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Queering the Countryside

New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies

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A Classroom in the Barnyard

Reproducing Heterosexuality in Interwar American 4-H

GABRIEL N. ROSENBERG

In June of 1934, Oliver Edwin Baker, a senior economist at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), told 4-H leaders that the nation faced a dire crisis of reproduction. Less than two years before, the eminent economic geographer offered similar warnings to the American Association of Geographers in his presidential address: "A nation must protect and preserve the children. . . . If conditions become unfavorable to the reproduction of the race, the first objective of national policy . . . should be to restore the favorable conditions."¹ Speaking to the adult chaperones of hundreds of rural youth who had traveled to Washington, D.C., for the National 4-H Camp, Baker emphasized the role of 4-H members in preventing this crisis of "reproduction" by starting their own healthy farm families. In 1934, nearly one million youth enrolled in the voluntary 4-H clubs organized by the USDA. Recognizing the popularity of the program, Baker told the assembled leaders that they could help "restor[e] . . . the family as the fundamental institution of society." Baker believed 4-H kept rural youth on farms to rear another generation of Americans in the moral, fertile embrace of the countryside. Throughout the 1930s, Baker peppered 4-H with speeches, pamphlets, and essays about his vision of an agrarian America reinvigorated by the reproductive labor of rural youth.²

This essay examines the effort of the American state to govern rural bodies, family life, and "heterosexual relations" in the countryside through a diffuse and sprawling network of 4-H clubs. These clubs originated in turn-of-the-century efforts to make American agriculture more rational, profitable, and efficient. Apostles of scientific agriculture targeted rural youth through clubs, contests, and home demonstrations,

promising to improve participants' four Hs: head, heart, hands, and health. Youth-oriented methods enrolled local volunteers, bypassed critics, and provided a nonthreatening image for technocratic expertise. On the strength of this system of agricultural extension, Congress created a permanent appropriation for the USDA's Cooperative Extension Service (CES) in 1914. By the 1920s, 4-H clubs circulated the USDA's preferred technical methods and created robust alliances of technocratic expertise, private capital, and local voluntary labor throughout the United States.

Although the early 4-H program was narrowly concerned with the technical details of commercially profitable agriculture, its purview soon came to encompass the bodies and psychologies of its youthful charges. The focus of 4-H broadened from the efficient production of commodities, to the cultivation of reliable agricultural laborers, and, finally, to the stabilization of cultural norms of gender, race, and sexuality. By the 1930s, 4-H health programs pushed rural youth to produce healthy bodies capable of laboring and reproducing for the nation and positioned technocratic authority at the center of rural family life and social reproduction. 4-H material asserted that the economic and biological union between a revenue-producing male "farmer" and a nurturing "farmer's wife" constituted both the ideal and normal form of organization for rural life. In rural communities, popular media, and on the floor of Congress, the USDA and advocates of club work advertised the virtues of federal planning by using images of wholesome, white 4-H'ers conducting gender-appropriate labor on family farms.³

What, then, should we make of O. E. Baker's striking vision for 4-H as a reproductive prosthesis for a barren nation? Although Baker rehearsed clichés of nostalgic agrarianism, his vision of fecund 4-H'ers populating the future sheds light on the broader ambitions of the New Deal state. Historians note the profound transformation of American governance during the interwar period, which was marked by expanded social welfare spending, taxation, and economic regulatory capacity, but they often limit their analyses to the federal state's formal abilities to demand and force compliance from its regulatory objects. However, this period also witnessed a fundamental rearrangement of the American state's relationship to the body, which proceeded through the state's efforts to define the boundaries of normal sexuality, families, and reproduction. Historian Margot Canaday forcefully argues that the early twentieth-

century federal government observed and policed sexual identities in military, immigration, and welfare institutions and laid the foundation for pervasive institutional heteronormativity after World War II.⁴ This delimiting of homosexuality in the organs of the state accompanied federal efforts to promote heterosexuality and pronatalism.⁵ As an ideology celebrating procreation and healthy reproduction, pronatalism held that the personal and collective management of life was a paramount objective of the American state, and, thus, ample justification for Baker's reproductive prosthesis.

Baker's speech, and the history of interwar 4-H, confirms Canaday's suggestion that historians of the state and historians of sexuality would benefit from an extended dialogue. Just as historians of the state must pay closer attention to how sexuality has constrained, rerouted, and produced state power, historians of sexuality must also consider how statist technocracy shaped modern sexual identities. But such a call for complementarity begs a thornier question: *Where* is the state and *where* is sexuality in this historical inquiry? Scholars of American political development, the American West, and environmental history document that, despite their alleged geographical marginality, nonmetropolitan spaces have been central to the story of American state-building through rural focused agencies like the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, water-resource and massive infrastructure projects, and the federally overseen genocide of indigenous populations.⁶ Historian William Novak contends that a "bottom-up" history of a sprawling state at the "peripheries" of the American polity is essential to understanding the putatively democratic governance America now exports.⁷ Novak suggests that the history of global neoliberal governance runs through the American hinterlands. As Michel Foucault and his interlocutors demonstrate, such governance depends on the biopolitical management of life, often through the "self regulating capacities of subjects" and heuristics of "normal" families, bodies, and sexuality.⁸ If historians know something about state-building and political economy outside cities, they still know little about the American state's efforts to produce and regulate sexuality in the countryside.

The difficulty in locating a biopolitical state in nonmetropolitan American has only been intensified by disciplinary silence around histories of rural sexuality. However, as this volume demonstrates, recent

scholarship questions the division between urban sexualities and an enveloping field of normal heterosexuality by showing, for example, how queer life thrived outside of cities. My own complementary strategy is to question the stability and permanence of rural heterosexuality. I argue that the history of heterosexuality is linked to the biopolitical ambitions of the American state in these seemingly peripheral and remote spaces. The contemporary circulation of the "family farm" as an aspirational ideal foregrounds how such ambitions have permanently shaped understandings of sexual normalcy in both town and country. Given the term's lack of cultural salience prior to the 1930s, its promiscuous deployment by contemporary food activists, among others, signals the internalization of the USDA's pronatalist and eugenic ideal. Heterosexuality's *national* articulation and normalization were inseparable from the particular logistics of governing life, love, and desire in the countryside.

The history of 4-H illustrates that larger process. In the 1920s, 4-H clubs created relationships among state authorities, medical professionals, and rural bodies through health programs that popularized federal authority in rural America through the image of wholesome and attractive country youth. In the following decade, club organizers parlayed that reputation into pronatalist schemes to pair and mate "perfect specimens." Club experts attempted to train rural youth for marriage and "heterosexual relations," to contrive rural heterosexual romance, and to educate rural youth about the sexual nature and function of their bodies. This effort circulated and ultimately normalized heterosexuality as a foundation of an idealized rural life. On 4-H's family farm, the hand of the state groomed young rural people for their sexual potential, just as 4-H boys groomed their prized sows. 4-H's commitment to breeding the best met the biopolitical logistical challenges posed by the emergence of positive eugenics and pronatalism in interwar America.

Building Biopolitical Capacity in the Countryside

Early twentieth-century American culture abounded with intertwined nostalgic agrarianism and narratives of rural decline. On the one hand, nostalgic agrarianism held that country living was intrinsically superior to urban living. The narrative of rural decline, on the other hand, took nostalgic agrarianism's mythical rural past as the counterpoint to a

debased and deteriorating rural present. Very real rural poverty existed, but rural progressives lacquered that truth with generous applications of moralism and class condescension, frequently eliding the economic and racial inequalities that drove rural suffering. This tendency was especially apparent in elite discussions of rural health. Agricultural progressives tended to ignore the role of resource disparity in discussions of rural health and focused almost exclusively on the role that ignorance played in generating rural squalor and blight. Reformers announced that rural people needed to obey medical professionals and public health authorities.

By the 1920s, the 4-H network joined this cause and parlayed access to rural youth into health improvement programs in rural communities. These programs featured local health examinations, sustained health education, and county and statewide health contests, creating new connections between medical professionals, extension officials, and rural people. Gertrude Warren, a senior girls' club specialist at the USDA, urged county extension and home economics agents to concentrate on health promotion work in 4-H. "In conferences, talks in public, and in publicity articles, emphasize ways in which the health of club members is being looked after through club works," Warren wrote in a manual on girls' club work in 1925. 4-H promoted good health by "tak[ing] farm girls out of the field [and] into the home," teaching them how "to keep health score cards," and enrolling them in "health club contests."⁹ In 4-H health contests, doctors and nurses examined club members at county and state fairs, judged them according to a standardized score card, deducted points for defects, and, ultimately, selected a winning boy and girl as perfect "specimens."¹⁰ By 1925, building on existing rural enthusiasm for similar "beauty" contests for babies, women, and livestock, health contests had already emerged as one the most highly publicized components of the entire 4-H program, receiving constant plaudits in newspapers for producing the "perfect boy and girl," as a headline in the *Washington Post* put it.¹¹

Iowa 4-H offered one of the earliest templates for a comprehensive health program built around competitive health contests. In 1921, extension officials devised the idea of a state-wide 4-H health contest to promote better health practices and bring publicity to the extension service's rural health initiatives. County 4-H health champions assembled

in Des Moines and received examinations from doctors affiliated with the Polk County Medical Association, which also provided a standard score card for the contest's use. In its inaugural year, boys and girls from half of Iowa's counties vied for the health state championship. In 1922, seven Iowa counties used the standard score card and formal medical examinations to determine which 4-H'ers should be submitted to the state competition. By 1930, ninety-two counties reported doing so, examining over 4,400 Iowa girls in the process.¹²

The effectiveness of Iowa's 4-H health program hinged on the score card—a device that permitted both medical professionals and club members to scrutinize bodies and quantify their copious "defects." The Iowa score card was composed of over seventy particular metrics, covering categories as diverse as the flushness of the lips, the symmetry of "sex characteristics," the shape and position of ears, and the quality of posture. Score cards covered health dimensions influenced by habit and behavior, but also evaluated "birth marks," flat feet, an "abnormally shape[d]" skull, and the "general impressions" of physical attractiveness.¹³ Contests recognized both winners and members who had improved their scores over the course of successive examinations. This ensured that all participants, even those who were initially infirm or sickly, had motivation to have "some defects corrected [and] bring up her standing for next year."¹⁴ Examinations enabled medical authorities to quantify both the defects and potentials of 4-H bodies, and they generated valuable bodily knowledge that could be mustered into personal or cooperative health activities executed over the course of months. The overwhelming majority of participants in 4-H health programs were female (often as high as 90 percent). Examinations made female bodies the subject of intense and invasive scrutiny, usually by male medical professionals.

Examinations provided an entrée for intensive "follow-up" work on the part of girls, agents, and medical professionals. In Webster County, for example, girls received two examinations over the course of the year. The first examination identified "any bodily defect" and prescribed improved "healthy habits." When girls were "scored down" for poor posture and skin, a local doctor lectured them about "physiology and hygiene." Based on the doctor's recommendations, the girls scored themselves at home for twelve consecutive weeks and then received a second ex-

amination to chart progress.¹⁵ After using a similar “follow-up” system, an agent in Hancock County lauded the results. Thanks to health talks from medical professionals, club girls “looked much better than they did last spring.”¹⁶ With adequate follow-up work by medical experts and extension agents, rural youth would execute their own private plans for personal health improvement.

Given Iowa’s results, similar 4-H health programs appeared in other states. Within a year, the Iowa program had inspired identical health competitions for club members at major livestock expositions in Sioux City and Chicago. The latter competition was rebranded as the National 4-H Health Competition in 1922.¹⁷ An American Medical Association survey in 1931 reported that 40 percent of all responding medical associations cooperated with 4-H to conduct medical examinations that qualified members for the national competition.¹⁸ By 1930, more than 100,000 U.S. youth were annually enrolled in 4-H health projects and examinations.¹⁹

Distressed by the paucity of boys in 4-H health programs, USDA specialists devised a health curriculum suitable for boys’ agricultural clubs. As home economics specialists, the women who led girls’ clubs had often studied human anatomy and health. But most county agents and male leaders lacked any training in *human* physiology and health, explained Miriam Birdseye, a USDA nutrition specialist.²⁰ Birdseye encouraged male agricultural agents to use their knowledge of animal and plant biology and recommended that, when speaking to boys in the context of a dairy or livestock club, club leaders and agricultural agents “us[e] a well-developed club boy, and show how these points parallel the points used in stock judging. . . . Mention parallels between the food-habits score card used by club members and good practices in feeding the kind of livestock raised by the club.”²¹ Birdseye suggested that club agents organize a course for club boys to show them that they were subject to “the same laws that govern the growth and development of other living creatures” and should accept their personal “responsibility” for “the improvement of the race.”²² At a 1929 extension conference, Birdseye demonstrated her methods to an audience of agricultural agents. Birdseye presented a fine calf and “pointed out its many signs of good health.” Then, “as the calf was led away, its place was taken by three boys, 10, 12, and 14 years of age, dressed in track pants, with legs, feet, and

torso bare.” Birdseye scrutinized the boys’ physiques in parallel fashion. Though the boys were preselected to display only peak fitness, they demonstrated the “different types of build and coloring” found among white adolescents.²³

The equation of healthy rural youth with well-bred livestock fit seamlessly into the broader popular celebrations of 4-H health champions as the “healthy specimens” of a wholesome, gender-appropriate middle-class white rural lifestyle.²⁴ 4-H health competitions, more than any other aspect of the 4-H program, received coverage in local, regional, and even national newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.²⁵ Newspaper accounts frequently referred to the youth as attractive and fit and provided photographic evidence with the articles. An account of the 1928 National 4-H Health Competition, for example, lauded champion Thelma Svarstad of South Dakota for her “blond, clear skinned” appearance, while the *Times* of Alden, Iowa, celebrated Tennessee’s Marguerite Martin as the “ideal of perfect health.”²⁶ These media accounts also emphasized that this attractiveness was a natural outcome of a wholesome, gendered rural lifestyle. For boys, this meant a robust physique gained from helping out on the farm, playing on athletic teams, or hiking in the woods. For girls, it meant no makeup, helping mother in the kitchen, and getting beauty sleep. Florence Smock of Florida, the 1929 National 4-H Health Champion, “use[d] no rouge nor lipstick but ha[d] rosy cheeks” and, despite going on a “few dates,” was always in bed by nine o’clock. Harold Deatline, the champion on the “masculine side,” had “broad shoulders and [was] strong muscled because of ‘plenty of good, hard work’ on his father’s farm.” Deatline sternly reported that he did not “care for dancing or ‘gadding about.’ For recreation he [went] hunting and fishing sometimes.”²⁷

Newspapers focused on winners, but ignored the “defective” contest losers and the tens of thousands of non-white 4-H’ers systematically excluded from competing. Throughout the South, African American extension services prioritized rural health programs. Nearly 20 percent of all 4-H’ers in the South were African American, and they also regularly received lessons on hygiene and health from black county agents. In places like Arizona, the extension service considered health promotion an important component of work with “Mexican” and “Indian” girls.

And, yet, the National 4-H Congress permitted only white 4-H'ers to compete.²⁸ Nor did media accounts rhapsodize about "perfect" non-white bodies. Media descriptions conflated whiteness and attractiveness when lauding the pristine skin and hair of winners. The publicity associated with 4-H health competitions circulated the ideal 4-H body as white and, simultaneously, suggested that state experts, in cooperation with a well-ordered farm home, could produce this perfected white body.

Even as club work created relationships among rural Americans and medical professionals, it also advertised directly to rural America the benefits provided by extension services. By circulating the image of perfected white youth, 4-H could convince rural America that county agents could be trusted with the most sensitive of activities. And by producing healthy rural youth, the extension service promised to protect them from the physically degrading elements of farm life and to shelter them from the sexual depravity of the city. As the 1920s came to a close and the countryside sank deeper into economic depression, club organizers recognized that 4-H's reputation for producing wholesome, healthy youth could be used to bolster the nation's reproductive future.

From Farm Bodies to Farm Populations: Pronatalism in 1930s 4-H

The tumult of the Great Depression and the ensuing expansion of federal visibility in rural America reshaped how federal authorities conceptualized rural youth. USDA demographers reported that the national birthrate was dropping precipitously, buttressed only by a high rural birthrate. Given that reality, the USDA believed farms had a crucial new role to play in the future: rural-reared people had always been the nation's best, but now they would once again be the nation's most plentiful. New Deal employment and conservation programs could capture youthful passion and energy, but the source of discontent for many youth was as much emotional as it was economic. As Gertrude Warren explained, foreign youth movements exploited the violent, unpredictable behavior of youth driven by disintegrating home life and eroding opportunities for marriage. Over the 1930s, 4-H organizers focused on how they could train rural youth for healthy, wholesome marriages and

"heterosexual relations"—training that required 4-H members to cultivate pleasing selves and 4-H leaders to cultivate wholesome club spaces conducive to heterosexual romance. By the end of the decade, 4-H educated its members about family, sex, and marriage, transforming clubs into sexual education classrooms.

Because of a declining birthrate, the extension service assumed the responsibility of maintaining both the rural birth rate and a supply of rural youth reared in wholesome farm families. USDA rural sociologist Robert Foster told the 1931 National 4-H Camp that the institution of the family ensured "the reproduction of the race" and was "the best means of securing a satisfactory social control of reproduction." Family life, however, was threatened by recent events. The urban divorce rate was "too high." Nevertheless, "most problems of marriage and family life [were] remediable thru education and training" that 4-H could provide to rural youth.²⁹ Reflecting on the "general decline in the birth rate," Gertrude Warren agreed that early family education and training were vital.³⁰ Warren urged extension workers to use club work to fortify the "important institution" of the rural home. Only with a healthy home life and strong family relationships would rural youth be able to resist the temptations of city living. CES Chief Clarence Smith noted that the demographic trends meant a monumental "responsibility" was "thus placed on the farm family," as well as "on the 4-H clubs" and the various institutions dedicated to strengthening the farm family.³¹

4-H could help rural youth meet this "responsibility" by directing inchoate sexual impulses towards a managed heterosexuality. Club experts presented the "human mating season" of adolescence as a cluster of impulses that were exclusively opposite-sex oriented and procreative.³² Gertrude Warren called it an "instinctive desire," while agricultural economist Eugene Merritt pointed out that "all creatures . . . feel a drive or urge to . . . seek someone of the opposite sex . . . and establish a new home or nest."³³ Ensuring that this nascent urge resulted in healthy reproductive outcomes required careful attention on the part of club leaders and organizers. Dr. Hedley Dimock, a prominent educational theorist, told the 1935 National 4-H Congress that mixed-sex activities in 4-H clubs performed the vital service of socializing healthy "heterosexual relations." Homosociality "tragically" ensured sexual maturation would take place only "in a vacuum" that left boys too aggressive and

girls unprepared to restrain them. Rampant promiscuity might ensue. Under the watchful eye of the county agent or local volunteer at a 4-H picnic, dance, or meeting, rural youth could be escorted into productive heterosexuality.³⁴

4-H camp emerged as an important arena for heterosexual socialization. Away from parents and surrounded by new friends, in settings that emphasized leisure and socialization, 4-H youth had ample opportunities for flings and romances. One camper reported that the Minnesota 4-H Conservation Camp educated attendees about ecology and heterosexual romance by integrating courtship into nearly all of the camp's ceremonies and rituals. Camp organizers paired boys and girls and had them "march" as "partners from the assembly to the banquet," and for a candle-lighting ceremony at the headwaters of the Mississippi, camp organizers directed each boy to invite a girl to accompany him. "Emphasis again was placed on companionship," explained the camper.³⁵ Into the early 1940s, Arizona 4-H'ers joked about romantic camp dalliances in the pages of a publication titled the *News*.³⁶ "Who's the handsome guy, Charlotte? Couldn't be E.M., could it?" wrote Dorothy Ingle and Tommy Patterson from Cochise County about a budding couple. "Ruth C., can you tell us where tall, dark, and handsome is this year? We hope you haven't been too lonesome!!!" mused Nadene Bishop of Maricopa County, referring to Ruth C.'s past camp romance.³⁷ References like these confirmed that relationships often blossomed at camp, frequently with the encouragement of camp organizers.

Organizers strived to make other components of 4-H programs as amenable to heterosexual romance. Gertrude Warren approvingly reported that a number of state extension services were organizing mixed-sex events that could offer the "opportunity for [club girls] to meet fine, manly young men."³⁸ By 1936, many states attempted to comply with these recommendations. Elda Jane Barker, a home demonstration agent from Allegheny, New York, described a joint event her girls club held with a livestock club. It began with "meat-cutting" and "canning" demonstrations. Then the girls prepared a banquet for the boys, after which all attendees "adjourned to the Wee Blue Inn for a dancing party." G. W. Litton, an agricultural agent in Tazewell County, Virginia, described how he had ensnared local youth with "the '3 p's' . . . pretty, personality, and parties. Young people are interested in things that pertain to

themselves and to the opposite sex."³⁹ Litton's comments indicated that 4-H could serve rural youth both by providing them with opportunities to meet prospective romantic partners and by helping them to develop personalities and bodies pleasing to the opposite sex.

Club material asserted that cultivating a pleasing self was hard work, but was necessary for long-term heterosexual fulfillment. West Virginia State girls' club agent Hallie Hughes, for example, described this labor of "self management" at the 1931 National 4-H Camp: "The individual self must be studied, analyzed and trained. . . . Self management must be practiced."⁴⁰ At the same camp, Robert Foster linked self-cultivation to the ability to attract a mate and to long-term marital success. Foster suggested that good social graces and the maintenance of "personal appearance" allowed couples to amicably share domestic space. Because 4-H could help rural youth develop self-control and a pleasing personality, it was similarly well situated to foster these healthy family relationships.⁴¹

Foster's approach laid a conceptual foundation for much of the "family work" done by 4-H clubs over the course of the 1930s. Gertrude Warren praised Foster's efforts, noting that at the National Camp and local club meetings, club members "discuss[ed] qualifications for successful home partnerships" and became aware of "the desirable qualifications to look for in choosing a mate." Such conversations had also "helped" club boys shed onerous "habits," strengthen self-mastery, and attract suitable mates.⁴² Over the 1930s, USDA and CES experts advised club leaders and members on the best routes to develop happy family relationships.⁴³ At the same time, 4-H literature focused on teaching boys and girls alike how to cultivate a self that would be pleasing to the opposite sex. The January 1938 edition of the *National 4-H Club News*, for example, listed for the benefit of its readers "the most frequent failings of boys and girls," itemized according to "What Boys Dislike in Girls" and "What Girls Dislike in Boys."⁴⁴

As important as personal appearance and a pleasant personality might be for attracting the opposite sex, 4-H literature also stressed that a girl's long-term marital prospects depended upon her fitness as a mother and wife. Club literature advanced the proposition that performance of gendered "domestic" labor was intrinsically linked to a successful marriage and successful heterosexuality. Female club members scored and recorded their "mothering" skills in projects that used younger siblings

and the children of neighbors as surrogates for their future children. By 1940, many states had integrated childcare projects into girls' club programs. Alabama 4-H provided extensive information on childcare and nurturing in "Senior Girls' Club" literature.⁴⁵ Similarly, "little mothers" Catherine Barnes and Betty Freeman applied their club lessons to the care of their nephews and nieces, winning national attention and accolades in the process. Barnes, a sixteen-year-old from Florida, "mothered 20-months old nephew Bryant for two weeks last summer while his parents took a much needed vacation."⁴⁶

For 4-H girls, fit motherhood meant robust physical health. Although there was little programmatic uniformity from state to state, some 4-H clubs used their health entrée with rural girls to launch broader discussions of maternal health that warned against sexual promiscuity. Iowa 4-H stressed that girls needed to care for themselves with future motherhood in mind. Dr. R. E. Parry, a physician in Scranton, Iowa, who addressed the 1936 Iowa 4-H Girls State Convention, announced that 4-H health examinations were ideal for "getting acquainted with the future mothers of our community." Young mothers, Parry complained, were too "modest" about their bodies and thus hesitated to seek prenatal advice and care. 4-H examinations broke the ice and allowed doctors to "educate the future mothers" and provide a "moral influence." Parry assured his audience that he "put the fear of God in their heads in regard to sex and venereal diseases" and told "them of the actual results of stepping over the moral lines of intimacy between sexes."⁴⁷ By 1939, the Iowa extension staff made sure to include material on "Mental Hygiene for the Adolescent" and "Venereal Disease Information" to all 4-H leaders for use in clubs.⁴⁸ By the outbreak of World War II, the American Social Hygiene Society encouraged its affiliates to show films about the threats of venereal diseases in 4-H clubs. Other clubs arranged to have their members' blood tested for syphilis and gonorrhœa.⁴⁹

Discussions of motherhood in health and home economics clubs provided a context to discuss "sex education" and venereal diseases for 4-H girls, but the situation for 4-H boys was more complicated. A study of sex education among 7,500 Wisconsin high school boys from 1939 found that 7 percent received their "sex education" from 4-H clubs, suggesting that at least some discussion of sexual reproduction in boys' 4-H clubs was common.⁵⁰ Many discussions of human health were

likely to involve some mention of reproduction and, depending on the perspective of the club leader, potentially social hygiene. Although 10 percent of the total 600,000 4-H boys were enrolled in health projects by 1940, some health information was provided through models of nonhuman biology in agricultural projects, which managed to educate boys about human reproduction. One popular graphic, developed by Birdseye and circulated in club publications in the 1930s and 1940s, depicted varying types of "quality" in corn and boys. For corn, the graphic displayed the spectrum from "the nubbin" on the far right—corn fit only for feed—to a "perfect" ear on the left whose kernels could be used as "seed" for another generation of corn. With this visual grammar transposed to the boys below the corn, the graphic formed an enthymeme endorsing eugenic restrictions. By implication, the boy corresponding to the nubbin—defective and unhealthy—was unfit to reproduce, while the robust youth below the perfect ear provided the seed for the future.⁵¹

Invocations of nonhuman biology in the context of human health did not necessarily constitute "sex education," but the labor involved in livestock breeding projects communicated sexual knowledge. 4-H literature was reticent about the animal sex act, but animal husbandry manuals provided boys with more explicit details. A superlative breeding project required a boy to select animals to be bred on the basis of registered lineage and desirable heredity traits. In cooperation with an experienced breeder, boys monitored a female animal's reproductive cycles, kept undesirable mates away, and, eventually, had her "serviced" by the male animal when she was in heat.⁵² Such practices provided boys with a ready heuristic for human bodies in the form of livestock. Other breeding manuals explicitly connected the practical experience of animal breeding to human sexuality. New Jersey farmer, 4-H organizer, and geneticist Dr. James E. Russell argued in *Heredity in Dairy Cattle* that there was very little difference between human and bovine reproduction. "As long as marriages are fancy free," Russell explained, "the outcome will be a human population comparable to our mixed cattle—scrubs, grades, and pure-breds as they come."⁵³ Harry Cook, another manual author, warned that the disregard of the "applied science" of breeding and "the importance of race improvement" was akin to "a biological joy ride with a high cliff at the next turn." Cook urged that government should ster-

ilize the “feeble-minded,” create extensive “tabulated pedigree[s],” and restrict marriage licenses on the basis of “genetic compatibility.”⁵⁴

4-H, Popular Eugenics, and the Everyday Biopolitical State

Russell’s and Cook’s eugenic appeals were hardly exceptional for their moment in American history. By the 1930s, the belief that expert breeding could perfect human bodies contributed to the enactment of sterilization laws in dozens of states. Despite extensive criticism of this assumption from geneticists and biologists beginning in the 1910s, such eugenic measures enjoyed sustained popularity, and eugenic sterilizations continued in many states late into the twentieth century. Daniel Kevles argues that critics of human eugenics forced a turn toward eugenics advocacy in the 1930s that eschewed sterilizations and other coercive measures in favor of the voluntary use of contraceptives and policies to encourage the fittest to breed more prolifically.⁵⁵ “Reform” or “positive” eugenics still lauded able bodies produced by heteronormative white families and thus depended on established pronatalist celebrations of white middle-class rurality.⁵⁶ The novelty of positive eugenics lay in the belief that governing agents had the capacity not only to cull obviously defective bodies through a brutal and clumsy exercise of state-power, but also to engage in the more sophisticated task of guiding fit bodies and psychologies into fruitful procreation.

Discussions of the history of eugenics too often linger on debates about the legal right and scientific feasibility of managed reproduction, but the history of 4-H directs our attention to the *everyday biopolitical logistics* implicit in eugenic regulation. Early twentieth-century Americans argued about whether the government should engage in eugenic regulation, just as geneticists and biologists quarreled about the mechanisms of human inheritance, heredity, and genetics. But what accounted for the belief that government possessed the practical capacity to execute eugenic regulation? Why did some Americans believe that the state could inspect particular bodies, ascertain their reproductive potential, and intervene accordingly?

In mental institutions, prisons, courts, Indian schools, and border stations that acted on the bodies of criminals, mental patients, immigrants, and wards of the state, these questions entailed less of a logistical

challenge. With “feeble-minded,” defective, and unfit persons relegated to the boundaries of the nation and society’s margins, the physical control and social abjection of them lubricated the practice of negative eugenics. In the great interior of the American social body, where state actors might be remote and the targets of eugenic regulation capable of evasion, the logistical problem was more daunting and only heightened by the emergence of reform eugenics. The targets of positive eugenics were not localized in state institutions; they were distributed throughout the state’s territory and unlikely to fall under its gaze in asylums, courts, or migratory way stations.

4-H health programs provided a partial solution to this biopolitical logistical quandary. Health programs brought the bodies of 4-H’ers into voluntary, everyday contact with state and medical authorities and allowed those authorities to generate knowledge about the fitness and reproductive potential of the bodies of rural youth. Celebrations of the “perfect specimens” of club work advertised the wisdom, trustworthiness, and capacity of 4-H, medical authorities, the CES, and the USDA. Not only did 4-H assemble cultural norms about the desirability of able, white bodies; it also taught rural Americans that governing actors had the capacity to assess and manage those bodies. 4-H solved the logistical quandary and boldly announced itself as the solution. As American culture turned more noticeably to pronatalism in the 1930s, this reputation positioned 4-H as an ideal mechanism for positive eugenics. 4-H educated rural boys and girls about the sexual possibilities of their bodies and provided wholesome romantic opportunities, all in an effort to socialize healthy heterosexual relations and reseed the nation with fertile 4-H families.

4-H’s promise to actualize the countryside’s procreative potential through expertly managed heterosexuality placed the state at the center of rural family life and social reproduction. A representative 1937 issue of the *Rotarian* celebrated the ability of the “local 4-H leader” to “be a combined sage, confessor, counsellor, and friend” who offered wise advice on “not only club work, but also how to act when out on a date . . . what is the best age to get married . . . should a young married couple live with relatives.”⁵⁷ In such moments, rural heterosexuality cohered as a set of innate sexual impulses safely managed by 4-H. Far from a natural, preordained outcome, rural heterosexuality required the state’s

assistance. 4-H's famous motto swore "to make the best better." In this case, the best bodies of rural America needed the state's guiding hand to reach productive heterosexuality. For an American state so biopolitically invested, such an arrangement was all for the better.

NOTES

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PART II

The Rural Turn

Considering Cartographies of Race and Class