Alabama's Black Belt region that lacked access to stable and permanent housing. The studio utilizes found, discarded, and donated materials to craft innovative housing solutions and public spaces in and around Hale County—a region that has played a historic role in the state as the seat of King Cotton in the antebellum south; it has since seen economic disinvestment leave it ruined, and has notoriously claimed the tittle of one the country's poorest counties. The Rural Studio aspires to confronting this historical legacy head-on by building private and public structures throughout the county at little to no cost to its citizens. This thesis brings the work of the studio into conversation with queer theories of metronormativity and anti-urbanism as developed by theorists including Judith Halberstam and Scott Herring. I develop the architectural practices of the studio and its relationship with its clients as a queer structure of feeling that challenges contemporary architectural values with its insistence on rural, vernacular building solutions—this, I claim, is parallel to self-identified rural queers who live in the country and defy metronormative and urbane conceptions of LGBT identity. By deconstructing modern, metropolitan definitions of queerness, I seek to expand the mantle of queerness to include the clients of the Rural Studio, as well as rural-identified queers who consider the country as an inherent aspect of their queer identity. By dissecting the geographic and temporal characteristics of the urban/rural dialectic, I attempt a rapprochement of rural space and queerness as such, disabusing the notion that to be queer is to be urban. Tracing the intersectional political alliances at the heart of the Rural Studio's design-build process, I hope to view the studio's work as a queer organizational model for marginal subjects—one that confronts the twin legacies of Queer and Southern history—through the production of strange and intersectional political and social alliances in rural spaces.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Rural Studio est un programme de design et de construction architecturale de l'Université Auburn en Alabama. Le studio a été co-fondé par Samuel Mockbee et D.K. Ruth en 1992 avec la mission de construire une "architecture de la descendance" pour les familles de la région du "Black Belt" de l'Alabama qui n'avaient pas accès à du logement stable et permanent. Le studio utilise des matériaux trouvés, recyclés ou donnés pour construire des solutions de logement innovantes et des espaces publics à Hale County et dans sa périphérie, une région qui a joué un rôle historique dans l'état en tant que siège du "King Cotton" dans les États du sud d'avant la Guerre civile américaine. Depuis, le désinvestissement économique l'a ruinée, et elle est connue pour avoir été proclamé l'un des comtés les plus pauvres du pays. Le Rural Studio aspire à combattre cet héritage historique de front en bâtissant des structure privées et publiques à travers le comté à peu ou pas de frais pour ses citoyens. Ce mémoire met en dialogue le travail du studio avec les théories queer de la metronormativité et de l'anti-urbanisme telles que développées par, entre autres, Judith Halberstam et Scott Herring. Ce travail conçoit les pratiques architecturales du studio et la relation qu'elle entretient avec ses clients comme une structure queer du sentiment qui, avec son insistance sur les solutions de logement rurales et vernaculaires, met au défi les valeurs architecturales contemporaines. Je soutiens que les pratiques architecturales du studio font écho au mode de vie des queers ruraux auto-proclamés habitant la campagne et défiant les conceptions metronormatives et urbaines de l'identité LGBT. En déconstruisant les définitions modernes et métropolitaines du queerness, je cherche à étendre sa portée afin d'inclure les clients du Rural Studio, ainsi que les queers s'identifiant a la ruralité et qui considèrent la campagne comme un aspect inhérent de leur identité queer. En analysant les caractéristiques géographiques et temporelles de la dialectique urbaine/rurale, je tente un rapprochement de l'espace rural et de la queerness en tant que telle, contestant la notion qu'être queer c'est d'être urbain. En retraçant l'entretoisement des alliances politiques au coeur du processus de design et de construction du Rural Studio, j'espère trouver dans le travail du studio un modèle organisationnel queer pour les sujets marginaux, un modèle qui confronte le double héritage du Queer et de l'histoire des États du sud à travers une production d'alliances politiques et sociales étranges et entretoisées dans les espaces ruraux.

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INTRODUCTION

The Rural Studio is an architectural design-and-build program co-founded by architects Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth in 1992 at Auburn University in southeast Alabama, with the intention of snatching architectural education away from abstraction and putting it to work in the real world. The studio combines an intensive student-led design process with salvaged materials and low-tech building strategies to construct private homes and public spaces for some of the poorest communities in the nation along the South's Black Belt region—with a primary focus on one local—Hale County, Alabama.

Samuel Mockbee, a fifth-generation Mississippian, grew up in the segregated south where he received "an exceptional education, no doubt at the expense of the black community"[1] before attending Auburn University, where in 1966 he was drafted into the integrated ranks of the U.S. Army. Mockbee was profoundly changed by the experience of serving shoulder-to-shoulder with black recruits who, until then, he had "just never experienced…as equals."[2] His time spent serving, compounded by the emergent Civil Rights Movement and his architectural education, transformed Mockbee's conception of professional success, and sent him on the unlikely—and much less profitable—journey to become what he would later call a "citizen-architect." Mockbee walked away from his thriving architectural practice in the early eighties to take on a number of small projects that included reclaiming and repurposing salvaged materials to build adequate housing

[1] Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, "The Hero of Hale County: Sam Mockbee," *Architectural Record* 189, no. 2 (2001): 76–82, http://archrecord.construction.com/people/interviews/archives/0102mockbee-1.asp
[2] Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 5.

for the poor near his hometown in Mississippi. Soon thereafter, Mockbee began applying for grants to take on more projects, and his work began to catch eyes in architectural circles. In 1991 he was offered a full professorship by D.K. Ruth, the chair of Auburn's School of Architecture.

From its inception, the goal of the studio has been to infuse architecture with a pragmatic and social urgency that emphasizes the potential for architecture to exceed the four walls of the classroom and become a force for positive change in the lives of ordinary people. Mockbee scorned what he believed to be architecture's contemporary fashionability and love affair with bleeding-edge stylistics, which held partly responsible for the field's cultural and artistic sublimation; he pokes fun at the two-dimensionality of what architectural education has become, half-joking that—

> I don't think the 100-plus architecture schools across the country realize how alike each program is, how interchangeable their curricula and faculty are. I've spoken at most of them. The faculty are usually all dressed in black. They all seem to say the same things. It's all become redundant and very stale, unimaginative. What's ironic is that you hear professors talk about how out of the box we need to be, how risk-taking is part of being an architect, yet the faculty is often guilty of sitting on their hands. If architecture is going to nudge, cajole, and inspire a community or to challenge the status quo into making responsible environmental and social-structural changes now and in the future, it will take the subversive leadership of academics and practitioners to keep reminding the students of architecture that theory and practice are not only interwoven with one's culture but have a responsibility for shaping the environment, breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo.[3]

The Rural Studio offers a socially-engaged material corrective to the often abstract and seemingly intractable legacy of racial inequity in the South. In its mission to provide permanent housing and public spaces for the communities in and around Hale County, the studio unpretentiously struggles to get its hands on the social order at the heart of

[3] Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, "The Hero of Hale County: Sam Mockbee," *Architectural Record.*

architecture's built environment. The students do this by leaving Auburn's classrooms and implanting themselves in the communities they seek to serve. Every aspect of the design-build process is their responsibility—from the initial design phase, in which they work personally with clients day after day to take into account their needs, desires, and preferences, to raising money, finding donated materials, and acquiring the appropriate building permits—to mustering volunteers, dealing with bureaucracy, and throwing together hodgepodge alliances between all levels public and private—it is a rigorous process that, above all else, anchors its faith in the collaborative relationship between the students and their clients.

It is, actually, perhaps a bit of a misnomer to refer to the people of Hale County as the students' "clients" since it is difficult at times to understand just who is serving who; because, while their clients might be something *built* from the process, it is the *students* who invariably benefit from the partial demolition of the walls of social privilege that lock them inside of themselves, and that is on top everything the students learn empirically about the realities of the built environment and an architecture that *lives.* So while many might look at the process of the studio from afar and see an unfolding paternalism or white guilt complex, those who come closer will see that, in fact, "it's a two-way street. We don't judge or ask questions. No one is feeling like anyone is taking advantage of anyone...There's an honesty that exists here. It's good to see our students respect clients they wouldn't have acknowledged on the street before."[4] And while white guilt or, more appropriately—the burden of Southern history—undeniably plays a role in the studio's work, the affective exchange taking place is not one of architecture for a

[4] Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, *Sam Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency,* 12-13.

clean social conscience. On the contrary, the deeply complex web of relationships that make up the Rural Studio—relationships both personal and private, public and collective, hierarchical and horizontal, historical and contemporary—intersect and interlock to form a *structure of feeling* that is remarkably *queer* in its critical potential.

Viewing the mission and work of the Rural Studio from a queer perspective, my goal here is to bring the work of the studio into conversation with queer theories of metronormativity, anti-urban aesthetics, and non-normative temporalities in order to highlight the queer potential embedded in the structure of feeling that makes up the Rural Studio. Pursuant to this rapprochement of the queer and the rural, it is first necessary to explore the way that these two concepts inform and antagonize each other. I begin this exploration by taking a *relational* approach to the rural/urban divide, viewing each category as constitutive of its supposed opposite; together they form a structuring metaphor that has come to stand in place for myriad other dichotomies that are pervasive throughout contemporary discourses of American culture and society—rich versus poor, white versus black, north versus south, modern versus traditional, city versus country, and gay versus straight. I want to appropriate the mission and material world of the Rural Studio to demonstrate the ways that these dichotomies expand, contract, and ultimately fail when they are no longer discursively sublimated, but put to test in the real-world, often messy, lives and relationships of intersectional individuals who may lay claim to *both ends* (or perhaps neither end) of the polarized identities which they are offered.

This is often the case with marginal subjects—the poor, disabled, dark-skinned, and queer—those whose lives and identities exceed and belie mainstream social categories and niceties are relegated to the margins (literally and figuratively) of society.

One demographic that is illustrative of this dynamic, and is the central focus of my argument here, is that of queer-identified individuals who live in rural spaces and claim the country as an inalienable piece of their personal identity. To demonstrate the ways that rural queers destabilize the rural/urban divide, I rely on emergent critical theories of metronormativity and queer anti-urbanism being developed by queer theorists including Judith Halberstam[5] and Scott Herring.[6] Understanding metronormative constructions of LGBT identity, where city life and queer sexuality are synonymous, is one route through which we can unpack the spatial construction of sexuality—a construction that is fundamentally dependent on the infallibility of the rural/urban bifurcation.

Chapter 1 examines some of the foundational queer literature surrounding rural spaces and non-normative sexuality; this chapter lays bare the dominant discourses of place, space, and sexuality that color the city queer and the country backwards. Popular representations of the metropolis as a queer utopia come at the expense of queer life in the country, which is invariably represented as impossible at best and suicidal at worst, and it's this troublesome metronormative wedding of LGBT identity and urban space that I want to splinter by showcasing the fungibility geographic and sexual identities that traffic in rural/urban discourses. The canon of Queer Studies itself has not been immune to this metronormative gaze, and for all of the radical accolades typically bestowed upon queer theorists, their infatuation with urban space and almost complete inattention/indifference to queers on the geographic margins or in rural spaces is testament enough to the metronormative mythology that fills the modern gay imaginary

[5] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
[6] Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

and collective queer memory. This "regional elision in queer theory"[7] will be addressed in this chapter, and guiding questions will be: what critique can the rural offer the queer? And what is is queer about rural space? Aside from self-identified country queers, how do theories of rural space and queer sexuality interact and intersect? And finally, how are said intersections made manifest in the social relationships, organizational structures, and material realities of the Rural Studio?

Chapter 2 enumerates some of what I call the "ethically queer" aspects of the studio and its anti-urban aesthetic. I take a queer ecological approach to investigate the parallels between LGBT struggles for safe space(s) in the city with the struggle for stable housing faced by the rural poor. How is the studio's penchant for fostering interclass contact mirrored by similar affective economies inhabited by urban queers in their search for sex? Following a brief review of the lauded role that urban space has played in enabling queer desire and confluent relationships among interracial and interclass subjects, I attempt to abstract this queer capacity for fostering these types of relationships, in an attempt to extract it from its idiosyncratically LGBT context and make use of it in other theoretical arenas, including that of the Rural Studio. That means arduously teasing out the differences between theories of queerness as a critical tool susceptible to appropriation by those unaffiliated with any properly LGBT movement or identity.

Luckily, metronormative critique can serve as a chisel to break apart conceptions of LGBT community and identity from queer*ness* as a subversive, universally-available tool for radical critique; by dissecting the metronormative ascendency of the post-

[7] Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 69.

Stonewall LGBT movement with its emphasis on heteronormative assimilation and visibility politics—at the expense and erasure of non-metropolitan queers—we can see plainly how queer critique evades the contemporary LGBT movement, and/or how that movement fails to encapsulate the radical potential of queer critique.

The final chapter brings together the preceding meditations on sexuality, space, metronormativity, and queer anti-urbanism to think through the aesthetic environment and temporal engagements of the studio. By delving into the unfashionable, anti-urban aesthetic of the studio's built environment, with its near-exclusive use of discarded, repurposed, and salvaged materials, we can begin to uncover its resistance to metronormative models of modern architectural education and practice. And built into these salvaged materials is a material *history* which refers not only to the local legacy of violence and white supremacy that the studio knowingly confronts, but also leads us to ask more profound questions about the alternative temporalities inhabited by marginal subjects. By understanding the classificatory capacity of aesthetic modernity to police subjects and communities that are either in-the-know or behind-the-times, we can diagram the process by which rural subjects are portrayed as living *anachronisms.*

Aesthetic judgments are inextricably linked with temporal ones, and the studio's anti-urban aesthetic serves as a counter-force to modern, urbane, hyper-capitalistic architectural models, and in this way, is similar to the unfashionable, anti-modern counter-discourse provided by rural-identified queers who live outside of metronormative rubrics of LGBT identity. Beyond their aesthetics, the structures of the studio are also used by clients in ways that mirror queer familial structures of feeling, including the invariable inhabitation of the studio's houses by inter-generational family members and

friends; the clients' houses become a haven for upsetting the dynamic of the nuclear family, and in this way, echoes the alternative models of kinship utilized by queers for some time. Finally, I want to stand on the border of modernity, to look backwards in the hope of bringing both queer and Southern histories into view. By comparing these histories, I want to bring into focus the different ways that they engage with their respective pasts.

For queers, the historical project is inevitably one of of recuperation—of coping with queer erasure and attempting to speak life into the queer ghosts of the past; the affective incentive here is to either reveal or construct a queer past so that the queer present might live with meaning. Southern history, on the other hand, seeks to exorcise its ghosts, not to conjure them; it's haunting is inescapable, and the "burden of Southern history" is not one that is susceptible to amnesiac fantasies, and as such, must be confronted everyday and everywhere in the lives of Southerners, and this is the redemptive challenge at the heart of the Rural Studio. These histories are two very different reparative projects, but are joined together in their shared histories of *loss* and continued engagement with negative affects, which I bring together under the umbrella of Heather Love's queer historical project in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History.*[8] I like to call this rural-queer rapprochement "feeling backwoods."

[8] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

CHAPTER 1

City Mouse, Country Mouse: Sex, Space, and the Urban/Rural Divide

Judith Halberstam's recent scholarship on queer times and places is an inquiry into the temporal and topological experiences that color queer life. For Halberstam, alternative temporalities and spatial relationships are not the sole proprietorship of self-identified LGBT subjects, but are instead the strange symptoms of a queer way of *being and doing* that exceeds and resists (hetero)normative logics of time and relating that becomes not an episodic or trivial trope of LGBT identity, but a durably *queer way of life:*

> If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment in "Friendship as a Way of Life" that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex." In Foucault's radical formulation, queer friendships, queer networks, and the existence of these relations in space and in relation to the use of time mark out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life. In this book, the queer "way of life" will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being.[9]

Halberstam illustrates the capacity for queer critique to be extracted from theories of sexuality of LGBT identity; this construction of a markedly queer "way of life" is essential to the extraction of a queer ethic from the work of the Rural Studio, particularly with regard to the studio's alternative methods of alliance between students, clients, and organizations, and the community at large, in addition to its eccentric anti-urban

[9] Ibid., 1.

aesthetic, which embodies and makes manifest the queer collaboration(s) responsible for its construction.

The rural landscape is defined discursively and materially by a struggle for power and resources within that landscape, whether discursive or material. From representations of rural subjects as backwards and un-evolved, to the material struggle over physical resources, the reality of rural life emerges from the struggle over resources and representations that seem to keep rural spaces on the economic margins, while also keeping rural cultures and ideals at the center of the American imagination.

This struggle for definitional power is certainly not unique to rural spaces, but is indeed characteristic of *all* places—it is what gives them contour. It is a struggle to control meaning, above all else, and as it stands presently, the Rural as such has been constructed as a marginal space of exotic destitution, pre-modern ideality, and abject fascination—while paradoxically being portrayed as the "heartland." Thus is the oxymoronic status of the rural—both marginal and centrifugal, abject and ideal.

As a discursive production that responds to a demand for meaning, the margins do a lot of work, as a metaphorical spatialized receptacle within which attitudes and ideas of rural life are cast, usually as inherently backwards, pitiful, and uncivilized. This confinement to the periphery, however, might not be an unconscious move, but a strategic one; as Mark Lawrence suggests: "Might it be the case that what's going on is the assignment of a 'neglected' status to populations over which state, academic, and

entrepreneurial interests are more, not less, interested in gaining both rhetorical and material control?"[10]

Lawrence's concerns are well-founded, and the problem of academic conscription of rural stories for personal and professional gain has been an underlying ethical tension throughout rural scholarship. This tension, this sort of Anthropologist's dilemma, if you will—poses many moral and theoretical dilemmas: Who speaks for the marginalized? Is there harm in attempting to *recuperate* the voices of those on the margins? Should researchers take the risk of appropriating rural voices throughout this retelling of stories?

Maintaining a sensitivity to these ethical dilemmas and the relations between the researcher and the researched is important, and is perhaps made easier by maintaining an epistemologically relational stance while writing the rural; Thinking this way might seem abstract at first, but it is attainable. Jesse Heley and Laura Jones give us a hint at what this relational rural epistemology might entail:

> What Marsden et al. term a 'holistic' approach to analysing power relations might thus be considered as a move towards developing a relational rural epistemology, in that it 'explicitly links knowledge (the discursive capacity to formulate interests), social action (the opportunity to act on such formulations) and materiality (the distribution of economic resources that facilitate certain courses of actions)'.[11]

The undulating discourses, actions, and material realities that coalesce to form modern conceptions of rurality and rural people—along with our recognition or misrecognition of queerness and queer people—are up for cross-examination here. Whether discursively, aesthetically, or temporally, I plan to disabuse the false dichotomy of the country and the

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[10] Mark Lawrence, "Heartlands or Neglected Geographies? Liminality, Power, and the Hyperreal Rural," *Journal of Rural Studies* 13 (1997): 12.
[11] Jesse Heley and Laura Jones, "Relational Rurals: Some Thoughts on Relating Things and Theory in Rural Studies," *Journal of Rural Studies* 28, no. 3 (July 2012): 210, doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2012.01.011.

queer, insisting instead on a theoretical approach that privileges the queerness of the country and its ascribed backwardness as a rich source of critique that is uniquely positioned to give the lie to metronormative academic discourses, especially within the contemporary discipline of Queer Studies as such.

Studies of sexuality and geography are nothing new, and yet most academic discourses surrounding the study of sex, space, and place have tended—at least in queer circles—to privilege the Urban environment. Pivotal queer texts like Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*[12] critique modern neoliberal circuits of regulation that attempt to diminish opportunities for public sex and queer encounters in the metropolis. Other scholars like George Chauncey give a comprehensive account of the "Making[s] of the Gay Male World"[13] in the first half of twentieth century New York City, paying little if any mind at all to the development of *other* non-metropolitan gay worlds outside of the city.

Outside of specifically queer-minded research, there has been an ever-expanding archive of work linking sexualities and space more broadly. David Bell and Gill Valentine—two prominent voices at the intersection of these fields—describe their book, *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities,* to be "…the first book to explore sexualities from a geographical perspective."[14] That claim may a bit inflated, especially given the incredibly rich work that has been done and is being done by feminist

[12] Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
[13] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
[14] David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

geographers such as Doreen Massey in works such as *Space, Place, and Gender*.[15] Although one could argue that Massey's work has much less to do with sexuality and geography than gender and geography, they are nonetheless inextricably and problematically linked. In any case, the body of work by Bell and Valentine linking sexuality and space is vast, and an inspiration to the project at hand here. One recurring theme throughout queer scholarship on sexuality and space regards the subversive capacity of queer spaces to foster interclass contact, particularly in the form of sexual and affective experiences amongst otherwise disparately-positioned social actors.

The notion of *place* is also crucial to explorations of class and the way that class intersects with other axes of identification, not just sexuality, but also race, gender, and physical ability—on a larger plane of social privilege. Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed, writing in their book, *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, offer—

> …a theoretical middle ground in which "place" can be metaphoric yet still refer to a particular physical environment and its associated socio-cultural qualities. In this view, place becomes a *grounded* metaphor. Our collection, then, insists on marking the conceptual and experiential difference between the country and the city by uncovering and extending the longstanding discourse which constructs these differences.[16]

The argument in favor of a grounded metaphor here, I believe, is especially potent, and I borrow Ching and Creed's conception of place as a grounded metaphor to uncover the metronormative influences of longstanding discourses that construct rural and queer subjects as inherently opposite.

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[15] Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
[16] Barbara Ching and Gerald W Creed, *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 7.

Writing in *The Country and The City,* Raymond Williams reminds us of the relational status that the rural and urban occupy in the social lives and identities of individuals:

> …our real social experience is not only of the country and the city, in their most singular forms, but of many kinds of intermediate and new kinds of social and physical organization. Yet the ideas and the images of country and city retain their great force…Clearly the contrast of country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society.[17]

Williams illustrates the relationality and permeability of rural and urban categories, while also paying deference to the concrete power of these contrasting forces to shore up cultural identity. Yet the bipolar tug of these magnetic powers is never cleanly resolved, but on the contrary, persists as a messy struggle that yields crises and new types of social and physical organization. For Williams, the Urban/Rural dichotomy isn't merely a matter of place or habitat, but is instead a powerful and pervasive cultural metaphor that actively structures personal identity and collective consciousness. This dichotomy is also central to the history of the United States and its transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy—a transition which is marked in the national imaginary by the fissure of the American Civil War—a fissure that still persists today in the national political and social discourse. The opposing forces of the agricultural South and the industrial North have been replaced by rural or urban-identified Americans, and the split between the country and the city is remarkably visible on the national electoral map.

This rural-urban spectrum consists of, at one end, urban space as synonymous with liberalism, progress, cultural enlightenment, tolerance, and ambition—while on the

[17] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 289.

other end, the country diametrically opposes these values, representing conservatism, stagnation, bigotry, ignorance, isolation, and backwardness. Within this spectrum exist the images, discourses, histories, myths, and other cultural representations of the urban and the rural that we embrace, resist, and vacillate between in a perpetual process by which we interpolate our social position.

Sticking with Ching and Creed's pragmatic insistence on place as a grounded metaphor, I want to bring into focus the tangible discourses of city and country perpetuate the divide between rural and urban spaces and shape cultural identity in contemporary society. The bifurcation of the city and country is not, however, a feature exclusive to the modern world, but, as Raymond Williams reminds us, is one that has been at work for quite some time, providing fodder for social distinctions at every level:

> On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between county and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times.[18]

Aside from the obvious technological and capitalistic differences that set up the urban and the rural as opposing forces, there is also an irrepressible tendency throughout much of the literature to associate the metropolis with the center (and even centeredness), while casting rural places off to the sides or, more appropriately—to the *margins*; this is quite an ironic trope, as I have mentioned, considering that rural America is often described as the "heartland" of the nation, and most of the country's major metropolitan areas are found on the coast.

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[18] Williams, *The Country and the City,* 1.

Nevertheless, the margins are where rural space is most illustrative as a container metaphor—something akin to nothing, an empty space that is somehow also substantially different, distinct, and idiosyncratic. The margins are the mirrors by which the center comes to see itself; the urban/rural distinction is, after all, a utilitarian cultural distinction—one that defines modern civilization—and, just as with all identity politics, helps to divide us across social, cultural, and political lines—for better or for worse. As such, metropolitan accounts of rural people and places dominate popular culture, and often these misguided urbane (mis)perceptions of rural life speak for rural populations even more than rural people speak for themselves. Marginality is a theme that seems to saturate academic discourses on rural space, and whether or not rural people themselves claim such a peripheral designation, there seems to be something characteristically *decentered* about rural space.

The construction and production of marginal spaces is not without its ethical dilemmas. Even if rural space is often spoken of as inherently marginal and peripheral, it's only the metropolitan referential that makes it so; in fact, many rural subjects might actually pity the condition of their urban counterparts, marking the city as the true margin instead of the country. Even the act of determining which subjects are the marginal ones is itself an inherently social, political, and cultural determination that discursively produces and consumes the marginal imaginary. This research itself traffics in discursive processes that throw rural spaces and subjects into imperfect relief, and participating in this production of meaning is not without its own ethical risks, for both the researcher and the researched, as Mark Lawrence makes clear:

> It is also possible that concern for neglected voices can lead to their recuperation by the system of political economic forces which often leaves (or even puts) rural

> communities in dire straits. Bringing neglected experiences out into the open can have the effect of making them available for capture by the mainstream. Under such circumstances, those voicing neglected experiences are not so much disempowered as burdened with an unanticipated responsibility for proving that the system can accommodate all perspectives, no matter how many contradictions this fosters.[19]

This dilemma is central to building upon theories of critical rural studies, and is also the core ethical challenge to the Rural Studio as a design-build architecture program consisting primarily of academically privileged, white, college students setting up shop in one of the poorest, primarily African-American places in the nation—Alabama's Black Belt. This reality doesn't escape the Rural Studio, but is instead embraced as the program's founding—if at times antagonistic—mission. As Rural Studio Assistant Professor Elena Barthel writes:

> Rural Studio is often perceived as a crusader against poverty. We're not sure if this image was part of Mockbee's central message or if it was created by the press. But we do not want to be perceived as ambulance chasers, and we know that neither Rural Studio nor our architecture can cure poverty. We want to be positive about west Alabama and shine a light on its strengths…Any good we've done has been an outcome of our remaining in this place for twenty years and building trust—showing ourselves to be good, and permanent, neighbors.[20]

The studio's exponential success over the past two decades is owed to its staying power and its commitment to being a good and permanent neighbor, and Barthel's sentiment here is worth echoing as we consider the mission and scope of the program. The studio doesn't promise to fix local problems for once and for all, it seeks simply to do what good it can, and to do that by staying put and listening to the local community. The studio has managed to maintain a humble commitment to *place* over the past twenty years, and that is perhaps what gives it such staying power. Sam Mockbee's founding vision was not

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[19] Lawrence, "Heartlands", 1-2.

[20] Andrew Freear et al., *Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County, Alabama* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014), 22.

to educate students, but to cultivate so-called "citizen architects," and that entails not only a commitment to listening to the people of Hale County or sourcing materials locally, but it also means developing a personal relationship with a particular place over time to actually understand what is needed and wanted in the community.

The willingness to stay put and commit to a place is what is required to understand the complexities and contradictions that constitute *any* place, and this is especially true when it comes to rural space. To really apprehend the complexities and dynamism of rural space, we first must begin to understand the shifting grounds upon which ideas of space itself are constructed. I implore a conception of space that is not understood simply as physical, tangible, or geographical, but socially, through human relationships and the everyday negotiations with power in which participate on levels both private and public. This social emphasis is not meant to downplay space's physical dimensions but, on the contrary, is meant to breathe life into the hidden *social* architecture(s) of space, so that we might better understand the material realities that emerge from this socio-spatial dimension. This socially-produced theory of space, as made famous by Henry Lefebvre[21] has a lot to offer critical rural studies, and is finding renewed salience as rural studies expands its trans-disciplinary relevance.[22]

Keith Halfacree orients us toward a definition of the rural that exists between the worlds of the spatial and the social, but does not give in entirely to either one, instead

[21] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).
[22] Socially-produced theories of space take on renewed salience in the work of Keith Halfacree, Nigel Thrift, and Mike Crang.

insisting on rural space as a "rational abstraction"[23] that manifests both conceptually and materially. Halfacree's movement towards a rationally-abstracted conception of rural space is an attempt to lend some dimension to what is otherwise a rather invisible and elusive definition of rural space, which is itself quite an elucidatory trope, since "neither at the official nor at the cultural or popular level is there consensus on the delineation of the 'non-urban' spaces that the term 'rural' seeks to encapsulate."[24] To put it simply, what counts as rural depends on who is asking and from where they are asking—among other things. For Halfacree, the phrasing of such a thing as "rural space" is already pleonastic[25] since the rural is inherently spatial, and any "attempt to separate rural from space runs the risk of reproducing the unhelpful dualism of society versus space."[26] By avoiding this dualism, Halfacree reaches instead for a spatial models that is already enmeshed in social relations; in fact, the two are co-constitutive.

To keep the metaphor of the rural grounded, and to bring us back down to the specificity explored here through the Rural Studio's work in the Black Belt, we must first locate "significant processes in operation that are delineated at a local spatial scale"[27] in hopes that "the resulting spatial inscriptions…enable us to distinguish 'rural' from one or more 'non-rural' environments."[28] It is my goal to track down these "significant processes" and "resulting spatial inscriptions" that emerge from the Rural Studio's work in and around Hale County, and to explore the ways that these processes run perpendicular to urbane stereotypes of rural life and people. One of these significant

[23] Keith Halfacree, "Rural Space: Constructing a Three-fold Architecture," in *Handbook of Rural Studies,* ed. Paul Cloke et al. (London: SAGE, 2006), 45.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 44.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 46.
[28] Ibid.

processes, which perhaps enables all the others, involves the willingness to stay put,[29] as mentioned before, and as demonstrated by the Rural Studio over the past two decades that it has spent in west Alabama. The program's dedication to building relationships in the communities where it is based is not only a *necessary* component of its success, but is also revealing of the dynamic, materially complex lives of rural subjects and realities.

Definitions of the rural are constantly in flux, and even our best conceptions of what is essentially rural are relationally-defined in opposition to our conceptions of the urban. These relational understandings of rural spaces have been both a point of theoretical frustration in rural studies, as well as a philosophically rich marker of what we might consider an emergent rural epistemology. The relational epistemologies that seem to bubble up within rural research implicate and implore researchers themselves to embody a relational spirit in their work, as Heley and Jones explain:

> Apprehending the complexity of the rural in these terms, we argue, requires not only thinking space relationally, but at the same time being epistemologically relational or theoretically pluralist. That is, recognising the co-constituent production of rural space through material and discursive phenomenon, processes and practices, and thus the value of existing theoretical resources (social constructionism, political and economic materialism) in relation with the critical and rigorous appraisal of 'new' concepts and ideas to better comprehend rural space in its multidimensional complexity and particularity.[30]

This relational approach eschews any tendency to think through the rural dualistically, opting instead to vacillate within the ambivalent antagonisms between theories of nature and society, abstraction and materiality, locality and globalism, discourse and materiality. It's an approach that I believe respects the complexities of rural life and rural

[29] Halberstam notes that the "…notion of rural queers being stuck in one place resonates with Gayatri Gopinath's theorizations of the meaning of queerness for those who 'stay put' in post-colonial contexts rather than leaving a remote area for a seemingly liberated metropolis." *In a Queer Time and Place,* 190.
[30] Jesse Heley and Laura Jones, "Relational Rurals," 208.

representations, and as such, requires a commitment to theoretical pluralism in order apprehend disciplinary intersections and theoretical nuances that undergird the theatre of the rural. Probing further at the specificity of rural locales, Michael Woods writes that:

> The portal of 'rural locality' allows us to glimpse the structural patterns produced by specific configurations of larger social and economic processes; the portal of 'representations of the rural' provides sight of the discursive meanings applied to the rural in relation to the wider world; and the portal of 'everyday lives of the rural' illuminates the routine enactment of a relational rural by individuals whose mobility is not constrained to rural space.[31]

Woods' transfiguration of the Lefebvrian triumvirate here is especially helpful for understanding the many faces of the rural that are produced at the intersections of political agency, material reality, and discursive representation. Rather than lending special credence to any single one of these aspects of rural life, it is essential that we understand the shifting relations between all of them, and to understand the perpetual negotiation of these different realities that we eventually come to recognize as the rural, or something like it. The Rural Studio is invested most obviously in the material realities of their clients in Hale County, but their work also has wider implications for discursive representations of the rural, as well as for the everyday lives of the rural subjects whose lives it impacts so directly and intimately.

The studio is emblematic of a hybrid approach to conceptualizing rural spaces, as articulated by Jonathan Murdoch,[32] who writes on the co-constitutive construction of the countryside and the self. For Murdoch, a hybrid approach is required to problematize conventional and comfortable social analyses that might tempt researchers: "There is something beyond the 'social' at work as the countryside displays a material complexity

[31] Michael Woods, *Rural* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 292.
[32] Jonathan Murdoch, "Co-constructing the Countryside: Hybrid Networks and the Extensive Self" in *Country Visions*, ed. Paul Cloke (London: Pearson, 2003).

that is not easily reducible to even the most nuanced social categories."[33] The urban-rural relation is not entirely determinative, however, as Halfacree reminds us, "the rural can be a significant category that emerges–and not necessarily just as a dualistic 'response' to the urban".[34] One place where the rural emerges as a significant category is in the lives of rural queers.

[33] Ibid., 264.
[34] Halfacree, "Rural Space," 49.

CHAPTER 2

We're Queer! We're...*Here!?* Metronormativity and LGBT Identity

If queers way out there—broadly conceived—have too often been stamped with scarlet letters that spell out backwater, rube, hillbilly, hayseed, redneck, shitkicker, and bumfuck, then what happens when this terminology turns against itself? What happens when countrified queers challenge the representational systems that underlie the perpetual citification of modern lgbtq life?
-Scott Herring[35]

If metropolitan lesbians and gay men had in fact succeeded in wiping out power in relationships, all we would have to do is enjoy our egalitarian practice and let everyone else in on the secret. But that is far from the case. The prevailing sex—gender system...is geared to the production of hierarchy...It is a liberal-bourgeois delusion to suppose that 'private' space can be somehow innocent of and protected from the real world. In actuality, [no power hierarchy] is insignificant in metropolitan sexual practice. But, unlike people in non-metropolitan systems, we prefer to pretend otherwise.
-Alan Sinfield[36]

The Rural Studio and "countrified" queers both traffic in the representational systems of the rural-urban dialectic, subsequently acquiescing and/or resisting stereotypes of the city and the country. In their ideological negotiations with these geographic identities, the Rural Studio and rural queers at times affirm—and at times subvert—stereotypical expectations of rurality. The illegibility and unrecognizability of those in the margins of rural space is dictated by their respective identities and dis-identifications at the intersections of many lines of difference, including race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability—yet these categories are never fixed, but perpetually in flux, and so it is important for us to—

…look 'in between' these domains to discover the ongoing processes of

[35] Herring, *Another Country,* 6.
[36] Alan Sinfield, "The Production of Gay and the Return of Power," in De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis, ed. Shuttleton et al., London; New York: Garland Pub., 2000, 31.

> negotiation and renegotiation by which selves and others are represented. Equally, it will be important to recognise that identity will be constructed differently through time, and that the reflexive presentation of the self will thereby not be contained within easily identifiable categories. Philo's (1993) call for attention to neglected rural geographies, then, should not simply be interpreted as an extension of rurality as positioned by gender, race, sexuality and so on—although such an extension is to be welcomed as a fruitful first step. The reversal of neglect should also account for other more hybrid geographies located in the interstices (or 'third space') between these categories.[37]

My primary intersectional interest here is between that of self-identified queers that occupy rural places and small towns all across the United States, and who have typically been excluded from the canon of mainstream LGBT representations and the so-called "liberatory" politics espoused within the dominant discourses of contemporary queer culture. The ostensibly inclusive attitude of LGBT identity politics, along with the critical gaze of queer studies in the academy, have remained stunningly un-attuned and ignorant to the lives of rural queers and the rich structures of feeling that they have managed to construct in the sparsest of landscapes—acting almost unequivocally in favor of urbane constructions of queer identity that lend little (if any) legitimacy to those between the coasts in what many so glibly refer to as "flyover country." As Spurlin reiterates:

> In contemporary American queer studies, not only is there a metropolitan bias in thinking about queer location but a coastal one as well, and we have yet to address the limitations of narrowly ascribing queer culture(s) to concentrated geographic areas and political spheres. Specifically, in the US, we have not yet begun to challenge popular assumptions that the seaboard cities are the only centres of queer culture and the primary locations from which queers can speak, when, in fact, many lesbians and gay men in the American Midwest, and in other non-urban parts of the country, often express dissatisfaction with queer communities in large urban areas on the coasts because queers in coastal cities often have a rather narrow image of what constitutes a queer identity and simultaneously exclude or marginalize those who do not fit their image of 'queer'.[38]

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[37] Paul J. Cloke and Jo Little, "Introduction: Other Countrysides?" in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation, and Rurality*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.
[38] Ibid., 180.

This erasure of rural queers is the at the heart of Scott Herring's work in *Another Country,* and is indicative of the messy theoretical courtship between rural and queer studies; it's a theoretical debate that is fraught with many new (and some very old) questions of space, place, geography, identity, and community—and one which, I believe, affords us an opportunity to embrace the ostensible antagonisms of these disciplines and chart a new path forward so that we might bring a model of queer ethics out of the woodwork and hand the metronormative lie back to the city by insisting upon the inherent value of rural epistemologies and small town organizational strategies. The work of the Rural Studio, I want to contend, challenges metronormative architectural values and rural stereotypes; it accomplishes this aesthetically, with its critically rustic apathy towards questions of style, as well as organizationally, with its insistence on intersectional coalition-building across lines of race, gender, class, and ability.

To be clear, I am not claiming that the Rural Studio is in any manner affiliated with formal LGBT politics; what I *am* claiming is that the structure of feeling which emerges through the studio's work is characteristically queer, and is emblematic of a radically expansive (pre-Stonewall) *queer critique* that is rooted in marginal space, and thus uniquely positioned to challenge metronormative models of aesthetic and temporal identity. The studio upends metronormative expectations of rurality and Southern-ness through its dutiful commitment to confronting the region's torrid history head-on, and in doing so, it presents us with a twenty-first century model of social organization that privileges intersectional struggles and identities, and is particularly attuned to the destructive tendencies of neoliberal economic policies and political commitments to privatization, the likes of which have proliferated throughout the South, leaving rural

communities devastated. All that is to say that, while the studio may not claim any formal connection to LGBT politics (or *any* specific political cause for that matter), it nevertheless embodies the radical promise of critical queer consciousness in its most powerful iteration—as a critique that capable of *talking back* to power and, importantly, is available to anyone at anytime and place within any hierarchical constellation of power.

Perhaps this wasted queer potential is one reason why the lack of attention paid to rural people and places within queer studies (and LGBT popular culture) is so unnerving. As an academic discipline, queer studies has developed almost exclusively within an urban paradigm, so much so that it seems to have become second nature for queer scholars. Herring is having none of this, and his writing passionately exposes queer theory's metronormative oversight(s):

> Suffice it to say that if recent strains of queer theory and recent forms of lgbtq politics (latent and manifest) share common ground, it's usually a dismissal of rurality as such, a dismissal not only commonplace but, let's bet the farm on it, chronic. Much of queer studies wants desperately to be urban planning, even as so much of its theoretical architecture is already urban planned.[39]

What the decidedly univocal status of queer and metropolitan space(s) throws into relief, aside from its metronormative bias, is a broader and more durable connection between sexual identity and place. Ching and Creed note the capacity for place-based dimensions of identity to act as an amplificatory element as it intersects with other cuts of identity:

> While we have been asserting the significance of place-based distinctions in the formation and interpretation of identities, we recognize that place is rarely, if ever, the sole dimension of identification. Rather, place inflects other dimensions such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity. However, since researchers often assume an urban setting, they fail to recognize the interaction of place with other identity elements. Just as these other factors take on a variety of meanings cross-

[39] Herring, *Another Country,* 5.

> culturally, their interaction with place creates a staggering and fascinating range of images. [40]

Within this staggering array of images we can include marginal and intersectional subjects whose messy or even contradictory identities ensure their exclusion from popular representation; such is the case with queer individuals who choose to make their home in the country and embrace rurality as a formative and indispensable part of their queer identity. I've chosen self-identified country queers to illustrate the personal and political dependence on rural/urban distinctions when it comes to knowing one's place, but I want to necessarily abstract and expand this queer mantle to include others who may not consider themselves queer at all—sexually or otherwise—but who nonetheless make a life for themselves outside of normative logics of space and time. These people, like many clients of the studio, inhabit liminal landscapes and marginal social positions that are notable for their queer orientations. Halberstam certainly believes in the potential for non-identified queer subjects to exist outside of the typical categories of sexual identity that we usually think of as queer:

> Perhaps such people could productively be called "queer subjects" in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity)…and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned…but also those people who live without financial safety nets, without homes, without steady jobs, outside the organizations of time and space that have been established for the purposes of protecting the rich few from everyone else.[41]

I want to suggest that the clients of the Rural Studio, under this rubric, can be considered queer subjects and, furthermore, the ritual building of the Rural Studio can be conceived of as a dynamic and embodied archive—a living memorial constructed from the material ruins of Southern history, and dedicated to the imperfect yet redemptive architectural

[40] Ching and Creed, *Knowing Your Place,* 22.
[41] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place,* 10.

processes upon which the program was founded. I submit to a Halberstamian definition of the archive as a type of constructed memorial that pays homage to a history of violence; in this sense, we can think of the studio's work in the Black Belt as a strategically intimate archival strategy, and one whose material form and construction embodies and affects the traumatic histories that it represents. The result is quite literally a memorial landscape that is *a living space.* Through the collaborative building activities of the students and their clients, the citizen-architects and their local counterparts are not only *producing* the archive, but they themselves are simultaneously *produced* by their architectural engagement with local histories of White supremacy, heteronormative patriarchy, and the economic exploitation of black and brown bodies. The result of this is an architecture of decency—a domesticated archive that is enlivened those who make a life within its walls; it is, to use Halberstam's own words, "simultaneously a resource, a productive narrative, a set of representations, a history, a memorial, and a time capsule."[42]

The work of the Rural Studio and the "tangled situation of privileged, mostly white students serving and learning from poor black folks on whose back that privilege has been written"[43] fits into a Halberstamian model of an archive quite neatly, and the uncomfortable contradictions, antagonisms, and inequalities that permeate its design-build process do not invalidate the work being done but, on the contrary, give its productive narrative and archival power new salience. It's an archive that, in Lawrence Chua's words, "…is uncomfortable to many. It is frequently dismissed as an act of liberal

[42] Ibid., 23.
[43] Lawrence Chua, "In Praise of Shadows: The Rural Mythology of Samuel Mockbee" in *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*, ed. Andrea Oppenheimer Dean (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 171.

white charity. But in [Mockbee's] rural mythology, this act of charity is something far more dangerous. It threatens to become an act of redemption."[44] The spaces constructed by the Rural Studio create opportunities for interclass contact much in the same way that queer spaces in the city have—although those urbane queer spaces have typically been focused on sexual interactions; I'm referring here to the literature surrounding queer sex in public spaces—most notably in the work of Sam Delany,[45] Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner[46]—and the keen ability for these spaces to foster interclass experiences and relationships—usually out of sheer necessity. The ability to bring together interclass actors from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds in a shared and intimate experience—whether it's building or even fucking—can and should be revered as one manifestation of a remarkably queer ethics that holds up confluent intimacy as its epitome. It seems perfectly ironic that the struggle for queer spaces of intimacy throughout urban locales could share anything at all with the rural spaces that it so often holds up as a hostile, backwards mirror image of itself—much less a shared devotion to creating and protecting spaces for queer, confluent, interclass contact.

The parallels I'm attempting to draw here, I confess, may seem counterintuitive, but when we begin to disabuse ourselves of our metronormative prejudice, it's not so difficult to recognize the congruence between the struggles of queers to find intimate/safe spaces in the metropolis, and the struggles of historically oppressed, impoverished communities of color to secure accessible housing in rural spaces. Delany even characterizes the porn theaters and back alleys that he cruises as one of the last

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue.*
[46] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (January 1, 1998): 547–66, doi:10.2307/1344178.

opportunities for "interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will"[47] amongst strangers, and the intimate architectural contact between the studio's citizen-architects and its clients certainly fits this characterization as well. The struggle for queer and rural safe spaces present very different, yet intersecting, affective economies that can also serve as models of resistance for opposing the homogenizing violence of capitalist forces and metronormative erasure; here we can see the Rural Studio's propensity for producing queer space and intersectional collaboration.

The similarities between the quest for queer space and the redemptive mission of the studio to provide housing for its clients in Hale County are more difficult to articulate, of course, than the differences between these two worlds might be, but it is the task at hand here. Most of the similarities between the work of the studio and the work of anti-urbanist queers is admittedly highly theoretical, but that does not mean that reconsidering their overlapping missions won't yield any tangible results—there is vast potential for social and political uptake arising from this rapprochement—most notably when it comes to organizing spaces of resistance in small towns and rural locales. One way to get at this potential for social and/or political change is by considering the studio's design-build processes diagrammatically and ecologically. Emergent theories of "queer ecologies"[48] and "heterotopic alliances"[49] afford us a new perspective on the strange alliances that are fostered throughout the studio's design-build process.

Matthew Gandy, writing in his article, "Queer Ecology: Nature, Sexuality, and

[47] Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue,* 111.
[48] Matthew Gandy, "Queer Ecology: Nature, Sexuality, and Heterotopic Alliances.," *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space* 30, no. 4 (2012): 727–47.
[49] Ibid.

Heterotopic Alliances," expounds upon the Foultcauldian[50] concept of heterotopias and heterotopic spaces within a specifically urban landscape, appropriating Foucault's idea in order to reinvigorate strains of queer critique within the fields of human geography, ecology, and the social sciences. Gandy sees the potential for queer theory to transcend narrow conceptions of human sexuality or identity politics, instead locating the real power of the "queer" in its most expansive and interdisciplinary form. There are, he notes, at least four dominate interrelated iterations of the "queer" as we have come to recognize it:

> At least four interrelated dimensions stand out: firstly, the deconstruction of sexual norms and categories associated with the bounded, regulated, and knowable human subject; secondly, the emerging activist agendas of the post-Stonewall era; thirdly, the critical reappropriation of the term 'queer' itself; and, fourthly, demands to widen the scope, methods, and analytical sensitivity of academic research into cultural, historical, and geographical aspects of human sexuality.[51]

For my purposes, the ability for queer approaches to heighten the "analytical sensitivity" that Gandy mentions is of primary concern. The critical capacity of queer analysis is truly interdisciplinary, and Gandy utilizes its theoretical portability to further explore the pervasive relationship between sexuality and space, in this case fusing together ideas from queer theory, ecology, and urban culture to uncover the inadvertent[52] heterotopic alliances that form between individuals and their respective, diverse, uses and appropriations of public spaces.

And even though Gandy is writing about men cruising for sex in London's Abney

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[50] Michel Foucault, "Des Espaces Autre," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5 (1984): 46–49.
[51] Gandy, "Queer Ecology," 734.
[52] Gandy defines these alliances as those that, "involve or at least imply a coalescence of interests—even if not explicitly acknowledged—between disparate groups or individuals concerned with the defence of marginal or interstitial spaces." Ibid., 740.

Park, the uptake of his ecological inquiry into the queer uses of Abney Park is revealed in the heterotopic bonds that form between different individuals as they move throughout a shared space, each one using that space to act on their own desire(s) and intentions. "There is a conceptual synergy," he writes, "between queer space and urban heterotopias that furthers our understanding of how material spaces are experienced and of how different kinds of cultural or political alliances might emerge in relation to the protection of specific sites."[53] I want to argue that this synergistically queer relationship is not unique or exclusive to urban spaces, but is in fact present in rural spaces—and especially the heterotopic sites of the Rural Studio.

It's productive here to take a heterotopological approach to further unpacking the omnipresent yet elusive rural-urban continuum that structures so much of spatial identity in modern times; that is to say, we should try to understand both the discursive/abstract and everyday/material manifestations of the rural and urban "as a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live."[54] This is, for Foucault, the simplest definition of heterotopology as an explicit tactic for understanding other spaces, and is instructive when it comes to addressing the categorical slippage of the rural and urban between their manifestations as mythic, imaginative resources on one hand, and their tangible, material, and worldly forms on the other. Gandy is bringing Foucault's heterotopic alliances into conversation with new ideas in the embryonic field of queer ecology—a bourgeoning, trans-disciplinary field of critical inquiry that combines elements of queer studies, cultural geography, and ecological studies, working to interrogate and disrupt normative/hegemonic systems of representing the relationship(s)

[53] Ibid.
[54] Foucault, "Des Espaces Autre," 4.

between human sexuality and the environment; and that is just scratching the surface:

> …there is an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically, and it is our task to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding. Specifically, the task of a queer ecology is to probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world.[55]

Understanding the biosocial projections that are cast upon the (mistakenly blank) landscape of the rural is one way that a queer ecological critique is able to assist in the demystification and deconstruction of the rural-urban continuum that is so often taken for granted. Queer ecology shows us that even "natural" space is politically and socially constructed, which serves as a much-needed corrective to the pervasive, absolute representation of rural space as idyll, natural, and even prelapsarian—diametrically opposed to the locus of culture, sophistication, and human achievement—namely, the metropolis.

The fable of the rural idyll is, of course, one of the principal representational myths at the center of the rural-urban break, and it's a bifurcation that begets yet another problematic and illusory dipole: nature versus culture. It's this comforting binary that we have internalized as—funny enough—second nature, which equates rural space as an empty, pre-political, anti-social, and uncivilized landscape, while simultaneously sublimating urban life as the pinnacle of modernity, cultural refinement, and hyper-social, cosmopolitan existence. But if we examine these neat oppositions more closely, they

[55] Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2010), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10421869.

begin to come apart at the seams. Consider, for instance, the contradictions latent in popular discourses of rural pastoralism and queer sexualities. Rural places are often construed—simultaneously—as the site of naïve, nostalgic, and rustic escape "from sophisticated 'metrosexuality' (rural negatively invested) or to romanticize the rural as a site free from the tainting traces of either urban depravity or urban regulation and surveillance (rural positively invested…)."[56] Strangely, the rural is "simultaneously a site of vestigial wildness and the forward edge of a civilizing force, or again simultaneously a zone of historical recidivism but also of rustic retreat."[57]

By combining elements of rural studies and queer ecology, we can forge an alchemic critique of the presumed monopoly that rural space has on the natural world. This strategy of reversing the calcified discourses of rural-urban and nature-culture has the benefit of better elucidating *both* sides of the continuum—the city and the country.[58] In her seminal essay "Towards a Queer Ecofeminism," Greta Gaard extends a critique of naturalism to one of queer sexuality, noting again the paradoxical construction of queer sexualities as closer to nature (i.e. primitive, uncivilized, barbaric), while simultaneously being considered a crime against nature itself (in that it openly defies heteronormative and reproductive logic).[59] This defiance is in line with Halberstam's insistence on the legitimacy of queer time(s) and space(s) which, "…develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop

[56] David Bell, "Eroticizing the Rural," in *De-Centering Sexualities,* 82.
[57] Lawrence, "Heartlands," 3.
[58] "Images of the country and of country life, therefore, tell us things about the city, too—and, in particular, about the working of the rural/urban, margin/centre, natural/unnatural hierarchy as a device which marks both…", David Bell, "Eroticizing the Rural," in *De-Centering Sexualities,* 94-95.
[59] Greta Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 119.

according to other logics of location, movement, and identification."[60]

The paradox of queer naturalism notwithstanding, the equation of queer identity with urban life and cosmopolitanism has been key to the paradigmatically metronormative ascendency of the LGBT movement in post-war America. Hastened especially by the proliferation of identity/visibility politics in the wake of Stonewall, the contemporary LGBT movement's own recognizability emerged synonymously with the metropolitan landscape(s) that so often were the sites of queer organizing and activism (though certainly not the *only* sites)[61]. It was, in part, this coincidental mid-century rise of popular anxieties surrounding urbanization, immigration, and environmental degradation—alongside the increasing visibility of the American homosexual—that has helped to portray both the queer and the metropolitan as unnaturally interwoven and mutually constitutive. In other words:

> The point is that the implantation of perversion was a distinctly urban phenomenon, and the fact of the proliferation of sexual possibilities in developing cities shaped the emergence of homosexuality as unnatural; emerging proto-environmental critiques of the destructive artificiality of cities were thus instrumental in shaping ideas about the artificiality of gay men in particular…[62]

This euphemistic artificiality has since been couched in more flattering terms, with the post-Stonewall construction of the cultured and cosmopolitan gay male archetype dominating popular culture, but it's not hard to see that mainstream "tolerance" or "acceptance" of (specifically) gay male sexuality isn't based in any real *queer-politik*, but instead is rooted in the contemporary gay male's ability to serve as the poster child for

[60] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place,* 1.
[61] "But it was the growing visibility of these communities, and the increasing association of homosexuality with degeneracy, that tied the homosexual to the urban, not necessarily some quantitatively greater homoerotic presence (even though one must certainly acknowledge that urban conditions have allowed many aspects of gay male and lesbian culture to flourish, and that visibility has taken a particular shape as a result)," Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies,* 15.
[62] Ibid., 15-16.

modern, neoliberal models of quaint consumption. That is to say, it is—

> …only a very narrow band of gayness—that portion tied to the fetishistic exchange of aesthetic commodities—ends up being at all "acceptable." Gay men and lesbians are OK not because they are queer, but because they are exemplary consumers in a society that judges all people by their ability to consume.[63]

This "narrow band" of gayness is both the source of modern day queer visibility as well as, increasingly, the homogenizing force that has rendered so many queers—namely those in rural spaces and small towns—completely invisible at best, and anathema to (contemporary queer recognizability) at worst. But even with the historical association of the queer with the artificial/unnatural, or the contemporary pairing of the gay (male) with high culture (as opposed to nature/the natural), we are still not on solid ground. Indeed, the irony only grows richer because, as Berlant and Warner explain, even with the prototypical coupling queers with culture—

> Queer is difficult to entextualize as culture. This is particularly true of intimate culture. Heteronormative forms of intimacy are supported…not only by overt referential discourse such as love plots and sentimentality but materially, in marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of work and politics. Queer culture, by contrast, has almost no institutional matrix for its counterintimacies. In the absence of marriage and the rituals that organize life around matrimony, improvisation is always necessary for the speech act of pledging, or the narrative practice of dating…The heteronormativity in such practices may seem weak and indirect. After all, same-sex couples have sometimes been able to invent versions of such practices. But they have done so only by betrothing themselves to the couple form and its language of personal significance, leaving untransformed the material and ideological conditions that divide intimacy from history, politics, and publics. The queer project we imagine is not just to destigmatize those average intimacies, not just to give access to the sentimentality of the couple for persons of the same sex, and definitely not to certify as properly private the personal lives of gays and lesbians. Rather, it is to support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity.[64]

[63] Ibid., 21-22.
[64] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 561-62.

This passage is worth quoting at length, as Berlant and Warner make it clear that, as easy as it has been to *equate* queers and culture, it is much more difficult (perhaps impossible) to *entextualize* queer *as* culture—especially when heterodoxy has been so definitive of which intimacies are deemed legible and worthy of institutional recognition. Even the so-called "battle" for "marriage equality" that has been so definitive of the LGBT movement in the twenty-first century is essentially a fight for homonormative assimilation which takes the heteronormative model of matrimonial coupling repro-futural temporality as its penultimate achievement.

In fact, the bourgeoning homonormativity of the modern LGBT political movement, with its insistence upon assimilation into heterosexual familial models, should be divorced from notions of *queerness* as a critical tool, as well as from the radical queer political project that preceded it. An elucidation of the differences that have marked the split of the modern LGBT post-Stonewall political movement from earlier, so-called "pre-modern" conceptions of queer life is in order here because, in no small way, understanding this split is central to resisting the metronormative paradigm that dominates contemporary LGBT social existence, and to recognizing the stylistic counterdiscourse that is built into the Rural Studio's aesthetic and material world.

The difference between self-identified "queers" and those individuals that identify as part of the LGBT community can perhaps be understood most productively in their relationships with—or engagements of—the public and private spheres as they have been popularly delineated within modern Western political thought and democratic societies. The dividing line between the collective public and the private individual has been and remains the foundational organizing principle of contemporary democratic states, as it

establishes the parameters of what is possible and what is appropriate between the government and the governed—an irrevocably intimate relationship that constantly establishes, affirms, and reaffirms its own legitimacy each time the public/private polemic is engaged at the inevitable sites of social and political conflict between citizens and their government.

This struggle is a classical one—whether to fight within or wholly outside and against—an unjust system. This choice captures new urgency in a modern democracy, which at least gives off the illusion that profound social and political change is possible through the governmental levers of power upon which it founds its own legitimacy. These two approaches to political activism—whether to rage against, or manipulate—the machinations of power are exemplified by the tactics of "queer" versus "LGBT" activists during the AIDS crisis and in the years since, as the epidemic subsided and both queers and the LGBT community at large began to ask what comes next.

Writing in *Publics and Counterpublics,* Michael Warner tries his best to parse these often divergent approaches to change-making in queer and LGBT politics,[65] but the slippage between queer-identified individuals and the perhaps more community-oriented individuals that elect to be affiliated with a broader LGBT movement is difficult to avoid, since both of these identities are undeniably *contextual,* and both frequently traffic in the political discourse of the other. It just depends:

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[65] "Queer politics has been innovative because of the degree to which it cultivates self-consciousness about public-sphere-mediated society and because of the degree to which that self-consciousness has been incorporated into the self-understanding of a metropolitan sexual subculture…Negotiation with state agencies, as a normal kind of activism, is typically organized by ideas of minority politics, community representation, and state coordination of special interests. Those who do it typically describe themselves as lesbian and gay rather than queer—even though many such activists call themselves queer in other contexts." *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Zone Books; Distributed by MIT Press, 2002), 211-12.

> Queer activists are also lesbians and gays in other contexts--as, for example, where leverage can be gained through bourgeois propriety, or through minority-rights discourse, or through more gender-marked language (it probably won't replace lesbian feminism). Some people are in some contexts meaningfully motivated by queer self-characterizations; others are not. This distinction is not the same as that between those who are straight and those who are gay and lesbian. No one adheres to queer self-characterizations all the time. Even when some of us do so, it may be to exploit rhetorics in ways that have relatively little to do with our characters, identities, selves, or psyches. Rhetoric of queerness neither saturates identity nor supplants it. Queer politics, in short, has not just replaced older models of lesbian and gay politics; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear.[66]

What is essential to the LGBT political project is a social identity that is culturally legible and aesthetically recognizable to the LGBT community itself and to—in this case—American society more generally. Queer individuals, experiences, and critiques, on the other hand, are often derivative of *dis-identifications*, *out-of-placeness*, and a (perceived) *lack* of community.

This perception—or reality—of a missing community is not only the blood in queer veins, but is also the structuring metanarrative of metronormativity, which relies on the discursive production of small towns and rural landscapes as the locus of isolation, backwardness, emptiness, loneliness, hostility, and desperation—while the city stands as a site of monumental tolerance, acceptance, community, culture, connectedness, and most importantly—the ceaseless site of sexual opportunity and romantic encounter. The equal and opposite reaction of this discursive coupling between the big city and LGBT community is the discursive de-coupling of country living and LGBT identity in a spatialized and nationalized gay imaginary. Furthermore, as Kath Weston argues:

> The result is a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence…In story

[66] Ibid., 213.

> after story, a symbolics of urban/rural relations locates gay subjects in the city while putting their presence in the countryside under erasure. One way to read narratives that depict rural gays as exceptions or impossibilities is as cautionary tales about what happens to preconstituted gay people who fail to find "community" (i.e., their proper place). But that reading ignores the extent to which urban/rural contrasts have structured the very subjectivity that allows people to think of themselves or others as gay.[67]

As Weston demonstrates, the flight to LGBT identity, connection, and community entails, as all political and social identities do, a *preconstitution* of individual subjects that must fit neatly into the broader, acceptable socio-cultural rubric of that identity, lest they risk invisibility. In the case of gay men, however, it's not only the supposed lack of an identifiable community of the like-minded in rural spaces that constitutes their respective disidentifications, but their very existence in their own homes and environments, which are far flung from the safe havens of the big city, and thus far flung and outside of gay identity itself.

This, to be sure, must be a powerfully *queer* experience for those individuals in small towns and rural areas that feel same-sex attraction, but don't have the taxonomic resources to name this attraction or to recognize others that might feel the same, since neither of them bear the metronormative inscriptions that render LGBT identity legible and recognizable. The out-of-placeness that is inherent in the lives of queers who fail to find or know their place, either in their failure to locate community, or in their failure to properly identify themselves in the cultural hierarchy of the urban and the rural.

[67] Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 40-41.

CHAPTER 3

Anti-Urban Aesthetics and Failed Modernity in the Queer Country

...At the Rural Studio, we very rarely actually have a conversation about the sort of stylistic nature of the architecture.
-Andrew Freear[68]

What sorts of style signal the crisis of survival?
-Judith Butler[69]

Whether polyphonous or univocal, history, thus ontologized, displaces the epistemological impasse, the aporia of relationality, the nonidentity of things, by offering the promise of sequence as the royal road to consequence. Meaning thus hangs in the balance—a meaning that time, as the medium of its advent, defers while affirming its constant approach, but a meaning utterly undone by the queer who figures its refusal.
-Lee Edelman[70]

In *Another Country*, Scott Herring identifies six foundational (though certainly not exhaustive) axes upon which metronormativity operates. They are the narratological, racial, socioeconomic, temporal, epistemological, and aesthetic[71] constructions of LGBT identity that presume a spatialized queer flight to the city as the ultimate bildungsroman for queers everywhere—the penultimate catharsis—a "coming out" of the woods and into the stylized gay mecca of the big city. All of these axes invariably intersect and are inextricably woven into each other, but sticking with Herring's rubric, and of particular import to the work I am doing here, are the temporal, epistemological, and aesthetic

[68] "Andrew Freear: An Architecture of Decency," interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, November 15, 2007, accessed June 05, 2015, http://www.onbeing.org/program/architecture-decency/transcript/4430
[69] Judith Butler, "Agencies of Style for a Liminal Subject," in *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall,* Stuart Hall et al., (London; New York: Verso, 2000), 36.
[70] Lee Edelman et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007): 181.
[71] Herring, *Another Country,* 15-6.

dimensions of metronormativity as revealed and to some unconscious extent—refused—through the work of the Rural Studio. That is not to say that the other dimensions Herring points out aren't present here also, just that they are more obvious/apparent in the rapprochement I am pursuing between queer anti-urbanism and the Studio, and thus require less elaboration here.

Let's start with the aesthetic world of the Rural Studio and the ways in which serves as an antidote to the metronormative pursuits of mainstream architecture. In doing so, we will also begin to unfold the temporal and epistemological paradigms that undergird its rural style—or, more appropriately—its lack of style. The metronormative aesthetic norm of LGBT culture (like other aesthetic norms) becomes "substantiated by epistemological, temporal, and socioeconomic norms," and, more specifically, as Herring continues—

> …occurs when the lesbian and gay urbanism that informs metronormativity consolidates itself as queer urbanity. Such urbanity functions primarily as a psychic, material, and affective mesh of stylistics informed by a knowingness that polices and validates what counts for any queer cultural production…[72]

The importance of the cultural legibility that stylistics and aesthetics lend to the identitarian political model cannot be understated here. This is because LGBT identity, unlike racial identity, has no biological manifestation. Whereas the presence or absence of melanin is (rightly or wrongly) used as the basis for racial identification, LGBT individuals have the luxury of choosing whether or not to reveal themselves, or to "come out" of the "closet"—a popular trope that we often forget is spatialized itself. Thus, LGBT individuals must aestheticize the identities they claim in order *to be seen.* This reliance on aesthetic legibility is one way of understanding the temptation to embrace

[72] Ibid., 16.

visibility politics and an aesthetics of identity that the LGBT community has used to define itself and its mission in the post-Stonewall era. The drive to visibility corresponds quite neatly with the spatialized flight to the city and the archetypal coming out narrative requisite of modern LGBT subjects seeking connection to a larger community, and it's perhaps no surprise then, that a metronormative metanarrative is what emerges from the conspiracy of these elements. There is certainly also an epistemological dimension to the aesthetic normativity of which Herring speaks; the "knowingness" that he describes is definitive of LGBT metronormativity, indicating who is "in the know" and what is fashionable, the latest, all the rage, chic, in style, etc.

All of these different dimensions—the aesthetic, epistemological, and temporal—are tied up into a labyrinthine sheepshank knot of metronormativity, since all of these dimensions are covalent, and all are indicative—in some way—of all the others. And these strains of metronormativity, whether viewed as a single knot or parsed into individual metronormative strands, "help support, sustain, and standardize the idealizing geographies of post-Stonewall lesbian and gay urbanism, an urbanism that facilitates the ongoing commodification, corporatization, and de-politicization of U.S.-based queer cultures in many locales."[73] For Herring, these "idealized geographies" have concretized in the homonormativity of the post-Stonewall era, but their foundations were poured much earlier in the ascendant urbanism of the early twentieth century.[74] We could, I believe, easily include constructions of the rural idyll in this category of idealized geographies, and I think it is productive to consider the popular notion of an idyll rural

[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.

landscape in conjunction with the development of the modern metropolis as the ideal—in fact, the *only*—suitable habitat fit for LGBT inhabitants.

Let's start with the Rural Studio's aesthetic of Herringian "critical rusticity" to understand the studio's rejection of style for style's sake, which enables it to resist the compelling advances of metronormative fashionability and chic compulsion that has become characteristic of modern LGBT identity as well as contemporary architectural practice, as far as they both concern themselves with the virtues of neoliberal capitalism. Paul Jones and Kenton Card take on the infusion of power in architecture while reflecting on the work of the Rural Studio, reminding us that:

> It is an oft-stated aphorism that professional architectural practice is closely aligned with the powerful. The symbiotic relationship is due both to architecture's capacity to materialise status, and its potential to facilitate the generation of surplus value from urban space; as a key site in these regards, architecture bears the hallmarks of cycles of speculative investment and disinvestment, of growth and of shrinkage. Given professional architecture's reliance on wealthy clients for commissions, on the surface it is perhaps an unlikely place to look for critiques, resistances and challenges to capitalist political-economy.[75]

Architecture's courtship of material status, and its impetus to extract "surplus value from urban space" is perfectly mirrored by modern LGBT culture's metronormative reliance on urbane paradigms to see its own reflection. Similarly—and in keeping with Jones and Card's capitalistic metaphor—it can be argued that queer/LGBT histories have themselves been subject to "cycles of speculative investment and disinvestment" where dis/investment is another word for the presence or absence of a popular LGBT community or cultural identity. This is captured *par excellence* in the post-Stonewall epoch of LGBT visibility and its unceasing pursuit of a civil rights agenda which relies

[75] Paul Jones and Kenton Card, "Constructing 'Social Architecture': The Politics of Representing Practice," *Architectural Theory Review* 16, no. 3 (2011): 232.

much more on a politics of normativity—"We're just like you"—than anything queerer than that, which might cross a line out of the mainstream and into popular disinvestment and communal shrinkage. It's safe to say that LGBT identity, visibility, and community is experiencing an unprecedented investment of capital in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, thanks to its aesthetic commodification and subsequent circulation as a durable good on both national and international markets. Thanks to the purchasing power of the ascendant "pink dollar" nationally and globally, the LGBT community has carved out more than a "niche market" for itself—it has found its own *market identity.*

Jones and Card employ Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory to think through the category of "social architecture" which is so often blindly applied to Mockbee's legacy; they unpack the taxonomy of the "social" category in architectural practice in order to understand "the types of uses and struggles that centre on the built environment, and the ways in which architectural practice—including the assemblage of materials, meanings and relations that constitute ''architecture''—connect to wider questions (such as concerning the material inequalities characteristic of capitalist formations)."[76] Modern architecture and LGBT identity share a common investment of power in aesthetics as a governing discourse which determines the line(s) between inclusion/exclusion, in the know/out of the loop, with the times/so yesterday, and on and on, etc.

Herring speculates on the Barthesian consequences of "what happens when you fail the cultural coding of urbanized outfits and exceed [the] 'normative' totality"[77] of metronormative fashionability, and the results are dire—especially for the queers that find themselves not only on the outskirts of the city, but outside of *le mode.* Not "getting

[76] Ibid.
[77] Herring, *Another Country,* 129.

with the program", as they say, also risks epistemological alienation and social isolation; as Herring puts it: "Unfamiliar with chic's shared 'knowledge,' you find your unfashionable self this side of social recognition, sanctioned outside of fashion's like-minded community—and you know it."[78]

Judith Butler wrestles with a pathology of style to the extent that it serves as an aesthetic threshold through which the individual is connected (or not) to a larger social community, asking: "How do we read the agency of the subject when its demand for cultural and psychic and political survival makes itself known as style?"[79] This style is a fashion that "enables sexual recognition while it asks for sexual assimilation into an urbanized queer group identity"[80] and it is this trading of (sexual) recognition for (urbane) assimilation that constitutes the modern LGBT square deal, and it's a raw deal for the throngs of queers on the American periphery who view their rurality as inherent—not antithetical—to their queer existence. But what does it look like to reject this deal? To refuse its terms flat-out? It might look rustic, kitschy, or even trashy—such is the case with Music Man's house (see figure 1 below)—but its ostensible lack of a formal style or sophisticated aesthetic shouldn't be mistaken for a lack of critical or material substance.

[78] Ibid., 129-30.
[79] Judith Butler, "Agencies of Style for a Liminal Subject," in *Without Guarantees,* 36.
[80] Herring, *Another Country,* 127.

Figure 1. “Music Man’s House” (Photo by Timothy Hursley)

Ching and Creed lay the critical foundation for “a culturally valuable rusticity”[81] which de-emphasizes style and cultural sophistication, insisting instead on the pragmatic and material virtues of practical know-how.[82] Herring takes this concept and runs with it, transforming it into a “dynamic mode of queer critique and a novel structure of feeling, a rhetorical and emotional engagement with U.S.-based metronormativity that critiques any representation of the rural as an ‘empty’ space removed from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stress or inequality.”[83] Much in this way, the Rural Studio functions as a monumental retort to *idyll*-istic or fatalistic representations of rural spaces, which would

[81] Ching and Creed, *Knowing Your Place, 10*.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Herring, *Another Country,* 85.

seek to simplify and leave un-tilled the cultural, socioeconomic, historical, and globally-interconnected complexities of rural spaces that the studio so incessantly digs up in its attempts to engage emotionally and honestly with the local nuances, antagonisms, and complexities that have coalesced over hundreds of years into the topsoil upon which its concrete foundation is laid.

The studio works against the hyper-capitalistic aesthetics of modern architecture and metronormative queer culture through its practical insistence upon using discarded, donated, repurposed, and found building materials, as well as through its utilization of ostensibly anachronistic and decidedly un-modern and old-fashioned building strategies, which operate outside of many taken-for-granted comforts that have come to define contemporary domestic life. For example, the studio relies extensively on low-tech strategies for naturally cooling and heating its buildings, including time-tested architectural tactics of manipulating natural light, shade, and building angles that help to cool the structures during the summer. The program's director, Andrew Freear, finds low-tech inspiration in the architectural heritage of the Antebellum South, and isn't afraid to look *back* at the history of the Black Belt in order to extract practical building strategies from the plantation houses (figure 2) that dot the landscape of Hale County:

> You know, the big white houses, absolutely, are tremendously well built, very, very cleverly built. And they've survived, not just because they're big white house and that they're cared for, but because they were very smart. They have big roofs. They're very well ventilated. They have big porches. They have big window openings, you know? And they're held off the ground. And our students go and look at them every day. And it's not to sort of copy the big white architecture, but it's to sort of think about the street smarts of it. I mean, today, our contemporary society is housing people in tin cans, where there are very few openings.

Everybody has the air conditioner. You have two seasons. You have the air conditioning season and you have the heating season.[84]

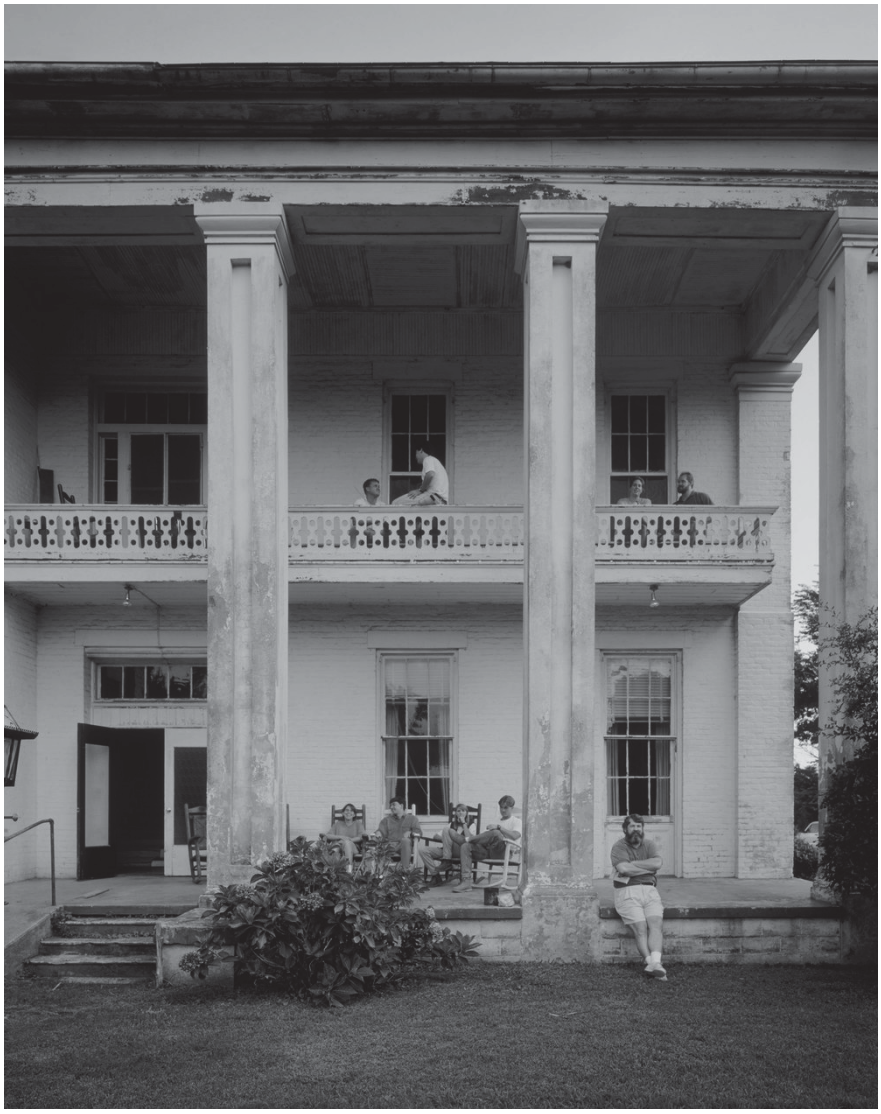

Figure 2. Mockbee and students outside of a dilapidated plantation home.

The ability to recover anything of value from the trash heap of history—or to find anything worthy of rescue on the side of the highway of technological progress—is a critically rustic propensity that unites anti-urban queers and rural building strategies under an "architecture of decency," as Mockbee would call it. Think of this as an

[84] "Andrew Freear: An Architecture of Decency," interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, November 15, 2007, accessed June 05, 2015, http://www.onbeing.org/program/architecture-decency/transcript/4430

aesthetic of the *necessary*—a *mode* of survival whereby rural subjects fashion the means and materials to sustain their very existence. What emerges is an unconscious, vernacular aesthetic that isn't concerned with the hyper-futurity of capitalism's ever-vanishing stylistic horizon, focusing instead on its material survival, and paying little (if any) attention to questions of fashionability. This isn't to give the impression that folks in the country are ignorant to ideas of taste, but it is by no means their *modus operandi*.

The studio's knack for fashioning stable housing out of rubbish, and rural queers' talent for building a world for themselves outside of metronormative graces is demonstrative of a rural epistemology that demands scrappy solutions to a dearth of material and social resources that render rural life unthinkable in the minds of most urban-dwellers. From this ongoing and daily struggle emerges a remarkably idiosyncratic aesthetic that, in the case of the Rural Studio, leaves many critics profoundly confused. Not quite nice enough to be modern, yet too intelligently-designed to be primitive; vernacular, but not kitschy—the structures of the Rural Studio elude the typical taxonomic categories that architects conventionally rely on for critique, much in the same way that the lives of rural queers confound their urban counterparts' reliance on equating LGBT culture with the metropolis. And even though the studio relies on found and donated materials, it manages to avoid being aesthetically pigeon-holed as novelty or "kitsch" culture; as Thorsten Botz-Bornstein explains:

> It becomes clear that the Rural Studio operates on a completely different anthropological ground. The typical clients of the Rural Studio are not integrated in the spectrum of capitalist societies, as their social habitus eludes most attributes of hedonistic consumer society and comes amazingly close to that of traditional, precapitalist societies. The main characteristics of their economies are frugality and thriftiness. This shows that the success of the Rural Studio depends on the

> particularity of its place: only within the limited social sphere in which they act can an architecture using junk and waste become a distinct style.[85]

Botz-Bornstein has a valid point here regarding the aesthetic and material priorities of rural subjects; they are, at the very least, on the *margins* or periphery of mainstream capitalist society and consumer culture. This is not the same, however, as living completely outside of the "spectrum of capitalist societies," and the suggestion that the clients of the Rural Studio live in some kind of "precapitalist" vacuum is quite a stretch, and is demonstrative of just how powerful the fable of the rural idyll has become. Even the design-build process of the studio itself—while often operating horizontally by building relationships *across* municipalities between students, clients, and officials—still doesn't escape recognizable models of capitalist exchange, though it may resist and warp them. Houses and public spaces *still* cost money to make, permits can be expensive, and even the ostensibly free labor of the students is rooted in their very privilege as students, which has been afforded to them through both private and public channels of family, government, and university.

It's easy as a theoretician to become caught up in the rapture of the rural poor, or to get carried away by the rural-exotic into a marginal imaginary that makes ordinary people seem supra-social, supra-historical, and even supra-capitalistic when they are not. Quite the opposite, in fact, and I feel here that I must insist on the ordinary-ness of the rural world, while at the same time making the case that there *is* something remarkable about life in the country that seems to hint at the possibility of building a life free of capital's omnipotent reach. This is the trap of the rural idyll, must also, admittedly, be the

[85] Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "Cardboard Houses with Wings," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 3 (October 1, 2010): 17.

sign of rural people's capacity for building and inhabiting non-normative spatial and temporal models.

So, while country living may not be as marked by consumer culture as city dwelling, rural subjects must still make a living, and so it is that the idyll-istic mirage of country folks somehow making a life for themselves that is uncorrupted by the economic constraints of capitalism is just that—a mirage. I also disagree with Botz-Bornstein's assertion that the social spheres of small towns or rural communities are necessarily "limited" and that somehow this narrow sociality is the only thing that enables a unique style to emerge from the studio and its clients throughout Hale County. To start from the assumption that the social world of the Black Belt is inherently limited or less rich or complicated than social world's elsewhere is a metronormative misunderstanding of rural communities.

Botz-Bornstein does offer a fantastic analysis of the studio's *vernacular aesthetic*—an aesthetic which on the surface blends seamlessly with its surroundings while giving little hint of the meticulous, laborious, and time-consuming design-build process that went into its creation. Vernacular architecture, in its most general sense, is an architecture that is constructed of local materials, built in the style of the locals, and most importantly—built *for* locals themselves.

Therefore, to say that a structure has a vernacular aesthetic is to say that it looks local—it fits into the landscape or seems indigenous to its environment. And it can be a tricky thing, this vernacular way of building, in world of globalized architecture where culture is so easily appropriated and cultural authenticity imitated:

> Wherever architects attempt to design "the vernacular," they are confronted with the paradox that the vernacular lives up to its truest definition when it appears not

> as designed architecture but as an unpretentious, private niche that looks just as if it has been made by locals. The buildings of the Rural Studio yield the impression that here the vernacular has been reinstated in a relatively original sense as something that looks halfway self-built.[86]

Perhaps this is not a coincidence, given the depth of commitment that the students make to their clients, and the time they spend living on-site and collaborating locally with clients, governments, and community organizations. The resulting structures couldn't help but to look self-built because to some extent, they are. This is the point of the Rural Studio, and possible because participatory design "overcomes the strict framework of community design, relativizes the 'paternalistic complex' of civic architecture. The students become members of the community; they make the community as much as the clients become members of the student group."[87]

This personal dynamic is illustrative of Sam Mockbee's original vision of the "citizen-architect" and is built into the DNA of the program as it aspires to create a type of architecture without architects, so to speak. Jones and Card describe Mockbee's perhaps unconsciously vernacular vision of the studio as—

> fundamentally contingent on the rejection of many of the principles of mainstream architectural practice and training. His program was designed to put undergraduate students 'into an architecture that is real . . . not theoretical' and to encourage a 'self-aware' architectural practice that would challenge 'pretense and undue abstraction' in the next generation of architects.[88]

It's clear that Mockbee wanted to utilize vernacular strategies to counter metronormative, mainstream architecture's primary focus on capital, and its estrangement from—and indifference to—social inequality; and he managed to do so in a landscape that is so often forgotten in metronormative discourse of social inequality and inner-city poverty.

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[86] Botz-Bornstein, "Cardboard Houses with Wings," 19.
[87] Ibid., 20.
[88] Jones and Card, "Constructing Social Architecture," 235.

The myth of the rural idyll is shattered when we come face to face with the studio's clients, whose substandard housing and everyday squalor disrupt the continuity of their bucolic surroundings; and the rural poor aren't hard to see just because of their position on the margins, though that is certainly a factor in their invisibility. The flux of their material conditions may also confuse mainstream perceptions of true poverty, and cloud their status of what most might consider to be *wholly homeless.* As Mary Stover makes clear:

> Literal homelessness often is episodic, whereas the condition of being without permanent adequate housing usually is longer term. The rural homeless typically move from one extremely substandard, overcrowded, and/or cost-burdened housing situation to another, often doubling or tripling up with friends or relatives. While housed in these precarious situations, the rural homeless do not meet the predominant interpretation of literal homelessness. They are, however, without permanent adequate homes.[89]

The upsetting result of this fading in and out of stable housing is the degradation of living standards and the evacuation of dignity from the lives of those in flux; and the resulting consequences are not merely episodic, though the literal homelessness may be, but are exponential, as moving from place to place (willingly or by force) can result in damaged credit, diminished reputation, and finally can render the poor conspicuously and notoriously out of place in small towns or rural communities.

All of this means that the rural homeless experience a flickering in and out of social visibility—a strobe-like effect whereby in one moment the reality of rural poverty is conveniently ignored by escapist fantasies of the rural idyll, while in the next moment, poor and homeless subjects in small towns and rural spaces are grotesquely visualized as they stick out from the rest of the population, pictured as a blight on the community as

[89] Mary Stover, "The Hidden Homeless," in *Housing in Rural America: Building Affordable and Inclusive Communities*, Joseph N Belden et al. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999), 76.

they move from makeshift shelter to ramshackle shed in between more favorable, "permanent" living situations. As Cloke, Marsden, and Mooney illustrate in their extensive studies on rural and small town homelessness in the UK:

> … examples are provided that illustrate how the increased visibilities of homeless people in village spaces often lead to the accentuation of difference and deviance, and the active, though informal, policing of this deviance. A local church representative in one case study village makes the following comment:
>
> 'if you're homeless . . . in [name of village] it sticks out . . . if someone's milling around and going round the same places . . . it's more exposing for that person. It identifies and accentuates their sense of failure and lack of worth.'[90]

Furthermore, they maintain: "…rurality and homelessness are discursively non-coupled… [through] the socio-cultural barriers that exist within the practices, thoughts, and discourses of rural dwellers themselves, leading them to deny that homelessness exists in their place.[91] The quotidian cognitive dissonance produced by living the material realities of rural homelessness while simultaneously (at least superficially) denying its existence leads to a profound psychic disconnection with the rural landscape—a dreadful feeling of being perpetually *out-of-place* in the country—not at all dissimilar to the creeping *placelessness* felt by queers in the country as they try to somehow square their rural heritage with metronormative rubrics of LGBT identity.

The coping mechanisms available to rural queers and those living on the socioeconomic margins of the country—and let's not forget that these are often *the same people*—are also notably similar. Among these strategies for survival we can include tactical movement(s) through friendly and hostile spaces—most poignantly encapsulated

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[90] Paul J. Cloke, Terry Marsden, and Patrick H. Mooney, *Handbook of Rural Studies* (London; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2006), 435.
[91] Paul J Cloke, Paul Milbourne, and Rebekah Widdowfield, Rural Homelessness: Issues, Experiences and Policy Responses (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2002), 66.

in the decision whether to go or to stay—as well as a remarkably queer restructuring of kinship and familial models, including the construction of affective communities, and the inter-generational reconfiguration of the home, domestic space, and nuclear models of support and belonging. The architecture of the Rural Studio embodies this struggle, and responds to the alternative, trans-familial and inter-generational structure of its clients' lives[92] in simple, elegant ways, as Andrew Freear explains:

> It's very, very simple inside — two very simple bedrooms and a bathroom. And then, these sort of three wonderful little sort of wagon wheels that stick out of the back that have very, very small circular rooms so the nephews and nieces could come and sort of lay down in.
>
> It's very smart, you know? They sort of — they can be used for stories; they can be used in different ways. But fundamentally, they were about the extended family. And even today, I don't know which generation it is that's running in and out of that house. But if you go down there, you'll find the kids in those little sort of nooks in the back of the house, enjoying them. It's very beautiful.[93]

This predicament (for lack of a more dignified word) of multiple, extended, and inter-generational families living together under one roof is the waking reality of the rural poor predicated on their limited access to material resources, ironically, in a landscape that represents abundance and an ostensibly "closer-to-nature" means of production.

I want to contend, however, that the close-knit experience of these non-nuclear families is more than a mere coping mechanism or reaction to a dearth of familial wealth and stable housing—though it is certainly that, as well. But it is also a fantastically *queer* organizational strategy (in the most abstract sense) that not only mirrors the self-built

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[92] And we started to look at the way that people lived in west Alabama. And there's an awful lot of sort of situations or conditions of extended families. And you'd often find a mother or a grandmother with a daughter or a daughter-in-law living with a younger child. So there would be sort of different generations living together. And it's not often that architecture sort of responds to that kind of family dynamic ("Andrew Freear: An Architecture of Decency," interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*).
[93] Ibid.

structures of feeling that have characterized models of queer community, friendship, alliance, and family—but is also a living arrangement that subtly and exquisitely defies the hegemony of heteronormative temporality and challenges the omnipresent, effervescent, impunity of repro-futurism.

This is a talent that again pays homage to the penchant of liminal and marginal subjects to exceed the boundaries of normative culture, whether temporally, aesthetically, or otherwise. And expanded notions of what exactly constitutes family is not only evident in the lives of the studio's clients once the building is finished, but the design-build process itself works as a process of fashioning intimate relationships with the clients—near strangers—that link up to form a larger, transgressive structure of feeling that sees the folding together of poor, disabled, black, and (formally) uneducated individuals and families with a class of irrevocably privileged, mostly white, middle class college students, in a locally-rooted, vernacular journey into a project of shared intimacy, the product of which is sustainable, stable, and permanent housing:

> Ms. Lucy Harris: I tell you, the house, you know, it just, when you go in, it's just a peace in my house. It's just a comfortable place to stay, you know? That's what built this house up. You know, it was built out of love and compassion, you know, and caring for one another. Because even, you know, now, I didn't know Ben was coming down. I didn't know him and Kim was coming down, but, you know, they became a part of my family. And we always stay in contact with each other. And I love them as, just like I love my children.[94]

Family is nothing if not malleable. Some might say that the type of "family" described above by Ms. Harris is a mile wide and an inch deep—that the "family" that develops amongst the studio and its clients, or between self-identified queers united by a common struggle is a bastardization of biological kinship and bears no legitimacy. And while it is

[94] Ibid.

true that there is rarely (if ever) a formal, legal recognition of these types of relationships—they are absolutely crucial to the survival of millions of Americans, and increasingly they belie the cookie-cutter illusion of the perfect nuclear family, exposing it as the *exception* instead of the *rule*, finally showcasing the fraught limits of mainstream models of rote intimacy.

It may seem, in fact, that all this talk of "family" and "intimacy" merely sinks into romantic abstraction, but on the contrary, these structures of feeling dictate the quality of life and the potential for upward mobility in the everyday lives of citizens across the country; through binding discourses of legal recognition and/or emotional discourses of social legitimacy, families are made and unmade at the behest of normative, dominant social institutions, whose own legitimacy is inevitably challenged by alternative models of family and belonging that do not fit the definition of the mainstream. Lauren Berlant ruminates on the transparent threads that connect the visceral, emotional lives of individuals with the opaque, collective world of the social institutions that are entrusted to maintain civil order:

> How can we think about the ways attachments make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities, when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely disruptive crises? And what have these formative encounters to do with the effects of other, less institutionalized events, which might take place on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue? Intimacy names the enigma of this range of attachments, and more; and it poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective.[95]

Berlant does a fantastic job of describing the plant-like xylem and phloem that exists between the minute "residue" of everyday intimate interactions and the grandiose,

[95] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (January 1, 1998): 283.

deceptively timeless social institutions that we put in charge of regulating the public sphere of super-structural socio-legal intimacy. And to the extent that queer structures of feeling have been historically forced to develop around and outside of mainstream familial configurations—and as much potential as queerness holds to disrupt and destabilize these configurations—the modern LGBT movement has also been remarkably devoted to being included in these traditional arrangements, and the marriage equality movement is an example of this, *par excellence.* The ceaseless push for equal marriage rights is all well and good, but does next to nothing when it comes to cultivating the queer potential that it has inherited for disrupting normative ideologies of repro-futural time and progressive teleology.

In Halberstam's words, "as a kind of false narrative of continuity, as a construction that makes connection and succession seem organic and natural, family also gets in the way of all sorts of other alliances and coalitions. An ideology of family pushes gays and lesbians toward marriage politics and erases other modes of kinship in the process."[96] This push toward marriage is perhaps not coincidental. Let's not forget that the contemporary incentives for marrying are primarily legal and invariably financial. That is to say that marriage, for as much as it has been construed as a natural investment in repro-futural security or inured to romance and religion—is first and foremost these days an *economic* arrangement.

As a financial tool, marriage is responsible for reaching into every corner of modern life, from tax and estate law to joint checking accounts, it's breadth is seemingly endless, and its manifestations too vast to enumerate here; and the heightened financial

[96] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 71.

status of marriage has proliferated wildly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as neoliberal economic policies have stripped down much of the protections put in place by the welfare state that was built in the image of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society", hollowing out public institutions and transplanting their social responsibilities squarely in the living rooms of Americans' private households:

> The stress on households is intensifying, as people try to do more with less. Care for children and the elderly, for the ill and disabled, has been shifted toward unpaid women at home or to low-paid, privately employed female domestic workers. In this context, household stability becomes a life-and-death issue. On whom do we depend when we can't take care of ourselves? If Social Security shrinks or disappears and your company sheds your pension fund, what happens to you when you can no longer work? In more and more cases, the sole remaining resource is the cooperative, mutually supporting household or kinship network.[97]

This dynamic is undoubtedly at work in the households of the Rural Studio, as clients try and fasten together a support network—a hodgepodge coalition of friends, relatives, public welfare, and private resources that can (hopefully) be cobbled together to make an honest living. So it would seem that family is only as transgressive as we make it; it can show up in perpetuity as reproductive logic embodied, as the supreme intimate institution upon which civilization itself rests, and a private domestic refuge from the incessant demands of public politeness and formality. Or, alternatively, it can operate subliminally and without virtuous repute as a queer structure of feeling or horizontal support network consisting of the myriad friends, lovers, and political alliances that are the meat and the gristle on the bones of everyday life among other people whom we move towards or away from, and whom we depend on (or not) for our own survival.

I don't want to make the institutions of intimacy seem absolute or omnipotent, however, because they are, in fact, just the opposite. Indeed, their normative power is

[97] Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, "Beyond Gay Marriage," *The Nation,* July 18, 2005, 25.

derived from their capacity to evolve to changing social norms and attitudes, and this process isn't just historical, but quotidian, animating the social lives of individuals and identity-collectives as they glide smoothly through its contours or, conversely, are knocked into political consciousness as they bump up against its limits constraints and limits. These are the limits that "put people in their place" so to speak, and the resulting socio-cultural hierarchy is the stuff that rights movements are made of. But—

> …intimacy refers to more than that which takes place within the purview of institutions, the state, and an ideal of publicness…While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way…It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates spaces around it through practices. The kinds of connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living (if not "a life"), do not always respect the predictable forms [but instead] these spaces are produced relationally [and] intimacy seen in this spreading way does generate an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it.[98]

In many ways then, it can be argued that the projects and structures—both public and private—of the studio are a physical manifestation of the counter-intimacies generated through the collaborative design-build process itself. Or, more profoundly, we can think of these spaces and buildings as an embodied archive—the living material that covers the queer structure of feeling that has been constructed over the past twenty years through redemptive rituals and ramshackle relationships strewn together through a rooted collaboration between the antagonistic social positions of poor, black, and rural subjects still biting on the cruel cane of American history—and the mostly white, ostentatiously privileged, college-educated kids who have made a conscious decision to help right a million small wrongs without making such a fuss about it.

[98] Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," 284-85.

"Not making such a fuss about it" is part of an atmosphere of humility that characterizes the Rural Studio, and it's a demure fashion that is embraced by the students, who are often peeved by the label of "social architecture" and popular misperceptions of the program as some grandiose do-gooder with a mystical solution to rural poverty and homelessness. As one graduate of the program—now an instructor—describes it:

> I don't like the sort of ''social architecture'' thing we get labelled [with]. The things that the books don't show is the sort of context of the place, that it's pretty fucked up when you go there. It's still fucked up. And it will probably always be fucked up. And you don't see that in the books. [With ''social architecture''] you just see the sort of romanticized poverty…the mission [of the Rural Studio] is, sort of as it's published, is sort of this social or environmental agenda, which is totally not the case…We're not here to solve the social problem. And you can't solve it through architecture because [the problem of poverty is] too broad''.[99]

And though most of the student in the program would shirk off the formal label of "social architecture" there is still a general consensus that the program is unique, and is something that works against the typical conventions of professional architecture programs that focus mainly on designing conventional spaces for wealthy clients. This just goes to show how pathetically abstract architectural labels are able to hold up when exported to local spaces and stripped of any meaningful context. Even the genre of "social architecture" disintegrates when applied locally—especially in this case, when those students allegedly practicing a "social" architecture flat out refuse that categorization of their work.

Essentially, what works is what gets built, and the process is a collaborative one, involving the students, clients, and local governments, but it is just an architecture that happens to be social—not the messianic, social-savior-architecture that is implied by the bombastic category, and all the subsequent discourses of poverty-alleviation and radical

[99] Jones and Card, "Constructing Social Architecture," 236.

social change that have been wrapped up in it. What emerges is an epistemology of radical practicality and strategic rusticity, which privileges material reality architectural viability above all else, including (especially) aesthetics or style. Again that's not to imply that there is no place for aesthetics in the design-build process, indeed the students must take the client's opinion into consideration in the design process, but only to the extent that it is materially, economically, and architecturally viable.

Figure 3. Lucy Harris stands by her "Carpet House" (Photo by Timothy Hursley)

This is part of the challenge of working in the Rural Studio, and the result(s) can be remarkably stunning and materially sustainable structures like Lucy's House—one of the most iconic buildings in the studio's portfolio. The walls of Lucy's House (see figure 3 above) are insulated with layer upon layer of carpet and rugs, which were donated, and help to keep the cold out during the winter; this is a prime example of the studio's

employment of vernacular, low-tech solutions that save money and produce a critically rustic aesthetic in the process.

When they're not falling in love with the "exotic" kitsch of Lucy's carpet walls, cosmopolitan critics might initially, reflexively scoff at its trashy aesthetic and the low-tech strategies employed by such a design. And though unintended, the half-mortified visceral responses often elicited by these structures and their images in cosmopolitan spaces like the Whitney or the MoMA should be seen as a feature (not a bug) of the critically rustic processes of the studio, and a premiere channel for instigating a reverse discourse that challenges the metronormative gaze and its unthinking consumption of rural images. Assuredly it wasn't a part of the design process, but Lucy's carpet walls certainly serve "a number of key symbolic functions"[100] because the materials chosen for the Rural Studio's buildings "[have] tactile qualities, [are] environmentally sustainable, and [suggest] an innovative, experimental approach to 'ordinary' and 'everyday' objects. These choices also imply a rejection of technologically-driven and expensive building materials, the materials of choice in supposedly more rarefied strata of architecture."[101]

[100] Jones and Card, "Constructing Social Architecture," 239.
[101] Ibid.

Figure 4. The landscape of "Lucy's Carpet House" (Photo by Timothy Hursley)

The low-tech building strategies and materials utilized by the studio also share another affinity with queer anti-urbanism in their backwards-looking anti-modernism; both shirk the mirage of modernist utopia, instead recovering what queer or architectural virtue they can from the past—even if that means, on the queer side of things, feeling low and confronting the historical fact of queer erasure, or, in the case of the Rural Studio, confronting the violent legacy of Southern history. I now want to further explore the temporal affinities between the Southern history which Sam Mockbee ventured to confront, ironically, with the "old-timey" building strategies of the studio, and where these strategies overlap with anti-modernist epistemologies of rural queers, and a politics of queer negativity in the face of contemporary LGBT progress.

> A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[102]

Benjamin's rousing description of the Angel of History is salient to any historical narrative, and I think it is a great prism through which we can refract generational legacies of queer erasure and the history of the American South—a regional history from which the Rural Studio emerged, and which the program seeks, at least in some small part—to redress. Both queer history and the history of the South are rooted in a legacy of loss, denial, and negativity, and both have been represented discursively as backwards, anachronistic, and an impediment to progress (until recently, at least, with the mainstream equation of LGBT identity with the modern).

Some of the Rural Studio's public works, like the Thomaston Rural Heritage Center, Pyramid Learning Center, and Safe House Black History Museum confront this history head-on, and in a more oblique manner than the rest of the program's repertoire might suggest. To bring the affective legacy of queer negativity into conversation with the South's history of loss and destruction, it is worth quoting Lawrence Chua's historical description of the Black Belt at length, as it appears in the studio's first book, published not long after the death of Samuel Mockbee:

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[102] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, English Language edition (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257-58.

> When Hernando de Soto embarked on his civilizing mission through what would later become the American South, he left behind a trail of misery that extended from Florida to the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. Accompanied by priests, de Soto and his men burned their way through native villages, enslaving local citizens in iron neck collars and chains to work as beasts of burdens. The expedition was hungry for wealth, and when one slave fell from exhaustion, de Soto would behead him so as not to impede the progress of the journey. However, de Soto's expedition was slowed down in 1540 by Tuscaloosa, the Black Warrior, king of the Mobiles. Historical accounts describe the Black Warrior as a man of gigantic stature, a commanding eminence who died, along with 11,000 of his subjects, in an intense battle with de Soto's forces.
>
> The Black Warrior River that winds along the western edge of Hale County, Alabama, takes its name from this decimate king. It flows from Bankhead Lake as a thin line and then opens into a thick-waisted body of water. Rivers like the Black Warrior are always somehow larger than life. They move like time, carrying along everything in their drift; they dry up and overflow and, like the history whose relentless current they suggest, constantly change shape. The land through which the Black Warrior curls is rich with defeat. One has only to kick at its red surface to detect the layers of hurt beneath it. Yet, there is a loveliness to the place that may come in part from the conflicting myths of freedom that shadow its soil.[103]

If there's any one definitive feature of the Rural Studio that makes it what it is, that feature is its dedication to place, as we have seen; but place means little without time, and without the history (in this case) of colonialism, enslavement, King Cotton, and the ongoing project of liberation that have given the Black Belt its name and soaked its soil in five centuries of hurt. Keith Halfacree incorporates notions of time into his three-fold architecture of rural space, nothing that:

> …ideas of space cannot be separated from ideas of time. Time does not exist on the metaphorical head of a pin/black hole and space is always temporal…Thus, we must note how the material space of the rural locality only exists through the practices of structural processes, and how the ideational space of rural social representations only exists through the practices of discursive interaction.[104]

[103] Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*, 163.
[104] Keith Halfacree, "Rural Space: Constructing a Three-Fold Architecture," 48.

The discursive canons of queer desire and the South are especially interesting to compare because although they share negative affects and backward representations, they seem to be headed in two entirely different directions in the collective political and social imaginary of the United States. We try to forget the violent, racist past of slavery and Jim Crowe in the South, while we try to recuperate the hidden queers of the past. We're dedicated to committing the memories of American apartheid to amnesia, while we scour the archives to find proof of queer love from long ago.

We typically find owning Southern "pride" to be embarrassing, and we find queers who own shame, or aren't proud enough, to be shameful. We construct the south as the antithesis of modernity, and the queer as its exalted opposite—the height of contemporary consumer capitalism and the cutting edge of American progress; and because we are so brutishly wedded to these affective and temporal associations, we just don't know how to act when queers feel backwards, or Southerners feel proud—and simply fall apart when these temporal affects are simultaneously rooted in the same subject. This is where metronormative rubrics begin to fall apart, and this traffic in shame, pride, history, and progression is where the studio has set up shop, temporally, in the hopes of continuing Mockbee's drive to build an "architecture of decency" that serves as a corrective, or at least a countervailing force, to a local history of violent, racist exploitation.

The teleological narrative of progressive modernity advises queers against looking backwards at a tragic non-history that "is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants,"[105] while, conversely, the nation is urged to "never forget" that its

[105] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward,* 1.

foundation is built on slavery, racism, and white supremacy. The South's past is inescapable; the queer past is invisible. And even the mere act of looking backwards for a thread that connects the modern moment is itself a political act that means many things for many people; for queers, it may mean a rejection of LGBT utopianism and affirmative politics, and for southerners it may be a way of coming to terms with history by connecting it to the present. And it isn't hard to see just how much of an impact the past has on the present, especially in west Alabama, where the studio works:

> Hale County has a powerful past but a frail present. Since the demise of King Cotton, the economy has withered and become reliant on low-wage, fragile agricultural industries: catfish farming, dairy farming, logging. Twenty-six percent of the county's residents live below the poverty line, the majority of them in trailers. Much of Alabama's land remains in the possession of absentee landowners who use their political clout and powers of persuasion to keep taxes low and the educational system consequently poorly supported. Local education funds are divided between private and public schools, and both options are weakened because of the divided resources.[106]

This is the environment in which the Rural Studio finds itself as it struggles to offer an architectural redress to the historical accumulation of grievances in the racialized landscape of the Black Belt. The proliferation of poverty in the region is one contemporary result of the structural barriers erected to political and economic enfranchisement in the postbellum South—barriers which were only compounded in the twentieth century by strategies of white disinvestment in structures of public life and civil society, which were headed for racial integration. This disinvestment and the withering of public resources in small towns and rural areas like those of Hale County was only hastened by generational movements like the Great Migration, which saw the exodus of

[106] Andrew Freear et al., *Rural Studio at Twenty,* 17.

millions of African-Americans from the South to cities in the West, Midwest, and the North.

The studio itself has taken on much of the work required to fill the holes left by generations of disinvestment in public infrastructure and civil life, as Freear explains:

> Newbern lacks the accoutrements of civic life that many folks expect. "Downtown" consists of a small general store called Newbern Mercantile, a post office, a firehouse, a town hall, and our design studio (the Red Barn)…The locals who manage to get an education tend to leave, so those who stay are either much younger or much older than we are. So we don't have many peers, but we do have many protective parental figures.[107]

The dearth of civil investment in small towns and rural areas perpetuates a cycle of abandonment, even by the locals that manage to get an education, as they are faced with the decision to stay behind or leave in search of opportunity—an ultimatum that is not unlike the one facing rural queers' when they must decide whether to remain rooted and risk isolation, or set out in search of community in some far-off metropolis. For those who choose to affirm their rural identity and make the conscious decision to stay, backwardness becomes a way of life, at least as far as it is discursively imposed on representations of rurality and country living.

Movement is, in fact, inextricably linked literally and metaphorically to the teleological march towards modernity, epitomized by the opportunity of the metropolis, and the urge to chase what's beyond the familiar horizon of home is an ontological choice that is faced existentially by queers, rural people, and especially those who identity as both rural and queer. To leave or to stay put? That is the critical question that faces country queers, whether they like it or not—whether they're asking themselves or someone else is demanding an answer from them. Halberstam sums up this forked road

[107] Andrew Freear et al., *Rural Studio at Twenty,* 16-17.

succinctly, imploring us to respect the complexity of such a choice, and to "…consider the condition of 'staying put' as part of the production of complex queer subjectivities. Some queers need to leave home in order to become queer, and others need to stay close to home in order to preserve their difference."[108]

The rural-identified and the queer-identified share a temporal affinity in their backward codification(s). This is perhaps becoming less true for contemporary queers, who align themselves with the post-Stonewall LGBT political movement and its allegedly progressive social mission, but nonetheless, feelings of shame, loss, impossibility, despair, isolation, and loneliness, still color the affective lives of many queers—especially those who experience the double-sided out-of-placeness of being queer in the country.

Questions of movement towards or away from modernity haunt the alternative temporal realities inhabited by country queers and the rural poor, and the past and present is littered with complex and often illegible counter-histories of queer repute, including the history of queers that have turned their back on metronormative, ostensibly progressive models of LGBT culture, and increasingly, the recent history of the Rural Studio, which has been resisting contemporary architectural practices for the past two decades by embedding itself in the landscape of Hale County and taking a radically incremental, ramshackle, and truly vernacular approach to building a difference in the lives of communities that have been left behind by modernity's metaphorical march to the sea.

[108] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 27.

Time—discursively produced—is a tool of modernity; it is used as a structuring metaphor to manufacture subjects and spaces of anachronism that are subsequently marked as backwards, inferior, ignorant, insignificant, inept, and "behind the times," as the saying goes. Rural space is used metaphorically as a placeholder for something else, as a discursively referential container into which national culture is able to pour popular mythologies of rural life—from the fabled innocence of the rural idyll to the notorious ignorance of hicks who just don't know any better.

Rurality, in this way, is a time capsule of sorts—a historical receptacle that is filled with anachronism and serves as a retrograde point of reference upon which the rest of urban, civilized America interpolates its own essentially modern identity—an identity that stands in stark contrast to the anachronistic and even prelapsarian idyll of rural space and time. Mark Lawrence has written of the omnipresence of theories of modernity and, more importantly, *failed* modernity in rural scholarship, and recognizes the imperative for—

> …any further work on the intersections of meaning and the spatiality of social relations as regards the rural will have to overcome what Philo begins to identify as 'the assertive modernist impulse...which heroically assumes the duty of assessing from without the realities of 'other lives' against transcendental yardsticks of 'right'/'wrong' and 'good'/'bad' that may have little relevance for the peoples and places concerned.[109]

The "modernist impulse" identified by Philo and picked up by Lawrence is essential to understanding the temporal dissonance between urban and rural dwellers, and it is fundamental to understanding the prevailing definition(s) of what it means to be queer these days. Modernity and fashionability have become the temporal markings of queer recognizability, and are irrevocably embedded into the city and cosmopolitan living.

[109] Lawrence, "Heartlands or Neglected Geographies?" 15.

This temporal march towards modernity is fundamental not only to critical conceptions of queer metronormativity, but also to what it means to be identified or recognized as either rural or urban; it is a mythological modernity that is hauntingly definitive of Southern history and contemporary American national identity. For queers in particular, this fumbling towards modernity has a metronormative and migratory element, manifested in the archetypal pilgrimage from the backwoods to the city, or what John Howard describes as "the dirt-road-cum-boulevard to gay self-actualization—to identity, community, and political movement—begins in the dark hinterlands of naïveté and deprivation, and ends, happily, in the bustling corridors of wisdom and illumination."[110]

Heather Love's work in *Feeling Backward* is crucial to understanding the role that loss plays in the construction of queer history, and is especially salient for considering the ways that Southern history and American history more generally, produce and engage with affective structures of feeling and alternative temporalities that emerge from rural spaces. Love offers us a model of queer historiography that is based on loss, denial, refusal, invisibility, and abjection—in order to think through the ways that these "negative" affects have been central to structuring queer identity and queer political projects both pre and post-Stonewall. Love reminds us that the power of "backwardness" to some extent arises from the temporal splitting that serves to mark the modern as separate from everything else, and it derives its power from this very bifurcation:

> The idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness. The association of progress and regress is a function not only of the failure of so many

[110] John Howard, *Men like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 26-27.

> of modernity's key projects but also of the reliance of the concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others…If modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed to move humanity forward, it did so in part by perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind—and so seriously compromised the ability of these others to ever catch up.[111]

Undoubtedly, the realm of those "lagging behind" in modernity's margins would include queer people, women, people of color, differently-abled people, transgendered people, poor people and, yes, rural people—especially the clients of the studio. But the Rural Studio doesn't shy away from negative history of the region in which it practices; instead, it turns this historical bug into a pedagogical feature of the program, connecting architectural practice and education with the racist legacies of the landscapes inside of which it builds. The studio's pedagogical orientation, including its vernacular allegiance to confronting local and regional histories of oppression, can best be described as a critical regionalist pedagogy, as described by Douglas Reichert Powell:

> …a central aspect of critical regionalism as cultural scholarship must be forging greater interconnection between universities and the communities and regions they are part of, as well as reinvigorating the neglected contacts that already exist. Part of the project of reclaiming the idea of region as social invention to a progressive political critique, as well as investing a socially constructed idea of region with agency and purpose, is to open the intellectual project to local participation, and specifically to be instructed by the voices and experiences of those normally excluded rom powerful strands of public discourse for reasons of their race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.[112]

The studio's pedagogy is perfectly captured by this description, and Powell's enumeration of critical regionalism's values echo many of the queer and anti-urban critiques explored here, including a devotion to thinking through theories of identity and place *relationally*. In this vein, Powell considers region as a social invention that

[111] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward,* 5-6.
[112] Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 26.

"supplies critical regionalism a language of possibility, rooted in the landscapes of particular communities viewed in terms of their vital connectedness to other places."[113] The vital connectedness we have been critiquing here is of the city to the country and, furthermore, between the city and queer sexual identity.

In fact, understanding region relationally as a necessarily partial and contested geographical discourse reverberates with the struggles to control meaning in the city and the country that we have analyzed here—and that includes the struggle to define queer identity that metronormative discourses are currently dominating. In this sense, region, like queer or rural identity, is never actually an essential thing, but a discursive power grab that seeks to reify normative definitions of these identities by the very act of stating them as obvious or taken-for-granted facts:

> Region, then is not a thing in itself, a stable and bounded object of study…just as "community" is for Raymond Williams "a warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships" "region" is always at some level an attempt to persuade as much as it is to describe. Because the "set of relationships" intersecting at any one point on the landscape is potentially unsummarizable by any one account, all versions of region are necessarily partial, and hence an attempt to persuade, at the very least, of the validity of their own particular definitions. Attempts at metadescription therefore need to be as much about the representational practices and politics that inform constructions of region as they do about the definitions themselves. Region is a rhetoric to describe these intricate interactions; critical regionalism is a way of harnessing these new tactics of description in cultural work for social change.[114]

And so it is that the Rural Studio attempts to harness the ugly descriptions of rural life and Southern history, so that it might acknowledge the small truths inherent to descriptions of the Black Belt, while working to point out their insufficiency by exceeding expectations of what can be accomplished in the landscape. The studio's

[113] Ibid., 24-25.
[114] Ibid., 21.

subversive power is bound up with its willingness to sit with the South's ugly history—to hold it close and embed it inside of its architectural mission; to do so is to fashion a vernacular southern critique—one that is not content with simply facing up to its past, but is also committed to building a future that goes beyond racist southern legacies to offer a critical point of view which is shaped by its past, but not wholly determined by it.

The studio's work embodies an emergent southern critique, and answers the challenge issued by Carlos L. Dews for scholars of the develop an idiosyncratically Southern critique—"to examine an attribute of the South thought of as characteristically southern, truly examine its cultural genealogy, without finding beneath it either misogyny, homophobia, racism, or classism."[115] The studio takes this challenge seriously, and over the last two decades has begun to give form to southern critique as a critical regionalist to metronormative attitudes toward rural spaces. And in a move that would certainly make Mockbee proud, the studio goes beyond abstract academic critique to plan and envision "...the construction of texts that can envision more just and equitable landscapes."[116]

[115] Carlos L. Dews, "Afterword," *Out in the South*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 238.
[116] Ibid., 24-25.

CONCLUSION

Queer people and places are everywhere; what makes them so may ultimately not have anything to do with sexual desire as much as it does with the ways they relate to others—other places, other people, and experiences of *otherness* itself. The experiences through which individuals interpolate their identities and social positions are myriad, and I have explored only two types of these experiences here—the sexual and the geographic. At first glance, it might seem that these branches of identity have little to do with one another, but as I hope I have shown here, place is productive and constitutive of desire, both sexual and otherwise. "Knowing your place" is an aphorism that reveals the power of place to structure social and cultural hierarchies, which are often spatialized through social and geographical representations of marginal spaces. The relationship of the center to the margins is epitomized through the urban versus rural dialectic, and the impact of this literal and physical geographic divide on the lives of individuals cannot be overstated.

Social identities emerge from our individual and collective negotiations with power, place, and desire; this is an admittedly messy process, especially for those of us who claim multiple, intersecting, and some might say contradictory identities. This is certainly the case for rural-identified queers who have been taught that the place they call home is contrary to the person they are. The contemporary post-Stonewall LGBT movement has seen phenomenal gains socially and politically—but the speed of its progress and its metronormative exclusivity has meant that many queers have been left in its dust, along with many of the early promises of a radically queer political praxis.

Representations of isolation and connection color the discourses of rural and urban life, and ultimately, effect the lives of country queers that are fractured by these dueling identities and social positions.

The clients of the Rural Studio present us with a very different type of marginal subject—subjects who make a life on the economic, social, and geographic margins—whose identity is marked on the surface of their body and in their undeniable role in American history. Where country queers and the clients of the studio overlap is in their shared experience of traumatic histories, their discursive and geographic consignment to the margins of the American imaginary, and their affinity for building structures of feeling that confound social stereotypes of rural life. To find yourself outside of mainstream social models of time and space is a queer experience, and it is one that country queers and clients of the studio share.

The Rural Studio builds the queer structures of feeling that I have been describing, and perhaps not intentionally. We can, however, see queer trappings all throughout studio—from its redemptive mission of confronting southern history and its anti-urban rejection of metronormative architectural values and aesthetics, to the non-nuclear patterns of domestic life embraced by its clients, and its forging of new rural organizational strategies that privilege expansive and intersectional coalition building—the Rural Studio is a strategically queer way of making change.

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