Judith Halberstam

In a Queer Time and Place

Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives


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The Brandon Archive

> The road was straight, the country was level as a lake, and other cars were seldom sighted. This was "out there"—or getting near it.
>
> —Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Out There

Our relations to place, like our relations to people, are studded with bias, riven with contradictions, and complicated by opaque emotional responses. I am one of those people for whom lonely rural landscapes feel laden with menace, and for many years nonurban areas were simply "out there," strange and distant horizons populated by hostile populations. It is still true that a densely packed urban street or a metallic skyline can release a surge of excitement for me while a vast open landscape fills me with dread. In December 1993, I remember reading a short story in the newspaper about an execution-style killing in rural Nebraska. The story seemed unremarkable except for one small detail buried in the heart of the report: one of the murder victims was a young female-bodied person who had been passing as a man. The murder of this young transgender person sent shock waves through queer communities in the United States, and created fierce identitarian battles between transsexual activists and gay and lesbian activists, with each group trying to claim Brandon Teena as one of their own. The struggles over the legacy of Brandon represented much more than a local skirmish over the naming or classification of fallen brethren; indeed, they testified to the political complexities of an activism sparked by murder and energized by the work of memorializing individuals. The fascination with murder and mayhem that characterizes U.S. popular culture has led some theorists to point to the emergence of a wound culture. It is easy to explain why homophobic violence might generate such fierce activist responses; it is harder to mobilize such responses for purposes that extend beyond demands for protection and recognition from the state. My purpose here is to build on the flashes of insight afforded by violent encounters between "normal" guys and gender-variant people in order to theorize the meaning of gender transitivity in late capitalism. Here I will use the notions of relays of influence between dominant and

minority masculinities to consider the place and space of the masculine transgender subject.

The tragic facts in the case of the murder of Brandon Teena and his two friends are as follows: on December 31, 1993, three young people were shot to death, execution style, in Falls City in rural Nebraska. Ordinarily, this story would have evoked only mild interest from mainstream America and a few questions about the specific brutalities of rural America; one of the three victims, however, was a young white person who had been born a woman, but who was living as a man and had been dating local girls. The other two victims, Brandon's friend Lisa Lambert, and her friend Philip DeVine, a disabled African American man, appeared to have been killed because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, although this too is debatable.

This chapter relates, explores, and maps the shape and the meaning of the remarkable archive that has developed in the aftermath of the slaying of Brandon Teena, Lisa, and Philip; the archive has created a new "Brandon." This new Brandon is the name that we now give to a set of comforting fictions about queer life in small-town America. The Brandon archive is simultaneously a resource, a productive narrative, a set of representations, a history, a memorial, and a time capsule. It literally records a moment in the history of twentieth-century struggles around the meaning of gender categories and it becomes a guide to future resolutions. So, while in my next chapter I will examine the "politics of transgender biography" and the difficulties involved in telling stories about people who have created specific life narratives, here I want to lay out the geopolitical ramifications of Brandon's murder by imagining the Brandon archive as made up of the insights and revelations allowed by a careful consideration of the many lives and social formations that Brandon's life and death sheds light on. If we think of the murder of Brandon as less of a personal tragedy that has been broadened out to create a symbolic event and more of a constructed memorial to the violence directed at queer and transgender lives, we will be better equipped to approach the geographic and class specificities of rural Nebraska.

The execution of Brandon, Lisa, and Philip was in fact more like an earthquake or a five-alarm fire than an individualized event: its eruption damaged more than just the three who died and the two who killed; it actually devastated the whole town, and brought a flood of reporters, cameras, and journalists into the area to pick through the debris and size up the import of the disaster. That media rush, in many ways, transformed the Brandon murders from a circumscribed event to an ever evolving narrative. As we will see in

the next chapter, among the magazine articles, talk shows, and other media that covered the case, an Oscar-winning feature film, *Boys Don't Cry,* was released about Brandon's death. This film, more than any other representation of the case, has determined the legacy of the murders. In a later chapter, "The Transgender Look," I will explore the mechanics of looking at the transgender body; but in this chapter on place, space, and regionality, I discuss the documentary film that greatly influenced *Boys Don't Cry*: *The Brandon Teena Story,* directed by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir (1998). Like the feature film yet in different ways, *The Brandon Teena Story* tried to re-create the material conditions of Brandon's undoing, but like the feature film, it ultimately told a tall story about rural homophobia.

By designating the stories told about Brandon and his friends as "an archive" in this chapter, I am tracing the multiple meanings of this narrative for different communities. Ann Cvetkovich theorizes queer uses of the term "archives" in her book *An Archive of Feelings*: "Understanding gay and lesbian archives as archives of emotion and trauma helps to explain some of their idiosyncrasies, or, one might say, their 'queerness'" (Cvetkovich 2003, 242). The Brandon archive is exactly that: a transgender archive of "emotion and trauma" that allows a narrative of a queerly gendered life to emerge from the fragments of memory and evidence that remain. When Brandon was shot to death by John Lotter and Thomas Nissen, his failure to pass as a man in the harsh terrain of a small town in rural North America prompted a national response from transgender activists. This response has been amplified and extended by other queers for different and conflicting reasons. Some queers use Brandon's death to argue for hate-crime legislation; others have made Brandon into a poster child for an emergent transgender community dedicated to making visible the plight of cross-identified youth, and Brandon functions therefore as a reference point of what I called in chapter 1 transgressive exceptionalism; still others have pointed to Brandon's death as evidence of a continuing campaign of violence against queers despite the increasing respectability of some portions of the gay and lesbian community. But few of the responses have taken into consideration the specificity of Brandon's nonmetropolitan location, and few if any have used the murder and the production of activist and cultural activity that it has inspired as a way of reexamining the meaning of sexual identity in relation to a postmodern politics of place.

I use the Brandon material, then, to unpack the meaning of "local homosexualities" or transsexualities in the context of the United States. Like other

narratives about nonmetropolitan sexuality, popular versions of this story posit a queer subject who sidesteps so-called modern models of gay identity by conflating gender and sexual variance. Indeed, in the popular versions of the Brandon narrative that currently circulate, like *Boys Don't Cry,* Brandon's promiscuity and liminal identity is depicted as immature and even premodern and as a form of false consciousness. When Brandon explores a mature and adult relationship with one woman who recognizes him as "really female," that film suggests, Brandon accedes to a modern form of homosexuality and is finally "free." Reconstituted now as a liberal subject, Brandon's death at the hands of local men can be read simultaneously as a true tragedy and an indictment of backward, rural communities. In this sense, Brandon occupies a place held by so-called primitives in colonial anthropology; he literally inhabits a different timescale from the modern queer, and using Johannes Fabian's formulation in *Time and the Other,* Brandon's difference gets cast as both spatially and temporally distant (Fabian 2002, 16). By reading Brandon's story in and through postcolonial queer theory and queer geography, we can untangle the complex links that this narrative created for the urban consumers who were its most avid audience between modern queerness and the rejection of rural or small-town locations.

I believe that an extensive analysis of the Brandon murders can serve to frame the many questions about identification, responsibility, class, regionality, and race that trouble queer communities today. Not only does Brandon represent a martyr lost in the struggle for transgender rights to the brutal perpetrators of rural hetero-masculine violences., Brandon also serves as a marker for a particular set of late-twentieth-century cultural anxieties about place, space, locality, and metropolitanism. Fittingly, Brandon has become the name for gender variance, for fear of transphohic and homophobic punishment; Brandon also embodies the desire directed at nonnormative masculinities. Brandon represents other rural lives undone by fear and loathing, and his story also symbolizes an urban fantasy of homophobic violence as essentially midwestern. But violence wherever we may find it marks different conflictual relations in different sites; and homicide, on some level, always depicts the microrealities of other battles displaced from the abstract to the tragically material. While at least one use of any Brandon Teena project must be to connect Brandon's gender presentation to other counternarratives of gender realness, I also hope that Brandon's story can be a vehicle linked to the discussions of globalization, transnational sexualities, geography, and queer migration. On some level Brandon's story, while cleaving to its own

specificity, needs to remain an open narrative—not a stable narrative of female-to-male transsexual identity nor a singular tale of queer bashing, not a cautionary fable about the violence of rural America nor an advertisement for urban organizations of queer community. Brandon's story permits a dream of transformation that must echo in the narratives of queer life in other nonmetropolitan locations.

Falls City, Nebraska: A Good Place to Die?

> In little towns, lives roll along so close to one another; loves and hates beat about, their wings almost touching.
>
> —Willa Cather, *Lucy Gayheart* (Cather 1935, 167)

In *The Brandon Teena Story*, Muska and Olafsdottir attempt to place the narrative of Brandon's life and death firmly in the countryside of Nebraska, so much so that Nebraska takes on the role and the presence of a character in this drama. We see prolonged shots of the rolling Nebraska countryside, road signs welcoming the traveler to Nebraska's "good life," and scenes of everyday life and culture in small-town America. The filmmakers make it clear early on that their relationship to Falls City and its communities is ironic and distanced. They never appear in front of the camera even though about 75 percent of the documentary involves talking-head interviews with interviewees responding to questions from invisible interlocutors. In the few "local" scenes, the camera peers voyeuristically at the demolition derby and the line-dancing and karaoke bar, and in the interview sequences, the camera pushes its way rudely into the lives of the people touched by the Brandon story. In one significant scene, the camera pans the backs of local men watching a demolition derby. As the gaze sweeps over them, the men are rendered in slow motion, and they turn and gaze back at the camera with hostile stares of nonrecognition. Interactions between the camera and its subjects register the filmmakers as outsiders to the material realities of the rural Midwest, mark the objects of the gaze as literally haunted by an invisible camera, and finally, place the viewer at a considerable distance from the actors on the screen. This distance both allows for the emergence of multiple versions of the Brandon story but also pins the narrative of violent homophobic and transphobic violence firmly to the landscape of white trash America, and forces modes of strenuous disidentification between the viewer and the landscape.

The landscape of Nebraska serves as a contested site on which multiple narratives unfold—narratives, indeed, that refuse to collapse into simply one story, "the Brandon Teena story." Some of these narratives are narratives of hate, or of desire; others tell of ignorance and brutality; still others of isolation and fear; some allow violence and ignorant prejudices to become the essence of poor, white, rural identity; and still others provoke questions about the deployment of whiteness and the regulation of violence. While the video itself encourages viewers to distance themselves from the horror of the heartlands and to even congratulate themselves for living in an urban rather than a rural environment, ultimately we can use Brandon's story as it emerges here to begin the articulation of the stories of white, working-class, rural queers, and to map the immensely complex relations that make rural America a site of horror and degradation in the urban imagination.

For queers who flee the confines of the rural Midwest and take comfort in urban anonymity, this video may serve as a justification of their worst fears about the violent effects of failing to flee; closer readings of Brandon's story, however, reveal the desire shared by many midwestern queers for a way of staying rather than leaving. While some journalists in the wake of Brandon's murder queried his decision to stay in Falls City, despite having been hounded by the police and raped by the men who went on to murder him, we must 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. The danger of small towns as Willa Cather described it, also in reference to rural Nebraska, emerges out of a suffocating sense of proximity: "lives roll along so close to one another," she wrote in *Lucy Gayheart*, "loves and hates beat about, their wings almost touching." This beautiful, but scary image of rural life as a space all-too-easily violated depends absolutely on an opposite image—the image of rural life as wide open and free ranging, as "big sky" and open plains. Cather captures perfectly the contradiction of rural life as the contrast between wide-open spaces and sparse populations, on the one hand, and small-town claustrophobia and lack of privacy, on the other.

The life and death of Brandon provokes endless speculation about the specificities of the loves and hates that characterized his experiences in Falls City, and any straightforward rendering of his story remains impossible. Some viewers of *The Brandon Teena Story* have accused the filmmakers of an obvious class bias in their depictions of the people of Falls City; others have seen the film as an accurate portrayal of the cultures of hate and meanness

produced in small, mostly white towns. Any attempt to come to terms with the resonances of Brandon's murder will ultimately have to grapple with both of these proposals. One way in which *The Brandon Teena Story* deploys and perpetuates a class bias in relation to the depiction of anti-queer violence is by depicting many of its interview subjects in uncritical ways as "white trash." In their introduction to an anthology titled *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray define white trash as both a reference to "actually existing white people living in (often rural) poverty," and a term designating "a set of stereotypes and myths related to the social behaviors, intelligence, prejudices, and gender roles of poor whites" (Newitz 1996, 7). The editors offer a "local politics of place" to situate, combat, and explain such stereotypes.

One way in which *The Brandon Teena Story* is able to grapple with the lives beneath the stereotypes (of white trash, of gender impersonation) is by allowing some of the women whom Brandon dated to explain themselves and articulate their own extraordinary desires. In the media rush to uncover the motivations behind Brandon's depiction of himself as a man, most accounts of the case have overlooked the fact that Brandon was actively chosen over more conventionally male men by the women he dated despite the fact that there were few social rewards for doing so. One girlfriend after another in the video characterizes Brandon as a fantasy guy, a dream guy, a man who "knew how a woman wanted to be treated." Gina describes him as romantic, special, and attentive, while Lana Tisdale calls him "every woman's dream." We might conclude that Brandon lived up to and even played into the romantic ideals that his girlfriends cultivated about masculinity. Brandon's self-presentation must be read, I believe, as a damaging critique of the white working-class masculinities around him; at the same time, however, his performance of courtly masculinity is a shrewd deployment of the middle-class and so-called respectable masculinities that represent an American romantic ideal of manhood. In the accounts that the women give of their relations with Brandon, we understand that he not only deliberately offered them a treatment they could not expect from local boys but he also acknowledged the complexity of their self-understandings and desires.

In order to understand the kinds of masculinities with which Brandon may have been competing, we can turn to the representations of the murderers themselves. While some accounts of the Brandon case have attempted to empathize with the men who murdered Brandon—Lotter and Nissen—by revealing their traumatic family histories and detailing their encounters with

abuse, the video tries to encourage the men to give their own reasons for their brutality. The conversations with Lotter and Nissen are fascinating for the way they allow the men to coolly describe rape and murder scenes, and also because Lotter in particular articulates an astute awareness of the violence of the culture into which he was raised. Nissen, however, shows little power of self-reflection; the video represents him as ultimately far more reprehensible than his partner in crime. For one second in the video, the camera focuses on a small tattoo on Nissen's arm, but does not allow the viewer to identify it. In Aphrodite Jones's book on the Brandon case, *All S/he Wanted*, she provides information that situates this tattoo as a symbol of white supremacy politics. Nissen, we learn, was involved off and on throughout his early life with the White American Group for White America (Jones 1996, 154). While Nissen's flirtation with brutally racist white supremacist groups need not surprise us, it does nonetheless flesh out the particular nexus of hate that came to focus on Brandon, Lisa, and Philip.

Nowhere in the documentary, however, nor in media coverage of the case, does anyone link Nissen's racial politics with either the brutalization of Brandon or the execution of the African American, Philip; indeed, the latter is always constructed as a case of "wrong place, wrong time," but Philip's situation needs to be explored in more detail. In *The Brandon Teena Story*, Philip's murder is given little airplay, and none of his relatives or family make an appearance in the video. While every other character in the drama, including Lisa, is carefully located in relation to Brandon and the web of relations among Brandon's friends, Philip alone is given only the most scant attention. No explanation is given for the nonappearance of his family and friends, and no real discussion is presented about his presence in the farmhouse the night of the murders.[1]

It is hard to detach the murder of Philip from the history of Nissen's involvement in white supremacist cults. Many accounts of white power movements in the United States connect them to small, all-white towns in the Midwest and to economically disadvantaged white populations. While one would not want to demonize poor, white, rural Americans as any more bigoted than urban or suburban white yuppie populations in the United States, it is nonetheless important to highlight the particular fears and paranoia that take shape in rural, all-white populations. Fear of the government, fear of the United Nations, and fear of Jews, blacks, and queers mark white rural masculinities in particular ways that can easily produce cultures of hate (Ridgeway 1995). In small towns where few people of color live, difference may be

marked and remarked in relation to gender variance rather than racial diversity. As Newitz and Wray point out in their anatomy of white trash, some degree of specificity is necessary when we try to describe and identify different forms of homophobia and transphobia as they are distributed across different geographies.

In "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," anthropologist Kath Weston begins a much-needed inquiry into the difference between urban and rural "sexual imaginaries" (Weston 1995). She comments on the rather stereotyped division of rural/urban relations that "locates gay subjects in the city while putting their presence in the countryside under erasure" (262). Weston also traces the inevitable disappointments that await rural queers who escape the country only to arrive in alienating queer urban spaces. As Weston proposes, "The gay imaginary is not just a dream of a freedom to be gay that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between urban and rural life" (274). She wants us to recognize that the distinction between the urban and the rural that props up the gay imaginary is a symbolic one, and as such, it constitutes a dream of an elsewhere that promises a freedom it can never provide. But it is also crucial to be specific about which queer subjects face what kinds of threats, from whom, and in what locations. While in the city, for example, one may find that the gay or transsexual person of color is most at risk for violence from racist cops; in rural locations, one may find that even the white queers who were born and raised there are outlawed when they disrupt the carefully protected homogeneity of white, family-oriented communities. One may also discover that while the brutalization of a transgender sex worker of color raises little outcry in the city from local queer activists, the murder of a white boy in rural North America can stir up an enormous activist response that is itself symbolic of these other imaginary divisions.

The material in the Brandon archive has led me to question my own interest in the case and it has forced me to "know my place" in terms of the rural/urban divisions in queer communities that reactions to the story make visible. When I began thinking and writing about the Brandon murders in 1996, I approached the material with the bewilderment of a typical urban queer who wanted to know why Brandon, but also his African American friend Philip, did not pick up and leave Falls City as soon as they could, and furthermore, why they were there in the first place. Falls City, in all the literature, sounded like the last place in the United States where one would want

to try to pass as a man while dating local girls; it was also clearly not a good place to be one of the few people of color in town and a black man dating a white woman. Deindustrialization and the farming crises of the 1970s and 1980s had made this town, like so many other midwestern small towns, a place of poverty and neglect where jobs were hard to come by. For the young white men in town, minorities were to blame for this latest downward swing in their fortunes, and certainly the federal government offered no real hope of retribution.

Having read much of the material on Brandon's short life and brutal murder, and having viewed this documentary about the case, I quickly rationalized the whole episode as an inevitable case of a queer running afoul of the rednecks in a place one would not want to live in anyway. In fall 1996, I was invited up to Seattle to speak at a gay and lesbian film festival following the screening of *The Brandon Teena Story*. I would be joined as a discussant by Seattle-local transman and anthropologist Jason Cromwell and Los Angeles–based philosophy professor and transman Jacob Hale. We conferred briefly before the panel, and after sitting through the disturbing documentary, we went to the stage to discuss the film with the audience. The organizers of the conference seemed to assume that the debate likely to be motivated by the documentary would involve whether we should understand Brandon as a female-to-male transsexual without access to sex reassignment surgery or a transgender butch who had deliberately decided not to transition. My comments skimmed over this debate, which seemed beside the point, and went straight to the question of regionality, location, and rural existence. I remarked that Nebraska was not simply "anywhere" in this video, but that the documentary filmmakers had skillfully tried to situate the landscape as a character in this drama. The audience made noises of approval. Next, I went on to the topic of life in small, mostly white, midwestern towns, and suggested that many of these places were the breeding grounds for cultures of hate and meanness that had both homophobic and racist dimensions. The audience was quiet, too quiet.

The question-and-answer session began without controversy, and a few people testified to the difficulties they had encountered as female-to-male transsexuals or as partners of female-to-males. Others talked about the traumatic experience of watching the video and coming so close to the horrific details of Brandon's murder. Then something strange happened. A harmless question came my way: "What do you think of the documentary? Do you think it is good? Do you think the directors were at all condescending?"

While I did have some real problems with the video and its representations of the people of Falls City, I felt that I had been invited to lead an even-handed discussion of *The Brandon Teena Story*, and so I shrugged off the implied criticism and said that I thought Muska and Olafsdottir had done some amazing interviews. The next question went a bit deeper: "What did you think about the depiction in the video of rural life, and furthermore, what do you mean by small towns in the heartland being 'cultures of hate and meanness?'" I tried to explain that I was describing the bigotry that resides in mostly white, nonurban constituencies. Then it got ugly. A woman stood up and denounced my comments as insensitive to those people present who may have come from small towns, and who, moreover, very much wanted to return to a small-town life and did not believe that the small town was an essentially racist or bigoted place. The audience broke out into spontaneous and sustained applause, and then one person after another stood up to testify that they too were from a small town or a rural background and that they too felt offended. Apart from a bruised ego (it is no fun to have an audience give a standing ovation to someone who has just told you that you are full of it), I left Seattle unscathed, but this experience forced me to reconsider what was at stake in the mythmaking that now surrounds Brandon's murder.[2] Confronted with my own urban bias, I decided that one could make use of the Brandon material to study urban attitudes toward queer rural life, and to examine more closely the essential links that have been made between urban life and queerness per se.

The murder of Brandon Teena, like the murder of Matthew Shepard some six years later, did in fact draw public attention to the peculiar vulnerabilities of queer youth (whether transgender or gay/lesbian) living in North America's heartland. In both cases, the victims became martyrs for urban queer activists fighting for LGBT rights, and they were mythologized in a huge and diverse array of media as extraordinary individuals who fell prey to the violent impulses of homophobic and transphobic middle-America masculinities. But while it is tempting to use the materials produced in the aftermath of the killings of both Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard to flesh out the details of the lives and deaths of the subjects, it makes more sense to my mind to collect the details, the stories, the facts, and the fictions of the cases, and then to create deep archives for future analysis about the many rural lives and desires that were implicated in the lives ands deaths of these individuals. Here I do not mean simply a collection of data; rather, I use the word archive in a Foucauldian way to suggest a discursive field and a structure of

thinking. The archive is an immaterial repository for the multiple ideas about rural life that construct and undergird urban identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the case of Brandon, the archive that has posthumously developed contains vital information about racial and class constructions of identity and desire in rural areas, and it also provides some important details about the elaborate and complex desires of young women coming to maturity in nonurban areas; the young women who were drawn to Brandon's unconventional manhood must have lots to tell us about adolescent feminine fantasy. As I will elaborate in later chapters, all too often such girlish desires for boyish men are dismissed within a Freudian model of female sexuality as a form of immaturity and unrealized sexual capacity; the assumption that underpins the dismissal of adolescent female desires is that the young women who fall for a Brandon, a teen idol, or some other icon of youthful manhood, will soon come to full adulthood, and when they do, they will desire better and more authentic manhood. By reckoning only with Brandon's story, as opposed to the stories of his girlfriends, his family, and those other two teenagers who died alongside him, we consent to a liberal narrative of individualized trauma. For Brandon's story to be meaningful, it must be about more than Brandon.

Space and Sexuality in Queer Studies

In her lyrical rendering of life in an "other" America, the coal camps and "hollers" of West Virginia, Kathleen Stewart explores at length the meaning of memory for those who live life in forgotten places of neglect and poverty, or in what she calls the "space on the side of the road." In her ethnography, Stewart collects the untidy narratives that disorganize the conventional forward motion of ethnographic telling and thus allows us insight into the particular pull exerted by small-town life for even those subjects who are brutalized by it. One such narrative, for example, emerges when West Virginian Sylvie Hess offers Stewart a rambling recollection of a childhood experience in response to a question about why she could not make a life in the city. In order to explain the attraction of her dilapidated rural hometown, Sylvie recalls her favorite animal from childhood, a cow called Susie, who followed her around throughout her day. One day, however, some stray dogs savaged the cow, and "ripped out her throat and tore her all to pieces." Lingering for a moment over the brutal memory of her beloved cow "layin' there all tore up," Sylvie abruptly switches gears and comments, "But that place was sa

perty!" As Stewart observes, "Here, home is a vibrant space of intensity where things happened and left their mark. Home is sweet not despite the loss of her favorite cow but because of it" (Stewart 1996, 65). Stewart's insightful rendering of the seemingly contradictory impulses animating Sylvie's memory provides momentary access for the urban reader to the appeal of the small rural town for the working-class subjects who stay there, finding beauty and peace in between the brutal realities of poverty, isolation, illness, and violence. For Stewart, the rural poor represent a forgotten minority in the U.S. imagination and offer a fertile site for the ethnographic project of documenting difference.

In gay/lesbian and queer studies, there has been little attention paid to date to the specificities of rural queer lives. Indeed, most queer work on community, sexual identity, and gender roles has been based on and in urban populations, and exhibits an active disinterest in the productive potential of nonmetropolitan sexualities, genders, and identities.[3] Or else when nonurban sexualities have been studied, most often within anthropological studies, they are all too often characterized as "traditional" and "non-Western."[4] And yet, at the same time that most theories of modern sexuality have made definitive links between the city and homosexuality, urban queers have exhibited an endless fascination for stories of gays, lesbians, and transgender people living outside the city. For example, we might explain the appeal of the case of Brandon to urban queers in terms of its ability to locate the continuing homophobic and transphobic violence directed at sex- and gender-variant people in the United States in spaces removed from urban life.

The deaths of Brandon and Matthew have sparked new considerations of the relationship between mainstream gay and lesbian rights movements and the harsh realities of lives lived far beyond the reach of rights-based policies. The response to these murders, in fact, suggests that they were, in the words of James C. Scott, "but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata" (Scott 1990). As Scott writes, "An individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation, but when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product" (9). While Scott's book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* pertains mostly to class relations in nondemocratic societies, in the age of global capitalism, democracy is now riddled with pockets of intense and naked oppression that both shore up the attraction of democratic rule and fortify the myth of its totality. For those subjects—nonmetropolitan queers, prisoners,

homeless people, undocumented laborers—who find themselves quite literally placed beyond the reach of federal protection, legal rights, or state subsidy, democracy is simply the name of their exclusion. For these subjects, the arts of resistance that Scott ascribes to slaves, serfs, and peasants become elaborate and necessary parts of a plan for survival. The Brandon archive is, in some ways, the "collective cultural product" that has responded to the affront of this brutal and phobic murder. And the archive reveals how little we actually know about the forms taken by queer life outside of metropolitan areas. The Brandon archive also makes historical and thematic links between the kinds of violences perpetrated against queer bodies and the documented violences against black bodies in lynching campaigns in the early twentieth century. Lisa Duggan has documented the ways in which lynching narratives and lesbian murder narratives in the 1890s mapped out overlapping histories of violence, and Duggan's powerful study of race, sex, and violence in her *Sapphic Slashers* makes these two seemingly distinct narratives tell a more complete story of the emergence of what she calls "twentieth century U.S. modernity" (Duggan 2000). Brandon's story, coupled as it is with the death of African American Philip DeVine, reminds us of the interchangeability of the queer and the racially other in the white American racist imagination.[5]

Most theories of homosexuality within the twentieth century assume that gay culture is rooted in cities, that it has a special relationship to urban life, and that as Gayle Rubin comments in "Thinking Sex," erotic dissidents require urban space because in rural settings queers are easily identified and punished; this influential formulation of the difference between urban and rural environments was, in 1984 when Rubin's essay was first published, a compelling explanation for the great gay migrations of young queers from the country to the city in the 1970s (Rubin 1984). And since Rubin's essay was heavily committed to the project of providing a theoretical foundation for "sexual ethnographesis" or the ethnographic history of community, it made sense to contrast the sexual conformity of small towns to the sexual diversity of big cities; such a contrast made crystal clear the motivations of young white gay men who seemed to flock in droves in the 1970s from small towns in the Midwest, in particular, to urban gay centers like San Francisco and New York. So in theory, the distinction between rural repression and urban indulgence makes a lot of sense, but in actuality, as recent research has shown, we might find that rural and small-town environments nurture elaborate sexual cultures even while sustaining surface social and political conformity. As John Howard argues in his book, *Men like That*, on rural gay male

practices, "The history of gay people has often mirrored the history of the city" (Howard 1999). But he goes on to show that this history of gay migrations to the city depends on a "linear, modernist trajectory" and "effects a number of exclusions" (12). Howard's book resists the universal application of the gay migration narrative, and instead looks at "the interactions between men who experienced and acted on queer desire within a small, localized realm, [and] men who never took on gay identity or became part of a gay community or culture" (14).

Rural and small-town queer life is generally mythologized by urban queers as sad and lonely, or else rural queers might be thought of as "stuck" in a place that they would leave if they only could.[6] Only of late has the rural/urban divide and binary begun to produce some interesting inquiries into life beyond the metropolitan center; in some recent work, the rural/urban binary reverberates in really productive ways with other defining binaries like traditional/modern, Western/non-Western, natural/cultural, and modern/postmodern. The editors of one anthology of queer writings on sexual geographies, for example, *De-centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis*, suggest that rural or nonmetropolitan sites have been elided within studies of sexuality and space, which typically focus on either "sexualized metropolitan areas such as New York and Berlin or on differently sexualized, marginalized and colonized spaces including the Orient and Africa" (Phillips et al. 2000). By comparison, "much less has been said about other liminal or in-between spaces including the small towns and rural parts of Europe, Australia and North America" (1). The volume as a whole points to the dominance of models of what David Bell in his "Eroticizing the Rural" terms helpfully "metrosexuality" and the concomitant representation of the rural as essentially either "hostile" or "idyllic" (Bell 2000).

The notion of metrosexuality as a cultural dominant in U.S. theorizing about gay/lesbian lives also gives rise to the term metronormativity. This term reveals the conflation of "urban" and "visible" in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities. Such narratives tell of closeted subjects who "come out" into an urban setting, which in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers. The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of coming out tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from "country" to "town" is a spatial narrative within which the subject

moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy. Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from closet case to out and proud. As Howard comments in *Men like That*, the rural is made to function as a closet for urban sexualities in most accounts of rural queer migration. But in actual fact, the ubiquity of queer sexual practices, for men at least, in rural settings suggests that some other epistemology than the closet governs sexual mores in small towns and wide-open rural areas. In reality, many queers from rural or small towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns; and many recount complicated stories of love, sex, and community in their small-town lives that belie the closet model.

Metronormativity, while it reveals the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S. sexual identities, can also shed light on the strangely similar constructions of nonmetropolitan queer sexualities in the United States and nonmetropolitan sexualities in other parts of the world.[7] The recent work on "global gays," to use Dennis Altman's term, has assumed a model of global consciousness-raising within which "unenlightened" sexual minorities around the world, and particularly in Asia, come into contact with Euro-American models of gay identity and begin to form rights-oriented activist communities. In his book *Global Sex*, Altman repeatedly describes the flows of cultural influence between the United States and the "developing" world in terms of the sway of "modern" sexualities on traditional understandings of gender and desire. Sometimes Altman articulates his awareness of the fact that "sexuality becomes an important arena for the production of modernity, with 'gay' and 'lesbian' identities acting as the markers for modernity" (Altman 2001, 91). But he quickly falls back onto thoroughly unexamined assumptions about contemporary forms of embodiment and liberation; for example, he implies repeatedly that gender variance is an anachronistic marker of same-sex desire. Altman writes, "I remain unsure just why 'drag,' and its female equivalents, remains a strong part of the contemporary homosexual world, even where there is increasing space for open homosexuality and a range of acceptable ways of 'being' male or female" (91). Altman's model of "contagious liberation," which is passed on from Westerners to those "closeted" folks in third world countries who remain committed to an anachronistic model of gender inversion and "drag," is deeply flawed. From his conception of a "universal gay identity" to his equation of Western identity with modernity

and Asian and Latin American homosexualities with tradition, Altman persistently conjures up a complex model of globalization only to reduce it at the level of sexuality to a false opposition between sexual liberation and sexual oppression.[8] What is more, his projections of sex/gender anachronism onto so-called developing nations unnecessarily simplifies and streamlines sex/gender systems in dominant nations.[9]

In an illuminating essay that acknowledges the difference between the kind of inevitable model of global gay life that Altman proposes and the active imposition of U.S. sexual hegemonies, Alan Sinfield notes that "the metropolitan gay model will be found in Johannesburg, Rio de Janeiro and Delhi, as well as New York and London, in interaction with traditional local, nonmetropolitan, models" (Sinfield 2000, 21). In other words, Sinfield recognizes that a global gay model is always interacting with other, often nonmetropolitan sexual economies. At the same time, then, that we find evidence of the (uneven) spread of U.S. sexual hegemony within these metropolitan areas named by Altman and Sinfield as centers for gay cross-cultural contact, could it be possible that nonmetropolitan models also share certain characteristics cross-culturally? These shared characteristics might be attributed less to capitalist modalities like gay tourism on which the metropolitan model depends and more to the separation of localized sexual economies from the so-called gay global model. In other words, could there be some level of correspondence between a nonmetropolitan sexual system in rural Indonesia and one in rural Nebraska? And could both regions be considered other in relation to the dominant metropolitan model of gay male sexual exchange? In an essay on "gay" men in Indonesia, for example, Tom Boellstorff posits this potential for "someone thousands of miles away (to be) closer than someone next door," and helpfully labels this confluence of distance and similarity "translocal" (Boellstorff 1999, 480). Calling for a "more serious engagement with postcoloniality as a category of analysis" within queer studies, Boellstorff argues that such an engagement "might improve our understanding of sexualities outside the 'West'" (478). But the full deployment of translocal analysis—by which Boellstorff means a way of moving beyond the local/global and sameness/difference binaries that have characterized much of the work on transnational sexualities—would presumably also potentially improve and indeed complicate our understanding of sexualities *within* the "West."

The kinds of sexual communities, identities, and practices that Howard describes in *Men like That*, and that have been depicted and "discovered" in

relation to narrative events like the murder of Brandon Teena, may indeed have less in common with the white gay and lesbian worlds associated with the Castro in San Francisco, West Hollywood in Los Angeles, and Chelsea in New York, and they may share some significant traits with the sexual and gender practices associated with *tombois* in Indonesia and Thailand, *travesti* in Brazil, and *bakla* in the Philippines (Morris 1994; Manalansan 1997; Donham 1998). Like other nonmetropolitan sex/gender systems, U.S. small-town and rural alternative sexual communities may often be characterized by distinct gender roles, active/passive sexual positioning, and passing practices; and like other nonmetropolitan models, they may exist in proximity to, rather than in distinction from, heterosexualities.

In the United States, rural populations are studied more often in relation to class or the formation known as white trash, and only rarely is the plight of the rural poor linked to other subaltern populations around the world. There are of course good reasons for not simply lumping all rural populations into one large subaltern formation: as George Lipsitz has documented, even working-class whites in the United States have a "possessive investment in whiteness" that situates them in often contradictory relations to power and dominant discourses (Lipsitz 1998). In the Midwest, moreover, the history of whiteness is linked to the early-twentieth-century Alien Land Laws, which restricted landownership only to those eligible for citizenship, thereby excluding, for example, Asian immigrants (Lowe 1996). As the federal government waged war on native populations in states like Nebraska, "white" immigrants from Scandinavia and other northern European destinations were encouraged to settle in the Midwest by specific government policies aimed at recruiting "white" settlers (Lieberman 1998; Hietala 2003). White rural populations in the United States, particularly in the Midwest, must in fact be thought about through the racial project of whiteness and the historical construction of working-class "whiteness" as a place of both privilege and oppression. Because of this complex construction, we must avoid either romanticizing rural lives or demonizing them: rural queers in particular may participate in certain orders of bigotry (like racism or political conservatism) while being victimized and punished by others (like homophobia and sexism). If we turn to the case of Brandon's murder, we discover a developing archive for the further consideration of queer rural lives. In the narratives and accounts that have poured out of the tragic murder of a young transgender man and his two friends in rural Nebraska, we find an intricate knot of questions about how Brandon passed; the desire he elicited from local

girls; his relationship to gay, lesbian, and transgender identities; the hate and violence his performance drew from two young white male friends; and the enduring legacy of the whiteness of the heartland.

One account of gay life in the Midwest that records the combination of privilege and oppression that characterizes the lives of the white gay men who live there, can be found in an oral history project called *Farm Boys* (Fellows 2001). In this volume, historian Will Fellows collected the memories and testimonies of a group of midwestern gay men, all of whom grew up on farms in Scandinavian American or German American families. The narratives presented by Fellows in *Farm Boys* were all submitted in response to a questionnaire that he circulated, and so the stories have an unfortunate generic quality that emphasizes the similarities rather than the differences between the life experiences of the men. In this stock format, each man speaks of his relationship with his father and brothers, describes some childhood sexual experiences (many with livestock, for example), and discusses his move from his rural hometown to the city and (sometimes) back again. But despite the repetitive and formulaic nature of these stories, some important features do emerge. Many of the men stress, for instance, the isolation and lack of queer community in rural settings. Their isolation has sometimes led to a lengthy delay in the man's coming-out process, and many take detours through unwanted marriages. Yet the isolation can, on occasion, also allow for an array of gay or queer identities since the men are not modeling themselves on one stereotypical narrative. The emergence of idiosyncratic formulations of sexual identity implies that if certain sex/gender categories are not presented as inevitable, other options may emerge. Howard claims as much in *Men like That*: "What is apparent is that gay identity in Mississippi (surely as elsewhere) existed alongside multiple queer desires that were not identity based or identity forging" (29).

Farm Boys also shows that rural settings and small towns may offer a reduced amount of contact between the queer person and the kinds of medical discourses that have been so influential on the lives of gays, lesbians, and transsexuals in the twentieth century (Terry 1999). Also, in climates where homosexual identity is not forbidden but simply unthinkable, the preadult sexual subject who pursues same-sex eroticism may do so without necessarily assuming that this sexual activity speaks the truth of one's identity. Furthermore, according to the male narrators of *Farm Boys*, same-sex sexual activity for them was not necessarily accompanied by noticeable degrees of effeminacy, and in fact, male effeminacy was actively discouraged within their

communities less as a sign of homosexual tendencies and more because it did not fit with the heavy labor expected of boys in farm families. By the same logic, however, rural women were more likely to be characterized by gender inversion because masculinity in women seems not to have been actively discouraged. A masculine woman, in the context of a farm, is not automatically read as a lesbian; she is simply a hardworking woman who can take care of herself and her farm. Farm masculinities for men and women, then, result in an asymmetrical development of gay and lesbian identities in terms of their relations to gender-inversion models of sexual identity.

Many of the men in *Farm Boys* disassociated themselves from the metropolitan gay worlds that they discovered once they left their rural and small-town homes. Some were puzzled and disturbed by gay effeminacy in the cities, and others were annoyed by the equation of gay with "activist." This desire to have a sexual practice separate from an overt ideological critique of the state or heteronormativity can be taken as one legacy of the history of whiteness that marks the communities the gay rural men left behind. Fellows makes no comment on the often reactionary political sentiments of these white gay men and his remarks focus instead on the importance of pluralistic accounts of gay life. As an oral historian, furthermore, who has actively solicited and shaped the responses of his informants, Fellows has left himself little room for critical commentary. His project points to the difficulties involved in taking account of rural gay lives, but it also charts the contradictory nature of rural queers who have been omitted from dominant accounts of queer life and yet must not be represented as a subaltern population.

As Fellows's volume argues, it is not always easy to fathom the contours of queer life in rural settings because, particularly in the case of gay men, queers from rural settings are not well represented in the literature that has been so much a hallmark of twentieth-century gay identity. Gay men and lesbians from rural settings tend not to be artists and writers in such great numbers, and so most of the coming-out stories that we read are written by people from cities or suburbs. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work has shown in compelling detail, the history of twentieth-century literature in an Anglo-American context has been indelibly marked and influenced by the contributions of white gay men; consequently, literature has been a powerful vehicle for the production and consolidation of gay identity (Sedgwick 1986, 1990). But again, little of this literature has anything at all to say about rural life, and most of it ties homosexual encounters to the rhythms of the city. Just a quick glance at some of the most influential high-culture texts of queer urban life

would reveal gay guidebooks to Oscar Wilde's London, Jean Genet's Paris, Christopher Isherwood's Berlin, E. M Forster's Florence, Thomas Mann's Venice, Edmund White's New York, John Rechy's Los Angeles, Allen Ginsberg's San Francisco, and so on. Canonized literary production by Euro-American lesbian writers like Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, Jeanette Winterson, and Gertrude Stein similarly focuses, although less obsessively, on urban locations like Paris, London, and New York. But in queer writing by women, we do find some of the themes that we might also expect to see in accounts of rural queer life like stories of isolation and numerous passing narratives.

While fictional narratives of queer rural life are quite hard to find, some ethnographic work and oral histories did emerge in the 1990s. Howard's *Men like That* is an exemplary and unique history and ethnographic survey of the sexual practices and social mores of men who have sex with men in southern Mississippi. His book examines "sexual and gender nonconformity, specifically male homosexualities and male-to-female transgender sexualities in Mississippi from 1945–1985" (Howard 1999, xiv). Arguing that men "like that" in the rural South in the 1950s were "largely homebound, living in familial households," Howard shows that these men did travel nonetheless, but most did not migrate to big cities; instead, "queer movement consisted of circulation rather than congregation" (xiv). Most queers, he claims, found partners within their immediate vicinity, and in the 1950s, these men were able to escape state surveillance of their illicit activities and their queer sexual practices went undetected. By the supposedly liberal 1960s, however, a new discourse of perversion allowed for the large-scale harassment and arrest of large numbers of queer men. What Howard's book perhaps does not emphasize enough is the impunity from legal and moral scrutiny in Mississippi that was extended specifically to white men while the sexual activities of black men (gay or straight) were constantly watched by fretful white citizens. In fact, it is not *so* surprising that white patriarchs during the same period were able to have sex with boys, black men, and each other without incurring any kind of comment. Howard's book also has little to say about female sexual practices in rural areas, and we are left to wonder whether the histories of men like that can tell us anything at all about the women who were also homebound and yet had no opportunities for congregation or circulation.

While Brandon fits only nominally into the category of "woman" and while his complex story cannot at all be called "lesbian," Brandon's choices do give us some insight into what kinds of options may exist for cross-identified, female-born transgender people in rural settings. Many urban gays, lesbians, and transgender people responded to the murder of Brandon with a "what do you expect" attitude, as if brutality was an inevitable consequence of trying to pull off such a risky endeavor as passing for male in some godforsaken place. But what such a response ignores is the fact that Brandon had been passing for male with only mixed success in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, since his early teenage years; indeed, it was only when he left the city and made a reverse migration to the small town of Falls City that he really pulled off a credible presentation as male. Obviously, the small town can accommodate some performances even as it is a dangerous place for others—for example, an exhibition of normative masculinity in a transgender man may go unnoticed while an overt and public demonstration of nonnormative gendering may be severely and frequently punished. Urban responses to Brandon's decisions also misunderstand completely the appeal of the small town to certain subjects. Like Sylvie Hess, the West Virginian in Stewart's ethnography who remembers the loss of a favorite animal and the beauty of the place of its death side by side, the rural queer may be attracted to the small town for precisely those reasons that make it seem uninhabitable to the urban queer.

Brandon clearly knew what was possible in Falls City, Nebraska, and he seemed to know what limits might be imposed on his passing performance. He moved to Falls City not in order to be a stranger with no history but because he had friends there. As Angelia R. Wilson observes in an essay about "Gay and Lesbian Life in Rural America": "Unknown outsiders are never welcomed in small towns." And she continues: "The key to survival in a rural community is interdependence" (Wilson 2000, 208). Brandon quite quickly developed a friendship network in Falls City, which included both his girlfriends and his killers, but he seemed to take a certain comfort in being known and in knowing everyone in town. By moving to a small town and setting up life as a young man, moreover, Brandon was operating within the long tradition of passing women in rural areas of North America that has been documented by historian Lisa Duggan among others.[10] Wilson mentions at least one such narrative in her essay involving an "African American woman who lived as a man for 15 years" in Mississippi in the 1940s and 1950s. Jim McHarris/Annie Lee Grant lived in a small town called Kosciusko, working and dating women, and was only discovered when he was arrested by the local police for a traffic violation. After that, Jim left town and began his life as a man elsewhere. The story was reported in *Ebony* in 1954.[11] And

there are many more. While gender codes may be somewhat more flexible in urban settings, this also means that people become more astute in urban contexts at reading gender. In the context of a small town where there are strict codes of normativity, there is also a greater potential for subverting the codes surreptitiously.

The Brandon story brings to light at least three historiographical problems related to the topic of studying queer rural life. First, this narrative reveals how difficult transgender history has been to write in general, but also how there may be specific dimensions of transgender identity that are particular to a rural setting. Given that many gay, lesbian, and transgender people who grow up and live in small rural areas may not identify at all with these labels, the rural context allows for a different array of acts, practices, performances, and identifications. Second, the Brandon story suggests that too often minority history hinges on representative examples provided by the lives of a few extraordinary individuals. And so in relation to the complicated matrix of rural queer lives, we tend to rely on the story of a Brandon Teena or a Matthew Shepard rather than finding out about the queer people who live quietly, if not comfortably, in isolated areas or small towns all across North America. The "representative individual" model of minority history, furthermore, grows out of the particular tendency in Western culture to think about sexuality in terms of, as Foucault describes it, "the implantation of perversions," which in turn surface as identities (Foucault 1980). The history of sexuality in a Euro-American context has therefore traced the medical and legal histories of the formation of identities like "homosexual," "lesbian," "transsexual," and "heterosexual." While Foucauldian histories have been careful to depict the sexological production of identities over space and time, still much critical attention focuses on the individual, the formation and transformations of self, the psychology of desire, the drama of pathology and pathologization, the emergence of types, and even the biographies of famous representative individuals (like Radclyffe Hall, Oscar Wilde, and so on). Less time, as George Chauncey has pointed out, has been spent on considering the developments of queer communities, and the negotiations of desire and identity within communities that may be unified or disunified by other modes of identification (Chauncey 1989). Even less time has been spent in consideration of those subjects who remain outside the ambit of the medical and psychological productions of identity, and the reverse discourses that greet and shape their use. Precisely because queer history has been so preoccupied with individuals, it has been harder to talk about class and race, and

it has seemed much more relevant to discuss gender variance and sexual practices. All too often, community models are offered only as a generalized model of many individuals rather than as a complex interactive model of space, embodiment, locality, and desire. The Brandon archive, then, needs to be read less in terms of the history of one extraordinary person, and more in terms of the constructions of community and self that it brings to light.

The third and final historiographical problem in relation to this case has to do with the stakes of authenticity. What is real? What is narrative? As I argue in chapter 6 in relation to Austin Powers and drag king subcultures, queer genders profoundly disturb the order of relations between the authentic and the inauthentic, the original and the mimic, the real and the constructed. And as we will see in the next chapter in relation to transgender biographies, there are no true accounts of "passing lives" but only fictions, and the whole story turns on the production of counterfeit realities that are so convincing that they replace and subsume the real. This case itself hinges on the production of a "counterfeit" masculinity that even though it depends on deceit and illegality, turns out to be more compelling, seductive, and convincing than the so-called real masculinities with which it competes.

Future Histories

Ultimately, the Brandon archive is not simply the true story of a young queer misfit in rural North America. It is also a necessarily incomplete and ever expanding record of how we select our heroes as well as how we commemorate our dead. James Baldwin, in his account of the 1979 Atlanta murders of black children, calls our attention to the function of streamlining in the awful vicinity of violent erasure. In *The Evidence of Things Not Seen,* Baldwin writes: "The cowardice of this time and place—this era—is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the perpetual attempt to make the public and social disaster the result, or the issue of a single demented creature, or, perhaps, half a dozen such creatures, who have, quite incomprehensibly, gone off their rockers and must be murdered and locked up" (Baldwin 1995, 72). The desire, in other words, the desperate desire, to attribute hate crimes to crazy individuals and to point to the U.S. justice system as the remedy for unusual disturbances to the social order of things must be resisted in favor of political accounts of crime and punishment. In the end, we are not simply celebrating a Brandon Teena and denouncing a John Lotter or Thomas Nissen, nor should we be seeing love as the redemptive outcome to a tale of hate; the

real work of collecting the stories of a Brandon Teena, a Billy Tipton, or a Matthew Shepard must be to create an archive capable of providing a record of the complex interactions of race, class, gender, and sexuality that result in murder, but whose origins lie in state-authorized formations of racism, homophobia, and poverty. Justice in the end lies in the unraveling of the crime not simply in its solution, and when we cease to unravel we become collaborators. "The author of a crime," notes Baldwin, "is what he is . . . but he who collaborates is doomed forever in that unimaginable and yet very common condition which we weakly call hell" (125). The stories we collect in the Brandon archive should stretch far beyond the usual tales of love and hate and the various narratives of accommodation; this archive lends us precisely the kind of evidence for things not seen that Baldwin sought, and in the end, if we read it right, it may tell us a different story about late-twentieth-century desire, race, and geography. With careful organization now, this archive may also become an important resource later for future queer historians who want to interpret the lives we have lived from the few records we have left behind.

3

Unlosing Brandon

Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography

> What is remembering? Remembering brings the absent into the present, connects what is lost to what is here. Remembering draws attention to lostness and is made possible by emotions of space that open backward into a void. Memory depends upon void, as void depends upon memory, to think it. Once void is thought, it can be canceled. Once memory is thought, it can be commodified.
>
> —Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*

The act of remembering, says poet and essayist Anne Carson, "connects what is lost to what is here." And to be unlost is to exist in that space between retrieval and obliteration where erasure waits on one side and something well short of salvation waits on the other side. In many ways, Brandon exists among the unlost; he is actively remembered by people who never knew him, and he is endlessly memorialized as a symbol for the lives that have passed unnoticed and the deaths that have gone unrecorded. When we "remember" Brandon, what do we remember, who do we remember, and why do we invest so much hope in the remembering of an individual who would have appeared unremarkable and possibly unsympathetic had most of his mourners met him today? By calling the legacy of Brandon an "archive," as I did in my last chapter, I draw attention to the material and phantasmatic investments in this figure who stands enigmatically for a generation or community of the lost, and I show how the act of remembering Brandon constitutes an act of mourning for a life unlived, a potential unrealized, and an identity unformed. In *Economy of the Unlost,* Carson comments: "Once void is thought, it can be canceled. Once memory is thought, it can be commodified." In this chapter, I will trace the commodification of memory by biographers of transgender subjects. If some memories are motivated by an idealizing and sentimental desire to elevate these characters to iconic states,