

# Southern Backwardness: Metronormativity and Regional Visual Culture

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Since the early 1980s, visual artist Michael Meads has photographed numerous white working-class males who reside in his rural hometown of Eastaboga, Alabama, often displaying these images under the installation title *Eastaboga*. In 2002, Meads gathered many of these photos together and reprinted them on his personal website, *Alabama Souvenirs*. As I have argued elsewhere, Meads presents these digital *Eastaboga* males in a series of seductive queer images that have sparked commentary from major urban-oriented gay newspapers and magazines such as *Attitude* and *Blue*, as well as from major metropolitan-oriented U.S. gay and lesbian websites such as *The DataLounge* (Herring, 217-19).

These urban-identified critics, I contended, have tried to normalize Meads's images by situating them into the ready-made sexual identity-categories of metropolitan middle-class gay males, or by placing them into an elitist canon of Western white "gay" male art—one dominated by artists such as Walter Pater and Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden. As I claimed: "Trained in photography and painting at SUNY–Albany and well-versed in Western (white) homoerotic art, Meads repeatedly invokes icons such as Caravaggio, the 'beefcake' nude, and other figures from 'gay' art history only to queer them. While the installation was briefly shown in a Chelsea gallery that specialized in postmodern art and has since closed, the photographs thus reproduce a rural space opposed to collective visual ideologies that often ground and give meaning to [what art historian

Thomas Waugh terms] urban gay ‘imaginary homelands’ such as ‘New York City’ (54)” (Herring, 219).

I would now like to amplify these findings: Meads’s critically rustic photographs often seem to come from another planet since their anachronism often challenges what Waugh calls “our erotic heritage” (xiv). To extend my recent arguments, I further focus on Meads’s anachronistic incarnations as they undermine the thrust of what one queer of color critic has termed urban “sexual assimilation” in the late twentieth-century United States (Muñoz, 98). To do so, I first examine some of Meads’s invocations of the gay male art canon in the opening windows of his website. Second, I read *Alabama Souvenirs* as an appropriative dialogue with earlier gay male art icons such as von Gloeden’s turn-of-the-century pictorials of southern Mediterranean boys. Third, I address how his appropriations distort a canon of (white) visual art that affirms the presumed artistic “heritage” of many (white) metro-identified gay male cultures in the 1980s, the 1990s, and in the early twenty-first century.

Before I begin these tasks, however, I want to briefly explain how I deploy the term “rural” in this essay, and how I envision this term in a tense opposition with the term “urban” for U.S. queer studies and beyond. These two terms are, paradoxically, both loose and static. While they are difficult to empirically define, many scholars in various disciplines try to do so, as do political institutions such as U.S. governmental agencies. In fact, we could follow the U.S. Census Bureau’s most recent guidelines and turn to its definition of “population density” to clarify our understanding of “rural” and “urban.” According to the latest definitional parameters of “Rural and Urban Classification” published in 2000, an “urbanized area” consists of “core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile” (“Census”). Under this rubric, my current residence of Bloomington, Indiana, counts as “urban” as much as what the website curiously hyphenates as “New York City–Newark, NJ–NJ–CT” (and as much as Appleton, Wisconsin, or Dothan, Alabama, two other listings under the “urbanized area” file). The geographic pratfalls of such a numerical definition of what counts as “rural” or “urban” space should be obvious (particularly when we consider the logistics of those “core census blocks” that have, say, a population density of 999 people per square mile).

In my mind, it makes much more sense—and it allows for far more flexible readings of how rurality and urbanity structure any U.S. cultural text for scholars in American Studies—to recognize that, while the term *rural* is historically co-dependent upon its binary opposite *urban*, we should theoretically envision “rural” or “nonmetropolitan” locales such as Eastaboga, Alabama, as performative geographic spaces that have enabled individuals or group subjects to imagine themselves as distinct from the spatial performatives of the “urban” or the “metropolitan.” Thus the binarism “rural/urban” could be seen not only as a geographic marker wedded to arbitrary population count or density. It could best be seen as an imaginary social fantasy or as a structure of deep feeling whose cartographies are as much psychic, emotional, stylistic, and *relational* as they

are geographically real or spatially realized without *and* within any metropolis.<sup>1</sup> The “rural” town of Eastaboga, Alabama, that is to say, is obviously linked to *Eastaboga*, the on-line images, but the two should not necessarily be conflated with each other.

It is precisely this imaginary social fantasy of queer rurality that governs Meads’s overarching aesthetic even as his images are historically taken from an economically impoverished working class community in northeastern Alabama. The photographer’s imaginary attack on dominant urban imaginaries begins the moment *Alabama Souvenirs*’ first window appears on the computer screen. Imposed over a pitch-black background is a photograph of a white male wearing a long-sleeve camouflage shirt (See Figure 1). No date is given. The documentary image crops the unnamed male’s body, and the viewer sees only a pale torso as the male lifts his shirt. In his right hand, perpendicular to his exposed stomach, he holds a hunting knife dripping with blood. The words “Alabama Souvenirs: Photographs from the Deep South” appear in white lettering underneath the photo, and it is hard not to imagine that Meads asks “you” to witness realistic “souvenirs” from an exotic land since “narratives of rural regions like the ‘Deep South’ . . . have long explored the badlands of the rural; its sick, sordid, malevolent, *nasty* underbelly” (David Bell, 94).

Yet if you stare at the website’s photograph, something strange happens: the image of this unnamed white working-class male (a classed identification with the “Deep South” that is signified by the popular camouflaged hunting shirt sold in supply stores such as Wal-Mart and K-Mart) fades into another image, which then appears to fade into another time (See Figure 2). Unlike the



**Figure 1:** Opening window to *Alabama Souvenirs*. Courtesy of Michael Meads.



**Figure 2:** Alternate opening window to *Alabama Souvenirs*. Courtesy of Michael Meads.

immediacy of *Alabama Souvenirs*' first visual, the second evokes a historical moment found in neither the contemporary rural "Deep South" nor its perceived imaginary counterpart, the cosmopolitan U.S. metropolis. It instead appears to be antiquated. Three bronzed cherubs are shown hanging below a wooden shelf. Surrounding them are aged photographs of hunters as well as newspaper clippings. Above them is a partially illegible sign that ends with the word "LIFE," and next to this sign stand three miniaturized confederate flags. In contrast to the bright colors that mark the first image, this shadowy second photograph is cast in sepia overtones, a color suggestive of a faded photograph. This retrogressive atmosphere is made more explicit when one reads the quotation superimposed over this old-fashioned scene: "He was always a seeker after something in this world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all."

A line below this otherworldly reference informs viewers that the quotation is taken from Walter Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters (on the life of Watteau), from his 1887 book *Imaginary Portraits*." While no further mention is made of the proto-gay Victorian art critic in *Alabama Souvenirs*, I believe that this citation is key to understanding how Meads agitates visual traditions of urban gay male spectatorship.<sup>2</sup> The photographer informed me in an email exchange that he found the quote in a retrospective that the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art held for twentieth-century American gay painter Charles Demuth, a painter who was for some time metro-identified and who made frequent excursions into New York City's Greenwich Village and Paris from his Lancaster, Pennsylvania, home.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition was homage to Demuth's now-classic watercolors of

floral arrangements, phallic working-class New York City sailors, and the painter's 1918 illustration of Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters." By invoking these icons, Meads situates his work in relation to earlier metro-identified "gay" art, yet he is also less invested in extending a visual legacy that includes Pater and Demuth than in wrecking this "gay cultural heritage" all together (Ellenzweig, xiv). Unlike the MOMA's retrospective, *Alabama Souvenirs* is less homage to recognizable Western gay male art forms or an extension of their legacy than a retrospective sabotage of some major gay male art icons. Rather than aligning himself with historical figures such as Demuth or Pater or even Jean-Atonie Watteau, Meads bypasses each to usurp the place of Pater's imaginary portraitist.

These dizzying inter-textual references could be tossed aside as trivia for art historians, but what fascinates me much more is the historical confusions that Meads's ruralized media produces here and in later photographs. Thrusting Pater's imaginary eighteenth-century French painter into the digital age of the ruralized "Deep South," Meads confounds any linear trajectory that might suggest his deference to—or his extension of—traditional archives of Western gay male art. This process takes place before the viewer's eyes. Once the photograph of the unnamed working-class white "redneck" blurs into the photograph of the hanging cherubs, the latter then blurs back into the former *ad infinitum*.<sup>4</sup> As it folds Pater's anachronistic recollection of Watteau onto Meads's anachronistic use of Pater into an appropriation of the MOMA's Demuth, the introductory moments of *Alabama Souvenirs* function as a leitmotif for the website's subsequent photographs. They rehearse the tense interconnections between the appropriations of Western gay art history and the "redneck" images that stump supposedly sophisticated metropolitan spectators.

Such tensions, I argued, become more apparent when we examine a series of photos collected under the title "Allen." Though set in the early 1990s, these photographs, I suggested, show a young white male sitting for the camera in pre-Stonewall physique pictorial poses (Herring, 221-27). Subsequent photographs in the "Allen" series further demonstrate how Meads's anachronistic images trace the "fantasy echo" of an "erotic cultural heritage," not to pronounce an allegiance to this tradition, but to trouble it (Scott 285). Take *Allen and Justin: On Marty's Bed, 1998* (See Figure 3). The photograph is part of a series of images that concentrate on a hyper-masculine working-class male habitus that Meads imagines is rural Eastaboga culture in the "Deep South," a habitus marked by trailer park bedrooms, pick-up trucks, self-made tattoos, and homosocial hunting. Yet while many of these images—and the image shown here—are set in "1998," a closer reading of this image also shows how it moves beyond the empirical geographies of late 1990s southern rural white male same-sexuality and into an anachronistic queer time and another performative social imaginary, the same time and space that the viewer encounters in both introductory moments of *Alabama Souvenirs*.



**Figure 3:** Michael Meads, *Allen and Justin: On Marty's Bed*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

It turns out that, at the turn of the twentieth century, *Allen and Justin: On Marty's Bed*, 1998 reintroduces classical male nudes common to imperial white gay male pictorial photography at the turn of the nineteenth century. In fact, we could visually read these images as commentary on another queer rural southern scene often considered “the first coherent licit artistic corpus of modern-day gay culture”—Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden’s *Taormina* series (Waugh, 71). In a personal phone conversation, Meads cited “Baron von Gloeden, a German photographer of gorgeous Italian boys” as one of the icons in which he was most interested, and many of the working-class white male images in *Alabama Souvenirs/Eastaboga* appear strikingly similar to those featured in what art historians now term von Gloeden’s *Taormina* series. Hence just as Meads recalls—and messes with—the supposed heritage of modern “gay” male art icons such as Pater and Demuth, so too do the photographs of “Allen” and “Allen and Justin” gesture towards the initial moments of modern white gay male photography through their mimicry of von Gloeden. Or better, they replicate the frames in which von Gloeden photographed his subjects in order to render this erotic historical heritage incoherent.

Return, then, to *Allen and Justin: On Marty's Bed*, 1998. The photograph appears to have the aura of documentary realism that situates it in a recognizable socio-economic, temporal, and geographic imaginary. But as I also noted, what is striking about the photograph is its rigid classical composition. What some considered an authentic snapshot of queer southern culture of working-class white males instead seems to be a formalized appropriation of earlier white

gay male art. As a matter of fact, the image dialogues with another rigid classical composition—a pictorial photograph that von Gloeden took of two young Italian males in the Sicilian town of Taormina (See Figure 4). Much like Meads’s careful composition of “Allen” and “Justin,” von Gloeden also has two men sit nude in an untitled photograph. The scene too is overcrowded with fabric, and one male’s face can be seen as the other lays on a mattress not with his head in his lap, but with his back to the viewer. The genitalia of one young man is visible, and the ruffled bed covers appear to suggest that sexual activity has happened—or will happen—sometime in the near future (Herring, 223-224). Though taken nine decades before *Eastaboga*, the *Taormina* image works as both a precursor and an inversion of Meads’s later photograph, and the artist repeats this dialogue throughout *Alabama Souvenirs*.<sup>5</sup>

I will return to Meads’s visual strategies of anachronistic appropriation momentarily. For the next few paragraphs, I briefly detour into the cultural history surrounding von Gloeden’s untitled image because it offers another window into how *Eastaboga* devalues a metro-identified Western gay male visual “heritage” and the interpretive strategies that support this ideology. A Prussian aristocrat who self-identified as a homosexual male, von Gloeden moved to Taormina in the early 1880s and—save for a brief forced relocation under Italy’s fascist regime—remained there until his death in 1931. Like other continental European imperialists, he found an agrarian southern culture



Figure 4: Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled*, circa 1900.

accommodating to his same-sex desires, and he spent much of his artistic career photographing young rural Sicilian boys in charged poses that many late nineteenth-century audiences considered classical nude portraiture, and thus condoned.

An Orientalist and a devotee to Grecian ideals, von Gloeden used his imperial capital to cultivate—through photographic images like the one featured above—an idyllic visual climate that voiced his homosexual desire.<sup>6</sup> These individual images also help to forge an imaginary international community of like-minded spectators grounded in Western European sexual identifications yet pronounced through southern European imaginaries. As Waugh writes:

Homosexual subjects of the industrial North . . . projected their utopian male–male fantasies onto the homosocial Other of the Mediterranean littoral. . . . For those nineteenth-century subjects, situated within the heterosocial nuclear family and the industrial workplace, within the sociosexual regime which had just identified and pathologized the “homosexual,” southern societies had distinct iconographical advantages: their preindustrial codes of gender segregation and male supremacy, their perceived pastoral intimacy with a Nature that northern societies had presumably left behind, and above all their ambiguity about the continuum of male friendship and male sexual exchange. (49)

For these metropolitan European males, the spectacle of such southern Italian “backwardness” paradoxically enabled them to announce their modern homosexual identities—most metropolitan-identified. And through the global circulation, exchange, collection, and decoding of Taormina’s photographic bodies, “an international constituency of gay cultural practitioners” was recognized (Waugh, 71). Or, as Allen Ellenzweig writes, “[von Gloeden’s] material was designed for and sold to adult [northern and central European] males seeking sexual arousal, *confirmation*, and pleasure by viewing images of nude youths” (4; emphasis added). To condense this history: von Gloeden’s pictorial photographs evidence an emergent homosexual collective of turn-of-the-century Western metropolitan spectators.

It is precisely how von Gloeden accomplished this imperial task of Sicilian homoeroticism that links up with my larger arguments about Meads’s rural stylistics. Whenever he frames his numerous photographic subjects, von Gloeden takes “iconographical advantage” of rural southern Mediterranean bodies to situate them in spaces marked by what can only be called anachronistic time, an anachronism that Meads borrows, negotiates, and dissects in the “Allen and Justin” series.<sup>7</sup> As we can see in his untitled photograph, von Gloeden’s southern male bodies are photographed alongside relics such as a painted vase and a palm, relics meant to transport the idea of a homoerotic ancient



Greece into turn-of-the-century southern Italy. Hence just as Meads brings von Gloeden's "heritage" into the rural working-class "Deep South," so too does von Gloeden bring a "heritage" of Antiquity into rural Sicily. Yet while Meads appropriates von Gloeden's anachronism to question metro-norms, the Prussian photographer deploys anachronism to forge a collective gay metro-body.

In one of the more incisive readings of *Taormina*, Roland Barthes picks up on von Gloeden's temporal strategies:

These contradictions [in *Taormina*] are heterologies, friction from diverse and opposing languages. For example, von Gloeden began with the laws of Antiquity, then overloaded them, paraded them ponderously (with ephebes, shepherds, ivy, palms, olive trees, tunics, columns, steles), but (first distortion) mixed the signals, combining Greek flora, Roman statuary, and the "Classical" nude of Beaux-Arts academies. With no irony, it appears, he accepted any worn-out legend as a genuine article. ("Is Von Gloeden 'Camp'?")

Barthes continues: von Gloeden's use of such anachronistic time—"the most 'Classical' culture [mixed with] the most obvious [modern] eroticism"—is "splendidly bold." Writing in 1978, the French critic finds that the campy temporal "contradictions" in *Taormina* only serve to confirm "the power of his vision, which continues to astonish us even now" ("Camp?"). Given Barthes's praise, it is clear that von Gloeden's anachronistic photographs not only helped to anchor and herald modern metropolitan homosexual communities in the early twentieth-century Western empire. They also continue to secure metropolitan homosexual communities in the century's later decades as well. With no apparent irony, the critic presumes that the overstuffed photos astonish "us"—an undefined, abstract "us" that interpellates readers into an imagined community of aesthetic appreciation for "our cultural heritage"—as he implicitly links anachronistic visual strategies of the early 1900s to his own metro visual strategies in the late 1900s. Through von Gloeden, Barthes (along with other gay male spectators) forges an imagined historical continuity that cements the collective sexual identity which Meads challenges. The Prussian pictorialist is, in brief, one of "our lascivious ancestors" (Waugh, 26).<sup>8</sup>

As I have already suggested, *Alabama Souvenirs* works within the confines of this ancestral tradition only to scramble it for metro audiences both academic and popular. To do so, Meads repeatedly presents "1998" *Eastaboga* males in poses that reference an imperial von Gloeden pictorial from the 1900s. Yet while von Gloeden exploits anachronistic time to announce the historical emergence of imperial gay "types," Meads exploits von Gloeden not to advance a neo-colonial gay identity, but to overhaul this master-narrative with his queer working-class ruralism. Though he, like his supposed ancestor, "mixes hillbilly and high art," he does not situate *Allen and Justin: On Marty's Bed, 1998* as a

historical continuation of a standard gay male pictorial tradition (Northcross, "Good," 95). These young men are not, I stress, "direct descendants." The temporal contradictions in *Alabama Souvenirs* instead question the contemporary compulsion to identify with this historical and aesthetic tradition, one that continues to provide many metropolitan queer males with a sense of collective identity to this day. In so doing, Meads grafts *Taormina* onto *Eastaboga* not to extend the ideology of so-called gay "heritage," but to wreck it.<sup>9</sup>

*Alabama Souvenirs* too recalls preindustrial codes of gender segregation and white male supremacy, pastoral intimacies with a Nature that northeastern metropolitan societies in the modern United States had presumably left behind, and ambiguities about the continuum of regional male friendship and male sexual exchange. But its photographs quarrel with what an "erotic cultural heritage" of metro-gay pictorial photography strives to make clear "these days," not with what this "erotic cultural heritage" should be. Each of these photographs "conjures places mysterious and unknown," one *GayCityNews.com* reviewer writes, "yet not unknowable" (Northcross, "Rural," 34). Mimicking a legacy that gives historical weight to urban gay visual lives both past and present, *Alabama Souvenirs* refuses yet another version of "our" historical selves.

As we saw in the website's opening frames, the "redneck" rural imaginary thus entices metro spectators with approximations of canonical gay male art, but they also disable the collective identity of "our erotic heritage" for urban-identified U.S. gays. Meads thus repeats these classic icons in a rural Alabama setting only to mystify metro gay identification processes both past and present. Hence we end where we began. Though the *Eastaboga* knife soon fades when it pops up on your computer screen, the website still cuts when you click, click, click into Meads's working-class *Taormina*—a "something" in the metro-oriented, racially-normative gay U.S. world "that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all."

## Notes

I thank John Howard for his editorial guidance throughout the composition of this essay.

1. For more on the definitional difficulties of defining "urban" and/versus "rural," see Michael Bell; Marsden; Halberstam on what she terms "metronormativity" (36); and Cloke.

2. I consciously use the term "proto-gay" since later art historians and lay critics such as Scott McLemee have reclaimed the critic for an "aesthetic" that supposedly "reflected a homosexual sensibility."

3. For more on the relationship between Demuth and U.S. homosexual identity, see Weinberg, 15-113. And for more on Demuth's relation to Pater, see Weinberg, 85-88.

4. I use the term "redneck" here and elsewhere in this essay knowingly and not disparagingly. While the slang term has historically been derisively used against working-class southern white (and often rural) populations, it has, of late, problematically become a term of self-identification for this social group. For critical analyses of the term "redneck" as well as southern white representations, see Cobb; Wray; Penley; and Hartigan Jr.

5. Though I have not the space to reprint them, most of the "Allen and Justin" series correspond directly to images in von Gloeden's *Taormina*.

6. For a critic whose work dialogues directly with the imperial sexual politics of the Mediterranean, see Aldrich. For more on von Gloeden's imperialism in particular, see Waugh, 71-86 and 97-102; Ellenzweig, 35-47; and Barthes.

7. This anachronistic time recalls and reformats Anne McClintock's influential theory of "anachronistic space," or what she defines a colonial "trope" that situates "colonized people" "in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency—the living embodiment of the archaic 'primitive'" (30). Though von Gloeden (and, to some extent, Meads) photographs rural bodies in an "anterior time" that signifies Ancient Greece or Rome, he also imports this time into his turn-of-the-century present rather than shunting them permanently to an unspecified past. For broader critical overviews of the relationship between temporality and sexuality, see Umphrey; Freeman; and Halberstam on the "anachronism" of the transgendered body (15). And for a recent criticism of Western modernity's obsession with what she calls an "epistemology of backwardness" that links to nonurban, non-Western European populations, see Pratt, 31.

8. Waugh's trans-historical contention here finds its popular parallel in Charles Leslie's "A Memory of Taromina" at the Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation's website.

9. This is also to say that Meads participates in a larger postmodern project of revising Classical ideals in an age of sexual identity politics. See Mirzeoff on "polyvalent Classical form for an entirely new audience" for more on this politicized appropriation (96).

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