

A Collision of Several Cultures: My Old Kentucky Homo

Description

The AutoEthnographer





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Authorâ??s Memo

My essay, â??My Old Kentucky Homo,â?• offers a glimpse into the collision of several cultures that I experienced as a newly minted PhD. The first clash was between North and South as I had been living near Chicago, IL. The university selected me for an interview for an assistant professorship at a university in rural western Kentucky. The differences in accent, self-presentation, and relative affluence â?? or at least the appearance of it â?? were all features of the culture I was living in that I would soon come to miss.

As a queer man living in a relatively accepting urban environment, I also experienced a clash of gender expression and sexuality when I came to Kentucky. As a proud part of the the so-called Bible Belt, I anticipated some differences. However, I was not ready for the clash with other non-heterosexual people. They looked at me and saw an outsider. That was a response I imagined receiving from straight, religious people in the region â?? not my fellow queers.

Using self-effacing humor as the lens for this analysis, I recount various aspects of my interview process and my early days living in a remote southern community. My experience highlights the ways

that formulating expectations of shared experiences and identity features often lands us in unwelcome territory. It also brings into question the lived experiences of those seeking kinship/community based on shared non-heterosexual identities.

Ultimately, I conclude that I didnâ??t exactly find any binding ties using sexual identity as a starting point. In fact, my essay highlights my failure to assimilate into the community in which I still live, fourteen years later. This conclusion does not, however, represent a loss of hope or an erasure of meaningful engagement. Rather, it accentuates our human capacity to feel apart from a culture while still living within, and contributing to, it.

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Well, perhaps thatâ??s not entirely true. I did travel there to get the offer. However, the experience was so surreal that I hadnâ??t had any time to contemplate life there for a queer agnostic northerner in a Dixie-identified Bible-Belt backwater. Itâ??s not that I was unobservant. It just happened that I interviewed during an ice-apocalypse that effectively glazed over the rough spots I would encounter months later

For the first thirty-three years of my life, Kentucky never crossed my mind. Not as a place, a possibility, or a problem. That all changed when they hired me as an assistant professor of English at a mid-sized state school. It was in a remote corner of the state just south of Illinois, north of Tennessee, West of Missouri, and east of everything Iâ??d ever known. It was 2009 and the job market for humanities faculty was abysmal. I signed the contract without hesitation before I ever even truly contemplated Kentucky.

I should have been concerned before I ever crossed state lines. An email from the hiring committee chair had arrived the day before with a fairly cryptic directive: â??BRING ALCOHOL. IF ITâ??S WINE, DONâ??T FORGET THE CORKSCREW.â?• I couldnâ??t imagine why he imagined booze would be so central to my interview until I learned that the town was â??moistâ?• â?? alcohol sales by the glass only. There were no package liquor stores. Nevertheless, I was a bit perplexed at the urgency of his all-caps command to come liquored up.

I was aware that winter weather was approaching. Just as I pulled in for gas barely across the state line in Paducah, ice started to pelt me. It was dark, frigid, and forlorn as I pumped my unleaded. And I wondered at the un-midwestern voices wafting from neighboring pumps. I was, perhaps, two miles out of Illinois. And suddenly everyone appeared to be participating in a revival of *Liâ??l Abner*. Well, perhaps thatâ??s a slight exaggeration, but many of those folks were certainly suffering from (enjoying?) a condition my Kentucky-native partner later informed locals call â??banjo mouthâ?• or â??mushmouth.â?• â??Theyâ??re country folkâ?•. He often reminds me, expecting that simple sentence to explain a whole catalogue of affectations and manners of being that struck me as part caricature and part homeliness. In short, I felt apart from them â?? and conspicuous in my difference.

I was somewhat accustomed to being conspicuous â?? but on my own terms. I had grown accustomed to life near Chicago where I knew what seemed like an entire army of queer men who drove Audis and draped themselves in designer clothes. Our style made us conspicuous because it relied upon carefully â?? some would say overly â?? maintained bodies that verged toward overthinness, overcolognedness, and overdressedness. We were aware of our excesses, and many of us quite enjoyed them. We had a sense, I would say, that the best people are always something of a parody of themselves â?? and I was no exception.

However, our language of style was certainly not incomprehensible or illegible in the context of greater Chicago. While plenty of people didnâ??t care to speak out particular language, they also didnâ??t seem to consider it especially remarkable or even necessarily regrettable. That distinction was important to me. The reason is I already knew what it was like to live, as a child, in a tiny cornfield-cordoned village populated by white, straight, virulent anti-queerness. In the days before I learned to appreciate standing out for those who could appreciate me, I resented those peopleâ??s unrelenting insistence upon punishing me for my queerness.

I did not want to move out of my own relative comfort in Chicagoland, where Iâ??d fled from that village. I had found my people and my place and Kentucky, as I would discover, had far too much in common

with where I came from. And the parts that differed were far from desirable. But, needs must so I slid into Kentucky that icy January night in my champagne-colored Audi A6 (used but shiny) and a black herringbone Armani trenchcoat (eBay).

I smelled of Yves Saint Laurentâ??s Opium and there were diamond rings on my fingers (jewelry store-employee bonus). I had stuff, but not from the usual methods. The locals I encountered took one look and couldnâ??t understand me. Even though they knew exactly what they were looking at. Fortunately for me, I couldnâ??t give it much thought because I was too busy trying to keep the car on the road.

For the next twenty-four hours, I was hustled around campus amidst the biggest ice storm the state had ever seen. No one failed to notice my trench coat, surveying it first and my face second. Even among the more urbane academic crowd, I stood out. I couldnâ??t exactly understand why. Yes, I dressed well in fine clothes, but they were simple â?? severe even â?? in their lines and colors. I was the model of appropriate attire for a job interview. I know this because I once worked as an instructor on that very subject for a high-end department store. Later, I would learn one of my future colleagues had remarked after our initial meeting, â??Finally! I think weâ??ve caught ourselves a real queer!â?•. He meant it as a compliment, no matter how actionable the statement may have been.

During the campus tour by an undergraduate English major, I was treated to a symphony of ice-laden trees snapping at their trunks in the weight of the ice. My shoes werenâ??t suitable for the storm, so I kept slipping and sliding â?? and then jerking to keep upright. I imagined myself looking like some over-decorated Christmas tree, skirt akimbo, glittering and glaring for all the world to see. The student, bless her heart â?? a vicious phrase I learned from Kentucky â?? couldnâ??t quite make sense of me or my questions. Five minutes into our treacherous journey she already seemed spent.

So, throwing her a softball, I asked where I could find a Target nearby. I had already decided that I had to have a Target or I simply couldnâ??t relocate. It sounds precious, I know, but I was serious. I already felt like Iâ??d driven off earthâ??s end. And I wasnâ??t going to start shopping at Wal-Mart just to prove Iâ??m a survivor (ultimately I did due to a dearth of options â?? and I am).

She looked at me with what I could only imagine were misty eyes. â??Is this girl going to start crying?â?• I asked myself, wondering if she revered the superstore as I did. â??Weâ??ve been promised a Target too many times. Itâ??s never cominâ??,â?• she announced, suddenly breaking eye contact and then refusing it altogether. Iâ??d lost her by opening a painful wound. Shortly thereafter my balance forsook me and I ended up on my ass. That, at least, seemed to brighten her mood and banish our mutual heady fantasies of slightly upscale discount shopping.

Scratched and feeling scratchy, I suggested that I had seen enough â?? I had â??. And asked to be returned to a less slippery situation. I quickly discovered that the terrain of the classroom where I would give my research talk was by no means less treacherous. I was just about to publish my first book chapter. So I decided to use that material to introduce myself to my Kentucky colleagues and potential future students. Like any young, slightly self-satisfied academic convinced of the engrossing nature of their highly specialized research, I had far less audience and self-awareness than I ought to have had.

I started with a question that landed like a grenade: â??what do museum staffs tell us about the lives of queer men when their showplace homes become museums?â?•. Some faculty forced smiles while others squirmed in squeaky seats. Eyes widened and lips tightened like I had just let off nerve gas in the classroom. The students in attendance either refused eye contact. Or they seemed to attempt to

communicate, telepathically, much like my siblings when we knew we pissed our parents, that I ought to shut up right quickly.

Understanding that I couldnâ??t stop, I played it off by saying â??Iâ??m not surprised you donâ??t have any answers. No house museum in this country currently addresses queerness of any kind.â?• I locked eyes with the department chair as I finished this exculpatory sentence and she gave me the nonverbal greenlight. I had acquitted myself â?? at least temporarily â?? but I now knew this audience could not be trusted.

That they felt no sympathy for my precarious position did not escape me. They were indifferent to the difficulties of presenting during an ice storm to a half-empty room of people worried we wouldnâ??t be able to escape the building afterwards. Throughout the day, in the corridors and the restroom, I had already received countless excuses for missing my talk. â??A tree just fell on my house,â?• one faculty member proclaimed in place of a proper greeting. I couldnâ??t tell if he was speaking in code or whether he was actually heading toward a domestic crisis.

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Another (presumably, names and ranks were not exchanged) professor announced, â??my cat just got caught on the porch roofâ?•. By way of explaining what I still donâ??t know. When I mentioned these, and other, odd utterances, the hiring committee reassured me that those people panicked because everything was so dangerous. And they had to get home to set things straight. Yeah, me too; my queer nonsense was clearly not marketable in a place like Kentucky.

By the time I had completed my talk, I felt certain I would leave the â??Unbridled Spiritâ?• of Kentucky about which its billboard shrieked, presumably in a mushy manner, and never come back again. That realization was punctuated by one of the students who had bugged her eyes out at my opening question. â??I thought â??queerâ?? was a bad word,â?• she stated prosaically, avoiding the trap I slipped into by employing the interrogative. Still, I had not actually learned. â??You did?â?• I asked, only to be met by a blank stare. Once I realized her determination not to say more since she had already made her point, I lurched ahead once more. Many non-heterosexual people, I held forth, had reclaimed the pejorative term as a proud non-identitarian positionality. Itâ??s a radical reclamation! I nearly shouted, mingling joy and panic, certain I could liberate her just then.

Deadpan, she then established herself as a â??nonhetersexualâ?• (*sic*) and restated her original claim. Nonplussed but unwilling to demand satisfaction from this sophomore sphinx lest it cost me a potential job, I congratulated her willingness to share her perspective and then moved on to another self-injurious question: â??how many people here have studied queer theory?â?• No one moved. Not one eyelash batted. The room, like the meteorological mayhem just outside, was frozen. None of them, including, apparently, the eight or so Ph.Ds in the room, had ever heard of the overly assimilated academic theory. In fact, I presume, not one of them would even venture to claim understanding or prior knowledge of the word queer itself. Once more I felt singular, set apart â?? and frankly, just a little silly.

It was only afterwards that a woman with a platinum-blonde mohawk and madness in her eyes, a professor of Philosophy, explained, as she fed me pizza in a restaurant with no heat and ovens running on a generator, that visiting Kentucky entailed time travel backwards. A radical from Seattle, she had played the role of fake queer in the department for a handful of years. In fact, the â??real queerâ?• guy had hired her first hoping that she would infuse the campus with militant lesbian feminist rage only to discover her shamefully unproductive heterosexual inclinations. His despair at her coming out was profound. He took solace in the notion that her unfeminine hairstyles would still lend an edge to the

somewhat stodgy department. Nevertheless, he felt disappointed to realize that his strategic hire would do nothing for the diversity demographics.

â??Her feelings were probably hurt,â?• she announced with her voice full of venom. â??And it serves her right!â?•. I had no idea how that explained what had happened. But I was starting to wish *I* could blurt something nonsensical about a cell tower falling on my ego and then bolt from the room. Alas, it was not to be; I was sitting on the inside of a booth and we were not alone. In fact, a candidate for another position and her assigned faculty minder â?? a man who talked like heâ??d just snorted speed â?? were sitting with us. He echoed the mohawkâ??s analysis with a series of rapid-fire â??yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah, yeah!â?•. It felt like the verbal equivalent of machine gun volley telling me that I hurt the nonhetersexual (*sic*) girlâ??s feelings by uttering â??queer.â?•

â??They consider it radical just to say theyâ??re not straight,â?• she finally continued. Itâ??s sad for them â?? but itâ??s also *really* sad for us. Can you imagine teaching students who are that far behind the times? I mean, what is this? 1950? You donâ??t know how bad it is here. DO NOT TAKE THIS JOB IF THEY OFFER IT! YOUâ??LL HATE IT!â?•. It was in that moment that I suddenly understood why the search committee chair had been so adamant about loading up on booze.

I had never felt so out of place in my entire life. I kept smiling and trying to joke around. Actually really liked this woman, even felt a kind of kinship with her. But, I couldnâ??t imagine ever speaking so candidly to a complete stranger. It felt like a shocking assertion to characterize all non-heterosexual people in Western Kentucky â?? maybe even the entire South â?? as overwhelmingly retrograde and overly sensitive when it came to queer life (like describing it as â??queer lifeâ?•) that I took for granted. A part of me also felt like she, and this entire place, must be putting me on with its over-the-top display of natural disasters and un-homophobic anti-queer sentiments.

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I took the job, dear reader. From the vantage of fourteen years later, I can confidently assert that I still often feel very much apart from this western Kentucky culture in which I live. Many times during my first years here I met people who loved non-heterosexually and hated â??queer.â?• Some even asserted that I should be stopped from using the word to describe myself, others, or in application to literature and culture. The wounds were too deep, the stigma still too strong. I respect their refusal, but I have not made it my own.

Throughout my career here, people have made me shocked and charmed, intermittently, by telling me that my way of being not-straight does not qualify as â??gay hereâ?• â?? applying an identity to me that sometimes hurts my feelings a little. I caused deep offense in my third year by growing a beard, for example. To be not-straight in western Kentucky, my students told me, meant shaving every day. I learned not long after that they also found it unacceptable that I had no interest then â?? or ever â?? in performing drag, despite my affection for the culture. â??Impossible!â?• they shrieked and instantly disqualified me from whatever pageant I had been unwillingly committed to. Only straight men didnâ??t do drag. Everyone knew that.

There were days then â?? and now â?? when I felt like the madwoman in the attic. Perfectly, perplexingly, permanently apart from the culture in which I am, economically speaking, forced to make my old Kentucky home â?? as a homo. I have not become more of a Kentuckian in any assimilative sense. But I have established my presence, perspective â?? and even a loving partnership with a

native â?? here. I imagine my life as one lived in resistance, defiance â?? which isnâ??t as acrimonious as it might sound. Rather, I see the value in being the one strange enough to say the words that others think shouldnâ??t be said and to recognize that even though I now admit Kentucky is a real place with an undeniable force in my life. I made it more real by my insistence that it make space for people like me, too.

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