Gary Richards. ***Lovers & Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961.*** Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. 243p.

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Despite pervasive stereotypes of the post Civil War American South as a place of sexual secrets and transgressive desires, little comprehensive critical attention has been paid to sexuality in southern literature. In his intelligent and highly readable study, Gary Richards addresses this critical silence by arguing that same-sex desire was foundational to writers' understanding of southern culture during the middle of the twentieth century. By grounding his analyses of Southern Renaissance novels in sexual theory, and by carefully addressing how the texts construct race and gender in relation to sexuality, Richards' study is both ambitious and impressive. His captivating work sheds light on the diverse representations of sexual otherness that have long been ignored or dismissed by what Richards calls "the Agrarians' conservative legacy" (21).

Richards focuses on six mid-twentieth-century authors—Truman Capote, William Goyen, Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Harper Lee, and Carson McCullers—to support his claim that southern writers are "as central to American gay/lesbian literary production as…those of any of the nation's other regions" (4). After his compelling chapter on the absence of adequate sexuality studies in southern literary criticism, Richards divides his chapters based on gender: the first two devoted to male authors, the last three to female authors. However, *Lovers & Beloveds* is actually constructed around two main arguments. The first is based on the extent to which a text adheres to the assumption that "gender transitivity" structures sexual identity—a concept discussed by Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and David Halperin. In other words, a novel that holds gender transitivity and same-sex desire to be indicative of one another espouses a logic that "Gay men are effeminate; effeminate men are gay" (31). The second argument that Richard undertakes involves the ways race regulates both African American and European American sexual and gender transgressions. Though *Lovers & Beloveds* would have been better served by a sharper argument structure based around these two analytical methods and the ways they relate to each other, his engaging analyses of the texts overshadow quibbles about organization.

The chapters that focus on gender transitivity are particularly compelling. In his chapter on Capote and Goyen, Richards argues that though the men in Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* do not physically actualize their desires, critics repeatedly recognize both Randolph's and Joel's feminine gender performances as designating homosexuality. In contrast, Goyen in *The House of Breath* resists collapsing homosexuality and gender transitivity by contrasting Christy Ganchion's hypermasculinity

with his brother Folner's effeminacy, though both engage in same-sex activity. As such, Richards argues that Goyen "forcefully destabilizes 'the' homosexual of 'the' American South at midcentury, calling into question the paradigms that Capote offers as immutable" (61). Richards returns to the framework of gender transitivity in a later chapter on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which he argues that Lee destabilizes normative gender and heterosexuality by parodying failed heterosexual relationships, by representing a symbolic homosexual closet though the characters of John Hale Finch and Boo Radley, and by focusing on the transgressive gender performances of Scout Finch and Dill Lee. Unlike Capote and Goyen, Lee does not equate gender transitivity with same-sex desire; rather, she "is as interested in gender transitivity when it is not indicative of same-sex desire as when it is" (120). Yet Scout's gender violations are policed far more heavily than Dill's—a policing that is based upon "white southern femininity's contingency on the debasement of African Americans" (130)—reflecting the key place white southern femininity held in the social matrix.

While the chapters that focus on the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality lack the strong argument of his chapters on gender transitivity, Richards' analyses of Wright, Smith, and McCullers are absorbing and sophisticated. In his chapter devoted to Richard Wright, Richards addresses the way race complicates the tensions of compulsory heterosexuality in, especially, Wright's *The Long Dream*. These tensions emerge from the devaluing of black women and the valuing of white women, and from punishing black men for violating the sexual taboo against white women. While Wright questions the historical accuracy of lynching as punishment for African American men's sexual violations, the thrust of this chapter reads the various sites through which *The Long Dream*'s Fishbelly Tucker "can escape from the anxieties of compulsory heterosexuality and explore whatever same-sex desires may arise within him" (90). Richards argues that the racial climate of the South pushed black men toward homosocial interactions even as persistent homophobia in the African-American community victimized gay black men.

Likewise, in his chapter on Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, Richards sees race construct sexual identity by tracing Smith's call for tolerance of both racial and sexual otherness, though the latter has larger been dismissed by critics who "emphasize that Laura and Jane never form a sexual relationship" in the novel (100). The regulation of white southern women to be sexually pure, Richards argues, encouraged white men to seek out African American women, thus re-enforcing the logic of miscegenation. Richards critiques Smith by claiming she "reinscribe[s] the hypersexual racial other who has permeated European Americans' cultural self-definition" (110) while failing to "complicate white male sexuality with the viability of homosexuality"

(109). His analyses of Carson McCullers' portrayals of sexual otherness are similarly compelling, particularly the ways in which McCullers attempts to circumvent the homosexual/heterosexual binary in her fiction. But despite the chapter's introductory focus on *Clock Without Hands* and its attempts "to centralize interracial desire between men" (160), Richards doesn't actually discuss the novel until the chapter is three-quarters finished, instead providing a review of sexual desire in other works by McCullers.

Richards' choice of lesser-studied novelists makes a needed contribution to the field of American literary criticism. This choice also means the reader isn't always given a clear context for understanding how these lesser-studied southern authors are situated among the oft-studied ones, nor how they are situated among other literary genres of the era and region. Although Richards had to limit his discussion somehow, it seems strange to read a book on sexual otherness in southern literature that does not directly address Tennessee Williams and the legendary homoerotics of Brick and Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, nor William Faulkner's portrayals of the southern gothic. These absences indicate that the topic of sexual transgression in southern literature remains ripe for further study, while also pointing to the innovative work Richards has undertaken in *Lovers & Beloveds* to establish southern sexuality studies as a field. ❊