



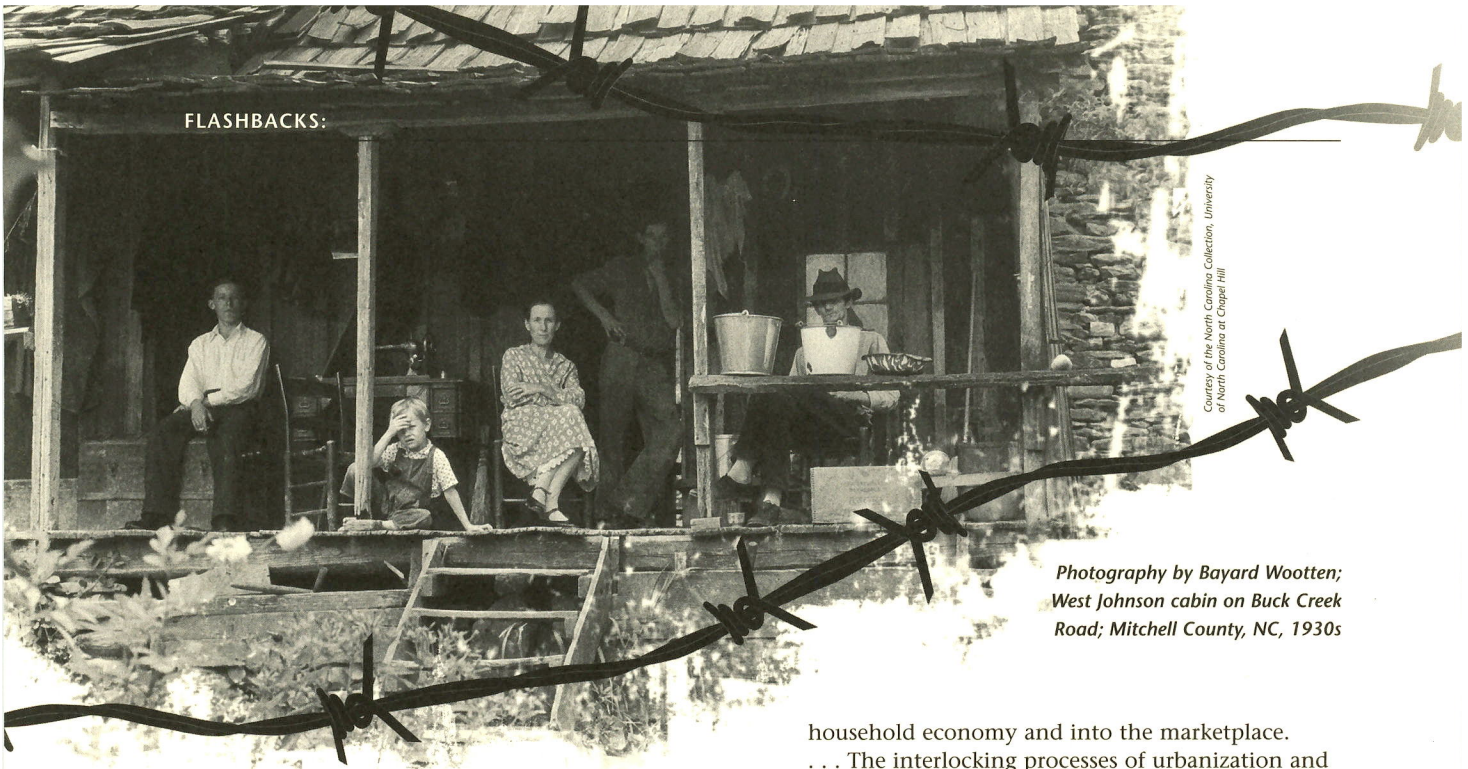
**Place and the Question  
of Queers in the Rural  
Souths of Lee Smith  
and Randall Kenan**

*by Harry Thomas*

In her otherwise brilliant essay "Thinking Sex" theorist Gayle Rubin voices this commonsensical notion – both popular and scholarly – of sexual difference in the countryside: "Dissident sexuality is rarer and more closely monitored in small towns and rural areas. Consequently, metropolitan life continually beckons to young perverts, [who become] sexual migrants . . . instead of being isolated and invisible in rural settings."

—John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (1999)

FLASHBACKS:



Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Photography by Bayard Wootten;  
West Johnson cabin on Buck Creek  
Road; Mitchell County, NC, 1930s

**The subjects of this essay are two novels – Lee Smith’s *Oral History* (1983) and Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) – that concern themselves with queer characters who are born in rural Southern settings, the kinds of places that the “commonsensical notion of sexual difference in the countryside” would suggest these characters need to escape.**

There is a conventional assumption in both popular culture and academic scholarship that links queer identities to urban locales. This way of thinking about queers (a term I use here and throughout to indicate people whose gender performance and/or sexuality lies outside the established norms in their community) comes, in part, from early scholarship in gay and lesbian history, which argues that industrial capitalism’s demand for labor shattered the traditional limits that nuclear families placed on sexual expression, thus enabling homosexual identities to emerge in post-World War II America. As historian John D’Emilio explains,

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the momentous shift to industrial capitalism provided the conditions for a homosexual and lesbian identity to emerge. As a free-labor system, capitalism pulled men and women out of a

household economy and into the marketplace. . . . The interlocking processes of urbanization and industrialization created a social context in which an autonomous personal life could develop. (11)

Pioneering gay historian George Chauncey comes to similar conclusions about the liberating possibilities that urban life afforded people whose gender performance and/or sexuality lay outside of what was considered mainstream elsewhere:

“Only in a great city,” declared one man who had moved to New York in 1882, could an invert “give his overwhelming yearnings free rein *incognito* and thus keep the respect of his every-day circle. . . . In New York one can live as Nature demands without setting every one’s tongue wagging.” In his hometown [this man] had needed to conform at all times to the social conventions of the community, for he had been subject to the constant (albeit normally benign and unselfconscious) surveillance of his family and neighbors. (131)

By locating the birth of gay/lesbian identities within the boundaries of major cities, these early and crucially important works of gay and lesbian history nevertheless implicitly position queer sexualities and gender performances as non-rural. This way of thinking is what queer historian John Howard skeptically calls the “commonsensical notion . . . of sexual difference in the countryside” (xiii). In this conception of queer identity, gay people and/or gender insubordinates might be born in rural settings, but they do not (and perhaps even cannot) fully exist in them. Queers must instead flee to a city in order to live honestly and happily.