50 STATES: TEXAS

Pure Carbon

In 1895 John Wesley Carhart, a prominent medical doctor from the small town of La Grange, TX wrote Norma Trist: or Pure Carbon, A Story of the Inversion of the Sexes, a novel featuring one of American fiction's first unambiguously lesbian protagonists. The edition was published at a small press in Austin and is most notable for its astonishingly sympathetic and progressive ideological defenses of homosexuality.

The complete text of the novel is presented here in loose graphite powder, in a font derived from the original typeface used in the first (and only) edition. The chapters are illustrated with images of what currently stands on the sites of historic lesbian and gay bars across the state of Texas. Chapters that relate to the heroine's sexuality are indicated with a metallic lip on the tables.

Loosely based on the sensational 1892 murder of Freda Ward by her lover Alice Mitchell in Memphis, the novel incorporates references to what was (at the time) cutting-edge medical thought on same-sex desire. Particularly worthy of attention is Chapter 27, in which Norma is put on trial for the attempted murder of her lover Marie (pp 121-124), as it contains arguments about the God-given nature of sexuality that read as if they could have been written a century later.

That aside, Norma Trist frequently takes the form of dime store fiction, replete with a ridiculous subplot involving a handsome Mexican captain and a search for buried treasure. Perhaps Carhart chose the format in the hopes that his ideas would reach a wider audience; perhaps he chose it in an effort to avoid censorship and protect his medical career. Either way, the book was reviewed and excoriated in medical journals (on largely moral grounds), and Carhart was arrested (though subsequently cleared) for obscenity.

Carhart's views on race are decidedly less enlightened than his views on sexuality. The book contains racist depictions of African American, Jewish, and Mexican characters. With the exception of a single racial epithet, which the artists omitted, Nick & Jake have included the complete text of Norma Trist in their work 50 States: Texas in an effort to avoid sanitizing Carhart's legacy.

The artists were introduced to Norma Trist by reading Kim Emory's 1994 essay Steers, Queers, and Manifest Destiny: Representing the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century Texas in UT Austin's Journal of the History of Sexuality. The text can also be accessed via a scanned digital copy through Houston Public Library and Google Books, which has recently made a digital copy available.

The novel is dedicated:
"To one whom we dearly love;
But who shall here be nameless."
OUR PARTNERS

Oklahoma State University: Gender and Women’s Studies, Department of History, School of Architecture, Department of Art, Graphic Design, and Art History, Oral History Project, Office of Multicultural Affairs, EQuAL, OSQ&A and GSSO.

Community: Tulsa Equality Center/OKEQ, Payne County PRIDE Fest, PFLAG Stillwater, Living Arts Kitchen, University of Central Oklahoma Melton Gallery, University of Central Oklahoma Women’s Research Center and BGLTQ+ Student Center, Herland Archive, Living Arts Tulsa and Tulsa Artist Fellows.

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