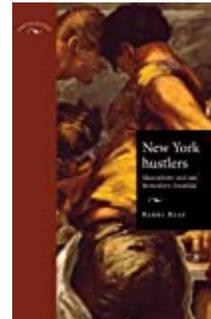




Barry Reay. *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America.* Encounters: Cultural Histories Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. xiv + 279 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8007-4; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-8008-1.



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Hustling the Historian

One of the most enduring legacies of the lesbian and gay rights movement in the twentieth century has been the attempt to craft a unifying history of same-sex desire; to graft onto a multiplicity of sexual practices a single sexual identity; to, in essence, create a great gay *we* that is historically self-conscious and politically forward thinking. To be sure, poststructuralists, *Queer Nation*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have all shown that such an attempt tends to be, if anything, an exercise in exclusivity where *we* are more often than not white, male, affluent, and urban.

Yet over two decades since the publication of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), in the midst of a decade-and-a-half-long stretch of historical research that has revealed queer desire on the rural roadsides of Mississippi and in the suburban cul-de-sacs of Southern California (those places *we* were not supposed to be), and that has given voice to femmes and fairies alike (the people *we* were not supposed to be), Barry Reay presents a new voice in a familiar place: the male *hustlers* and *trade* of mid-century New York City. Hypermascu-

line and ostensibly heterosexual, in uniform and in for same-sex sex, these men traversed both the fictional and nonfictional sexual geography of Gotham: from Times Square to Coney Island, from the novels of John Rechy to paintings of Paul Cadmus.

For Reay, these men offer another opportunity to reveal the rich continuities of taxonomies missed by a tendency to categorize all same-sex sexuality activity as *gay*—to, in other words, continue the sustained attack on the great *gay we* of twentieth-century lesbian and gay America and, in the process, challenge our notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality (p. 17). This is not a recent turn in the history of homosexuality (p. 14). Rather, it is a distinct theoretical shift in historical accounts of same-sex desire that, at present, requires further elaboration and refinement in the light of new historical evidence and scholarly research. In short, Reay's *New York Hustlers* speaks to an important debate within the history of homosexuality—if not a recent turn then definitely a turning point.

How does Reay and *New York Hustlers* stack up in this regard? Reay offers an impressive amount of new and underappreciated historical evidence on the male hustler in mid-century New York that goes far in ensuring that the recent turn toward a multifaceted history of same-sex desire is maintained. Indeed, Reay's detailed analysis of the Thomas Painter archives is, at times, exemplary. A close informant of Alfred Kinsey and a detailed devotee of New York's hustler scene, Painter's collection of photographs, correspondence, and pseudo-scientific observations offers a wonderful insight into the life of the male hustler as well as the lives of those who sought their companionship. In conjunction with court records and cultural ephemera, Reay is able to paint a detailed picture of the male hustler, a noteworthy component of his work in and of itself. The New York hustler was both homosexual object-choice and heterosexual subject par excellence; he moved between illicit same-sex activity and illegitimate society in a manner that destabilized the gay world-making ethos of lesbian and gay apologists and, I presume, distressed the heteronormative stakeholders of postwar America.

In addition, Reay's detailed primary sources reveal two important elements that characterize the mid-century male hustler: money and masculinity. While the structural logic of *New York Hustlers* is rather difficult to comprehend (Reay would have done well to eschew his five-page laundry list of the hustler in American culture for an introduction that summarized main arguments and chapter outlines), the role of capital in the lives of the New York hustler is not. Throughout the monograph, Reay presents a fascinating connection between prostitution, homosexuality, and profit that, in many ways, offers an unintentional history of situational homosexuality. It is the sort of "gay for pay" narrative that could potentially move cultural materialism in a whole new di-

rection.

At the same time, Reay's research uncovers a recurring reassertion of masculinity within the lives of hustlers and within the sexual proclivities of the hustled. In the words of one fictional hustler, quoted by Reay, "HUSTLERS ARE NOT QUEER" (p. 171). Indeed, the hustler defined and was defined by an aversion to effeminacy that was increasingly reinforced by the burgeoning lesbian and gay rights movement from the 1950s onward. Again, this is the sort of historical evidence that could potentially reinvigorate present-day debates within feminist circles over the impact of gendered practice on the sexual taxonomies of postwar America.

But Reay does not seem very interested in addressing these sorts of theoretical issues, even if his research practically begs for it. As Matt Cook puts it in his backcover blandishment for *New York Hustlers*, "Reay wears his theoretical knowledge and expertise lightly." Reay does so at his peril. What about the implications of the hustler for cultural historians, for those interested in the manner by which ethnicity or class affected the sexual availability of men in New York City? What about the implications of the hustler for historians of the built environment, for those interested in the spatial stories being told by the hustler's movements through the public places, parks, and prisons of New York? In light of all this wonderful primary material, so what?

In all fairness, Reay leaves the door open for researchers interested in the theoretical or political effects that the character of the hustler might have on the history of sexuality. His thorough analysis of the Thomas Painter archives gives those not able to nip over to Indiana a privileged look into the possibilities that such material might hold. In this regard, *New York Hustlers* is worth a trip to the library.

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