A review of *The Rural Primitive in American Popular Culture*, by Karen E. Kayden

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The Rural Primitive in American Popular Culture serves as Karen E. Hayden's unique contribution to the fields of rural sociology and rural criminology. This text is a history and exploration of one aspect of our cultural inheritance: the dark side of the American mythos of the rural archetype. Not the bucolic, idyll of small-town Americana, but the horror pornification of the rural: the isolated, the primitive, the inbred. Arguing that either stereotype allows rural peoples to be disregarded, and demonstrating meticulously detailed research and an impressive depth of knowledge for her topic, Hayden explores the historical origins and progression of the depiction of the dangerous (possibly cannibalistic) rural inbred monster of contemporary horror fiction.

The book begins with a brief examination of the othering and exploitation that has historically occurred to rural peoples. Touching on how these phenomena benefit the status quo, Hayden offers a decidedly neo-Marxian critique of the disenfranchisement and ill-use that rural populations have been subjected to, from extractive industries to pharmaceutical guinea pigs. This maltreatment of the rural citizen is linked to early notions of degeneracy, to ideas of rural as primitive. Tracing these representations of the rural to their ultimate nexus with historical prohibitions against endogamy, Hayden investigates the development of these cultural taboos from their origin in the church, their growth through the lens of social Darwinism, and their ultimate unfolding into a cultural trope of what rural peoples represent.

Hayden argues, quite convincingly, that the negative side of the archetype of rural, the rural as primitive, anarchic, and savage, is ultimately a mythological warning against turning our backs to progress; the inevitable downfall of those who remain too insular, too detached, apart, and how the othering this enables allows those who castigate the rural citizens to paint them as both perpetrator and victim of their own downfall, neither deserving of consideration or compassion. This section of the book evinces unquestionable scholarship and a penetrative inquiry. Hayden sketches a vivid genealogy of the cultural perspectives on endogamy, from the European continent to the New World to the receptive audience of social Darwinists in 19th century America, making its association with the rural paramount.

Continuing in the same vein, Hayden looks back through time, thoroughly accounting for the (almost) universal prohibition against marrying within one's family, or endogamy, by

explaining its nascence in the medieval church, its adoption by students of Darwin's evolutionary theory and Spencerian advancement, and its ultimate yoking to the rural stereotype. Hayden touches on the hypocrisy of the powerful and urbane social philosophers who railed against consanguinity as they married their cousins. Tracing the story of the mythology of inbreeding through to the modern era, the book gives readers a vivid portrait of the duplicity that has surrounded the topic of endogamy, noting its allowance when royals must keep wealth within the bloodline, and its castigation when practiced by those of lower status.

Hayden deftly uses modern depictions of inbreeding in popular media to explore the deeper meanings behind what had become, by the early 20th century, the punchline to a hillbilly joke. Using such disparate sources as *The X Files* and the horror porn films in the *Wrong Turn* series, the author uses these exaggerations and grotesqueries to dive deeper into the cultural geneses of mainstream notions about what it means to be rural. Hayden then exposes the ultimate capitalization upon these terror tropes by examining nonfiction media, specifically true crime television, and its fixation of the backcountry murderer. Exploring how the negative stereotype of the rural is indelibly intertwined with the positive, such as home, family, and connection, she illustrates how these are twisted by the pornification of the rural into the dreadful; incest, cannibalism, and murder.

In the final sections of this book, Hayden explores the possibility that contemporary popular media might move beyond the depiction of the rural as something different and fearful. She speaks to a promising trend within some media to combat the oversimplification of the unfamiliar, attempts by artists and creators to cleave the root of stereotype. Whether the dichotomy portrays the rural as pastoral wonderland or the rural as savage throwback, both are a disservice to the truth. Hayden discusses the possibilities of countering the rural primitive image through purposive, self-deprecating humor, and describes several pertinent examples.

There is little to offer in the area of criticism for this book. The depth of the research into the development of cultural prohibitions against consanguinity is rather dense, but necessary for the culminating (and imminently readable) content analysis and media criticism that follows. For the academic or researcher, it is all but certain that anyone reading this book will find themselves an apt pupil to Karen Hayden's illuminating teaching.