

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America*. Encounters: Cultural Histories. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010, 208pp. \$US 35.00 paper (978-0-7190-8008-1), \$US 90.00 hardcover (978-0-7190-8007-4)

N*ew York Hustlers* is a work of cultural history. Although not explicitly written for them, the book will nonetheless be relevant to sociologists interested in sex and gender, as it explores the “instability” and “untidiness” of categories of sexuality. Empirically, Reay’s book examines paid sex between men in New York during the middle of the twentieth century. More than a foray into sex between men and the slipperiness of labels, this book casts Alfred Kinsey’s research on male sexuality in new light by following one of Kinsey’s key informants: Thomas Painter. Most of the material for *New York Hustlers* was researched at The Kinsey Institute for Research on Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University, where the collected writings, letters, and photographs of Thomas Painter are held.

Painter was fascinated by “trade”: macho, virile, masculine bodies and men who took an insertive or active role in commercial sexual encounters (“being blown or actively sodomizing”). The Painter collection provides unique textual and visual insight into the gendered aspects of male with male sexual relations in New York between 1930 and 1970. Drawing on Painter’s collection, Reay shows how trade was a way of making a living that overlapped with other kinds of hustling (e.g. thievery) and other sorts of sexual encounters. Excursions into Puerto Rican gang activities, jail tattoos, and the lives of Italian-American boxer-hustlers all help make the point about muscling, hustling, masculinity, and sex. Male hustling was marked by a rough trade aesthetic and tough sexual code, at least until the mid-1960s.

Reay notes (as did Painter) an interesting change over time: macho males involved in paid sex between men faded with gay liberation struggles and the coming out of millions of Americans; or at least hustlers were recast as part of the “gay” community. Previously, homosexual and gay identity was not intelligible in trade and hustling circles, demonstrating the mutability of sexual identification and categorization. As Reay puts it “the hustler — who was part of the sexual regime known as

"trade" — sexually traversed homosexuality and heterosexuality, continually negotiating the boundaries of pleasure and self through acts that refuse easy attributions of identity." Reay writes that the word "homosexual" hardly ever appears in Painter's collection, especially not in the material from the 1940s and 1950s. "Queer" appears as a label, but it is used to refer to effeminacy, "fairies," "queens," and "pansies" whom Reay depicts as a minority and uninvolved in the trade scene that Painter covers. It is not until the mid-1960s and the emergence of gay liberation struggles that what Reay calls "the homosexualization of the hustler" takes effect.

Sociologists interested in sex work will enjoy *New York Hustlers*, as it provides an in-depth account of commercial sex in one major American city. The narrative starts in the New York hustler haunts of 1940s. Painter frequented these hangouts not only to meet men (and bring them home and photograph them and collect their stories), but also to contribute to his own intellectual appreciation of sex and sexuality in America. Painter compiled a study of American hustlers from 1930 to 1941, in which he argued that male hustlers were in fact "normal" whereas their clients were the ones deviating from sexual roles (a similar theme would arise in Kinsey's work). Reay asserts that many of Kinsey's key claims about male sex are anticipated in Painter's study of hustling. It is for this reason that Kinsey became reliant on Painter as an informant and interviewee broker for *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Painter had access to the "mad sexual routines" of midtown Manhattan, Times Square, Washington Square Park, Battery Park, Bryant Park, all of the 42nd Street bars, Lexington Avenue, the sailor sites, and the teeming beaches of Long Island and Coney Island, which Reay cumulatively refers to as the "floating center of hustlers." Perhaps the major difference, which Reay touches on, is that Kinsey was quick to identify all of this diversity and complexity as a natural, biological phenomenon, whereas Painter was hesitant to relegate the shadowy sexual fluidity he encountered to any definitive scientific typology.

Reay mines other data sources to confirm his conclusions and Painter's claims. For instance, he offers an analysis of novels, plays, movies (*Midnight Cowboy* and others) and art (the paintings of Edward Melcarth) depicting hustling. He assesses the contributions of Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, John Rechy, Gene Kelly, the Benzedrine-fuelled sex and monstrous huge bangings of the beat poets such as Herbert Huncke (who Kinsey relied on as an informant as well — there is an epilogue on Huncke and his relationships with Ginsberg and Kerouac), and other cultural figures who participated in these encounters. This American Studies element of *New York Hustlers* is underplayed, but it provides

a worthwhile backdrop. Weaving in and out of the lives of Painter and hustlers and others (and peppering these accounts with photos and cartoons from the time), Reay provides a temporal experience for the reader that is tremendous in ways that narrower, almost clinical sociological and psychological accounts from Painter's period fail to measure up to.

Some sociologists might find Reay's analysis unsystematic — my sense is that cultural sociologists and social historians will get over this more quickly than others. Reay does not try to measure frequencies or a distribution of sexual activity, which is part of the point: social sciences and sexology have a hard time making sense of the constantly moving meanings of sex and sexuality. *New York Hustlers* is an alluring read, with an exploratory appeal that is broader than the title hints at. Visual sociologists will herald *New York Hustlers* as raising academic expectations for featuring images, photos, and illustrative texture in scholarly work. My only complaint is that Reay occasionally reasserts the sexual categories that he wishes to subvert, even after so much effort to render these categories unintelligible by treating them as “adjectives and not nouns.” Nonetheless, Reay's effort at destabilizing sexual categories mostly finds its mark.

University of Victoria

Kevin Walby

Kevin Walby is Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria. Peer reviewed articles include *Antipode* (2011, with R. Lippert), *Alter-natives* (2011, with J. Monaghan), *Policing & Society* (2011, with J. Monaghan), *Social Movement Studies* (2011, with J. Monaghan), *International Sociology* (2011, with S. Hier), *Punishment & Society* (2011, with J. Piché), and the *British Journal of Criminology* (2010, with J. Piché). Walby is also the author of *Touching Encounters: Sex, Work, and Male-for-Male Internet Escorting* (2012, University of Chicago Press).

kwalby@uvic.ca