

Towards a New Landscape of Queer Research on the Rural?

Gray, Mary L., Brian J. Gilley, and Colin R. Johnson (eds.) *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*. New York: New York University Press 2016 (396 pages)

THIS ANTHOLOGY COMES with high promises of presenting new and challenging perspectives on the so often presumed – and culturally hegemonic – paradox of rural queer life. The editors of the anthology seek to contribute to the field by a critical engagement with the notion of rurality in queer studies from a North American perspective. Although the rural issues and the rural/urban power relations are seemingly alike across the globe, this positioning of the rural and the queer as predominantly Western and North American is in itself a hegemonic stance that needs to be problematised (cf., Szulc 2014).

I engage with the anthology through my own upbringing in a (albeit Swedish) working-class home in the rural north, as well as my queer and crip present as a PhD student in Umeå (Umbeje in Umesaami). Hence, my academic life takes place on traditional indigenous land colonised by the Swedish state. As such, the place and time from which I write is conditioned by many of the central questions raised in the anthology.

In the introduction, the editors convincingly argue the case that hegemonic ideas of queer life are intertwined and co-produced with discourses of progression and liberation as something taking place solely in metronormative urban spaces. Hence, alongside previous research they

argue that the rural space is understood and constructed as barren, conservative, violent and dangerous for queers. The editors' purpose with the anthology is to present a more nuanced way of understanding and researching the rural and the urban in relationship to the queer. Without such perspectives, critical research risks to re-inscribe stereotypical and harmful notions regarding this issue.

The anthology's contributors further examine, or critique, the hegemonic notion of urban freedom and rural constraint present in the field of queer studies, by investigating intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality through a wide range of material and methods including qualitative interviews, historical texts and film and literary analysis. It is this wide scope of the anthology that, in my opinion, is its biggest contribution to the field. The most interesting contributions explore the rural by departing *from* it, rather than approaching it from an elsewhere, such as Mary Pat Brady's contribution "The Waiting Arms of Gold Street: Manuel Muñoz's 'Faith Healer of Olive Avenue' and the Problem of the Scaffold Imaginary," which manages to engage critical with the concept in its own right, rather than constantly comparing it as an *other* to an urban *first*.

However, it is striking that although the separate contributions to the anthology depart from different places, their conclusions are nevertheless repetitive. I find that the recurring discussion of the rural as a "problem," that frames most of its contributions, risks reproducing a metronormative understanding of the rural.

I am at first troubled by this chafing experience of the reproduction of the rural as a problem in the text. However, in retrospect, I begin to think that this hardship is in itself one of the most important contributions to the discussion in the field. It clearly shows the difficulties of challenging pre-existing hegemonic discourses and of formulating opposing or nuancing stances from within them. It also displays how the hegemony of metronormative thoughts continues to inform queer theory.

In the introduction to the volume, the editors state a need to further critically examine the concepts of the rural in relation to those of state,

nation, and land. This is first implied by the use of the word “frontiers” and in many of the contributors’ interest in the shaping of the rural as a nationalistic project, for example Robin Henry’s “Queering the American Frontier: Finding Queerness and Sexual Difference in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Colorado,” and Gabriel Rosenberg’s “A Classroom in the Barnyard: Reproducing Heterosexuality in Interwar American 4-H.” However, the majority of the contributors fail to sufficiently engage critically with the power relation, which builds this frontier and serves both as a backdrop to the previous understandings of rural life and as contemporary system of oppression: *settler colonialism*. I regard this as the major shortcoming of the anthology. In this, the anthology as a whole risk to empirically reproduce a colonial understanding of traditional indigenous land as barren, and of indigenous perspectives and research as irrelevant to queer studies. If we wish to engage critically with concepts of rurality, sexuality, gender, race, and class in relation to one another, we need to engage with the colonial presents and pasts that play out in the construction of the rural and the urban, from both a North American and a Swedish/Scandinavian point of departure.

When reading, I long for a conscious discussion of colonial pasts and presents in a queer setting. Particularly in a Swedish context, the socio-economic marginalisation of the rural north is highly intertwined with the colonial construction of the Swedish state on indigenous land. Many of the discussions in the anthology that border this theme would have needed to be taken further in both a theoretical and an empirical sense in order to thoroughly engage critically with the constructions of class, gender, sexuality and race and its relation to notions of power formed by place and space.

In his text “Ett koloniserat sinne sjunger inte” [“A Colonised Mind Does Not Sing”], indigenous Saami scholar and activist Johan Sandberg McGuinne (2018) describes the effect of settler colonisation of Saami land and people by the Swedish state as a mute mind. A mind that becomes unable to articulate or even to imagine the vast promising land of the rural as land previously tended by someone else. Perhaps it is

this unintended muteness that is to blame for this shortcoming of the anthology. Sandberg McGuinne calls for voices of critical engagement, which are acting to make evident the historical and present oppression as well as to challenge it:

This void demands the echoes of a hundred songs
to challenge its violent existence

As these voices are mostly lacking in the anthology, its critical potential is consequentially limited.

Despite the critique I presented under the previous heading many of the anthology's contributions lend themselves well to an ongoing academic, political, and activist discussion of the rural position in a Swedish context in which the metronormative hegemony is being challenged through experiences and analysis departing from the rural. I see a great use for the anthology, its purpose, and many of its contributions in this discussion, and I do find its broad scope a valuable contribution to the field. Its shortcomings make evident the further need for research that explore the intersection of the rural and the queer from the angle of race and class. Of course, *one* anthology cannot fill this entire need, and perhaps especially not so in various political and national context. Nevertheless, through both its strengths and shortcomings it can show the way and direct the steps that need to be taken. Which I believe this volume certainly does.

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REFERENCES

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