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Book Review

Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America

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Mary Gray’s book, *Out in the Country*, allows readers to inhabit the world of rural and small town Kentucky and understand how young LGBT people and their allies experience its contours. The findings Gray presents primarily draw from nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork as well as interviews she did with thirty-four LGBT youth. This ethnography challenges assumptions that circulate, both in and outside the academy, about expressions of gender and sexual nonconformity in rural America, LGBT activism, and the role of new media in social change. Gray asks how rural youth “do” LGBT identities and how new media matters in their lives. Given its aim, the book most centrally contributes to sexualities and media studies – yet its analyses will be of interest to scholars who study rural communities and education and social movements, as well as to educators and activists dedicated to supporting LGBT youth in rural areas.

Perhaps one of this book’s most exciting contributions to sexuality studies is how it problematizes the way that “the rural United States operates as America’s perennial, tacitly taken-for-granted closet” (p. 4). Gray laments the way that both the political Left and Right characterize rural America as inhospitable to queer expressions of gender and sexuality, and notes the paucity of academic research addressing the experiences of LGBT individuals in these areas. Thus, Gray’s work contributes to sexuality studies by illustrating how rural LGBT youth “do the collective labor of identity work” (p. 21).

Throughout her discussion of identity work, *Out in the Country* focuses on the relationship between identities and political activism. Specifically, chapters two and three document the importance in rural life of being able to make claims of belonging and sameness, asking how, in turn,

this shapes political work. One example is the political mobilizing of area college students to contest a state representative’s claim that his lack of attention to LGBT issues occurred because there were no gay people in his district. Combating the logic that would displace queer into the “stranger” category and outside of rural spaces, these students mobilized, securing 400 signatures from people demanding that their representative acknowledge that, in fact, gay people did live there. Gray astutely identifies the tension that exists for LGBT activists in rural communities between laying claims to familiarity and asserting queer difference. Gray suggests that the work of non-profit organizations is important in the lives of rural LGBT youth as it helps youth feel a part of a community. These chapters, however, are more concerned with highlighting the connections and tensions between national, statewide, regional, and local advocacy efforts and less concerned with detailing the impact for rural LGBT youth identity.

Continuing the focus on political mobilization strategies, chapter three addresses the struggle over a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at Boyd County High School. This section will likely be of the most interest to rural educators and scholars interested in K-12 rural education. Gray outlines the history of this GSA – including its inception in October 2002, its ban a few months later by the county school board, the protests against and in favor of the club, and its final reinstatement in 2003 by order of a district judge. Gray also draws our attention to a few key players shaping the club’s history. For instance, Gray discusses how local activists were able to draw on support and knowledge from national nonprofits like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in advocating for the GSA. She notes the tension created by relying on support from national organizations, as those against the GSA were suspicious of such outsider influence in local affairs. Yet ironically locals on both

sides were united during a rally held in 2003 through their condemnation of another outsider: Fred Phelps, the Baptist minister from Kansas, who, along with his congregation, “have made a name for themselves toting ‘God Hates Fags’ signs around the country to protest events ranging from Matthew Shepard’s memorial service to funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq” (p. 79).

Gray argues that Phelps’ protest of a rally designed to support diversity “is what ultimately united the community” (p. 79) insofar as even those “against” homosexuality or the GSA wanted to demonstrate that they were not like outsider Fred Phelps. This topic is of such interest that it warrants further attention in future research. As the analysis shifts focus between the national and urban chapters of GSLEN and the local GLSEN-KY chapter, this chapter deftly illustrates how political mobilizing strategies do not always translate easily between national and community actors – and between urban and rural organizations. Gray’s analysis therefore opens avenues for those interested in rural education to explore questions such as: How do GSAs affect the lives of rural LGBT youth? Are those effects different in urban and rural communities? How do LGBT individuals’ negotiations of sexual identity shape their engagement and performance at school in rural areas?

In chapter four Gray moves to a greater focus on the experiences of rural LGBT youth – and how they make visible and make sense of their sexual identities. She provides a rich discussion about the range of activities youth engage in to construct LGBT identities – from doing drag at the local Wal-Mart to a “queercore punk band” playing at the performance stage of a church-sponsored skate park (p. 101). Gray documents how LGBT youth enact sexual identities within an environment of familiarity rather than anonymity. These environments shape how they negotiate what Gray calls “the politics of visibility” – the cultural and political demand to come out and be visible. However, she notes that such spaces can be very easily “disrupted, pushed out of reach, or blocked” (p. 107). Rather than link this fragility to an assumed hostility in rural areas to expressions of non-normative sexuality, Gray links it to the “infrastructural poverty that typifies rural publics” (p. 107). In this chapter Gray also has a brief discussion of gender, race, and class shaping the experiences of rural LGBT youth, an area upon which future scholars can expand. This chapter also leaves readers wondering if these expressions of LGBT identity are the only ones happening in rural areas.

In addition to a focus on LGBT activism, Gray analyzes how rural youth use media in their identity work. Arguing against a tendency in media studies to analyze only the context of the text itself, in chapters five and six Gray puts forth an analysis of how individuals utilize new media. She argues that online spaces like chat rooms and websites are important insofar as they give youth tools to think about their

desires and identities as well as help youth feel connected to a larger LGBT community (130). Rather than view rural LGBT youth’s engagement with new media as an escape from their local conditions, Gray argues that this use of media is “supplemental” (112). For instance, Gray describes how members of Highland Pride Alliance post pictures of the Wal-Mart drag show on the organization’s website and thus argues that the website can “extend and repeat the displays of queer-youth identity work beyond the moments of Wal-Mart” (113). She also uses the example of a web-based journal of AJ, a young female-to-male transsexual living in rural Kentucky, to illustrate how engagement with new media disrupts assumptions about divides between public/private, national/local, and online/offline. For instance, AJ’s website contains comments from locals such as his mom and friends, as well as from people within an international online trans-friendly network. Gray’s discussion of how rural youth engage with new media highlights themes that resonate with the rest of the book: disrupting assumptions about public/private, highlighting the connections and tensions between national and local LGBT identities and activism, and showing how the impoverished infrastructure in rural Kentucky matters for what LGBT youth do.

Overall, Gray’s book is a provocative analysis of how rural LGBT youth and their allies organize and create queer identities and networks – in “brick and mortar” structures as well as through engagement with new media. Gray does a wonderful job of providing a balance between detailing rich stories from the ethnographic fieldwork and offering academic analyses. Thus, this is a suitable book for undergraduate and graduate level courses in LGBT studies, rural education, media, qualitative methods, and social movements. Additionally, this book will no doubt contribute to a rethinking of what it means to be LGBT in the country and how LGBT activists can continue to successfully organize individuals across geographic contexts.