

An Ambitious "State of the Field" Volume that Puts "the Rural" Firmly on the Map of Sexual Geographies

Gorman-Murray, Andrew, Barbara Pini, and Lia Bryant (eds.) *Sexuality, Rurality, and Geography*. Lexington Books 2012, hardback (278 pages)

THE STUDY OF the connections between sexuality and space is a broad area of interdisciplinary research that has, until recent years, predominantly focused on LGBT and queer identities and communities in cosmopolitan Western metropolises. The sub-discipline of "geographies of sexuality" emerged initially from interests in space, diversity, and "deviance" in fields such as sociology and human geography in the 1970s and 1980s. The field came into its own, as it were, with the publication of seminal and dedicated volumes, such as David Bell and Gill Valentine's edited collection *Mapping Desire* (1995), at a time when scholarship also benefited from a surge in queer and sexuality research more broadly. In the years since, this literature – aided by the establishment of thematic research networks, perhaps especially in the United Kingdom – has interrogated the formations of specific urban subcultures, mapping the sites of activism, pleasure, leisure, violence, as well as other articulations of belonging and visibility in the cityscape. An often overlooked consequence of this focus is the ways in which the dominant focus on urban space has produced and maintained certain unexamined assumptions regarding its perceived "backward twin": rural locales, or ruralities.

Recent writing has begun addressing the almost mythical opposition between urban and rural life, questioning common assertions of the city as a beacon of tolerance and rural places as the backward, unenlightened Other. As Mary Gray demonstrates in *Out in the Country* (2009), her important ethnography on queer youths living in small-town Kentucky, rural queers utilize a wealth of resources, including those based on kinship and other social forms of belonging, alongside new media cultures and their politics, to create viable life strategies that challenge preconceived notions of out-of-the-way sexualities (Gray 2009). In short, there is a growing recognition of the need to complicate spatial figurations beyond the urban, to unpack myths and stereotypes regarding rural spatiality and imaginaries as positioned in stark opposition to liberated and diverse cosmopolitan cityscapes.

Sexuality, Rurality, and Geography (2012) is an ambitious volume, which contributes to the small but growing area of geographies of sexualities that reaches beyond the customary focus on cosmopolitan urban space in the Western world. As such, it is specifically concerned with the notion, imaginary, site, and experience of "the rural" and how such a concern complicates unhelpful and static stereotypical thinking about urban and rural space, and sexual and gender diversities therein. The premise of the book is that "the rural" is an understudied terrain in interdisciplinary studies of space, geography, and sexuality. Not surprisingly, then, a major aim of the book is to address this omission by showcasing a vast array of current academic research on rural sexualities, thereby advancing new knowledge and the central importance of rural perspectives to our understanding of sexual geographies more broadly.

The volume casts the net wide in terms of geographical locations. There are thirteen main chapters, which include case studies from rural Finland, Sweden, Norway, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The methodologies are mainly qualitative ethnographic research, and textual media and discourse analysis. The authors – including early career doctoral students and established researchers who have published widely on sexual geographies – come from various disciplinary backgrounds, such as literature, human and cultural

geography, and sociology. This sweeping diversity sets the stage for an exhaustive, informative "state of the field" overview of rural sexual geographies. In this sense, the volume is laudable in its effort to address omissions and gaps, and to expose the underlying unhelpful assumptions regarding space and sexuality.

Accordingly, the book's thirteen main chapters are organized into four thematic sections: "Intimacies and Institutions", "Communities", "Mobilities", and "Production and Consumption". In addition, there is an "Introduction" and a "Conclusion" chapter authored by the editors that connect themes across the chapters. Usefully, these sections also foreground gaps in the discussions and needs for further research. All chapters contribute profoundly toward the volume's stated ambition to open up the figure of the rural to the complications that arise from viewing spatiality as a diverse terrain in both theory and practice.

The first section, "Intimacies and Institutions", provide in-depth discussions on concepts and imaginaries of rural intimacies, on the ways that dominant social institutions shape these intimacies, and how they produce and maintain hegemonic notions of respectable sexuality. The three chapters focus on the Travellers' Aid Society's work to "save" young country girls from perceived sexual and moral danger in 19th century British cities (Phillips), public sector provisions of LGBT equality measures in contemporary Britain (Browne and McGlynn), and negotiations of care and intimacy in heterosexual marriages in agricultural Australian communities (Bryant). The second section, "Communities", explores variegated ways to negotiate sexuality in rural communities and the dynamic interplay between belonging and alienation. Themes include hegemonic masculinity in reality television shows and documentary film focusing on men's lives in rural Norway and Finland (Ikonen and Pehkonen), kinship and queer place-making in Kentucky, the United States (Detamore), lesbian and gay lives in outback Australia (Gorman-Murray), and – the only chapter to expressively consider issues of race – queer Black women's lives in the South in the United States (Eaves). Section three, on "Mobilities", focuses on movement, migration, immobility, as well as return-migration in lesbian and gay people's

negotiation of sexual and gender difference, displacement, identity work, home, and kinship. The chapters discuss gay men's intra-national migration in the United States and France (Annes and Redlin), lesbian family migration and homemaking in Queensland, Australia (Waitt and Johnston), and young lesbians negotiating coming out in small-town Sweden (Björklund). The fourth and final thematic section, "Production and Consumption", is concerned with unpacking customary notions of the urban as proper site of production and consumption, and the important role of rural imaginaries and sites. Chapters include discussions of the management of animal sexualities in agricultural production and human consumption (Rasmussen), rural heterosexualities in the Australian mining industry (Pini and Mayes), and finally, a wonderful analysis of male sexuality and gender, based on an intimate study of the figure of "the global cowboy" (Gibson).

From the brief chapter-by-chapter summary given here, it should be clear that the volume delivers on its ambition to complicate stereotypical notions of rural sexualities, and the conceptual dynamics between rural and urban. Thereby, the book advances new knowledge and important perspectives on this "understudied topic" (Gorman-Murray, Pini and Bryant 2012, 221), and should serve as an inspiration and valuable source of references for anyone interested in this field. In its expressed aim to address shortcomings and fill gaps in the literature, the volume succeeds in giving voice to new approaches to rural spatialities. It should be noted that the book's immense breadth and diversity of perspectives prevent more emphasis on depth and detail in the case study examples and analysis.

Some of the chapters would have benefited from adding more detail and context in their case studies and deeper analysis to build a more convincing argument. Other chapters – such as Detamore and Gibson's essays, in particular – are wonderful reads and accomplished in their well-rounded balance between case studies and analysis. Given the primary concern with space and place in the volume, I was left curious about the relative absence of discussion on the specifics of the localized spatialities in the different chapters, and what possibly connected them.

What would be the possible broader connections or divergences across these locations? How does the volume trouble and complicate concept-metaphors such as "the West," given its broad interest in local practices in places such as the Arctic Norway, rural Australia, and Kentucky? Given that the "Conclusion" chapter considers the literature on rural spaces and sexualities in the context of globalization, I wondered what the sociospatial and cultural specifics of the locations in each of the book's chapters might add to a more expansive spatial analysis of ruralities. Perhaps these gaps – the questions they engender, and curiosities to know more and add details – could be considered fodder for a follow-up volume or collaborative research initiatives.

Sexuality, Rurality, and Geography is, then, a timely and provocative collection of essays on space and sexuality in dynamic, transnational context. Taken together, the chapters succeed in complicating common understandings of urban/rural space. In this sense, the volume provides an excellent overview of the state of the field for anyone interested in understanding the geographies of sexualities through the lens of the rural. In particular, the volume works very well as a textbook for undergraduate teaching due to its accessible language, exhaustive references and topical diversity. The volume is also warmly recommended to anyone interested in geographies of sexualities.

ELISABETH L. ENGBRETSSEN
SHANDONG UNIVERSITY

REFERENCES

- Bell, David, and Gill Valentine, eds. 1995. *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gray, Mary. 2009. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York: New York University Press, kindle edition.