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Book Review – Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America by Colin R. Johnson

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Abstract

This is a book review of Colin Johnson's *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*.

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Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America by Colin R. Johnson, 2013 Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Penn., 1-247.

Critical theory as a tool has long been utilized in various fields of study. Unfortunately for American history, many scholars have been reluctant to employ it. This is especially true in agricultural and rural history. Though one of the oldest subfields of scholarship, agricultural historians have, until recently, been unable or unwilling to utilize critical theory. This is why Colin Johnson's 2013 work *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* is such an encouraging sign. As an Associate Professor of Gender Studies, Johnson marshaled his considerable knowledge to study sexuality and gender in early rural America. And what he found might just surprise the vast majority of readers. Instead of reaffirming rural America's place as a bastion for conservative normativity, Johnson demonstrated a startling fluidity in sexuality and gender. In fact, rural America only received a gradual normative discourse on gender and sexuality during the early twentieth century. This has been lost to America's memory because of the imposition of "metronormativity" on scholarship and the popular imagination. Metronormativity refers to the notion that queer spaces can only be found in urban areas, with the countryside specifically hostile to gay and lesbian experiences. Ultimately, Johnson's book looked to correct this selective amnesia and rediscover America's queer rural past.

To prove these points, Johnson breaks down his argument into two different sections. In the first part, he revealed the importance of rural contributions to normative sexuality by examining the connections between the Eugenics movement and agriculture. Moreover, Johnson also showcased the construction of hetero-normativity in rural America through the Country Life movement. In the second section, he countered the argument that sexual and gender non-conformity were an urban phenomenon. From homoerotic relations between hobos and tramps to "mannish" farmwomen, Johnston's work displayed the multiplicity of sexual and gender identity in the early twentieth century rural America.

Unfortunately, despite his willingness to challenge metro-chauvinism in scholarship, Johnson failed to interrogate the conception of “rural” with the same ferocity. What exactly does “rural” mean? Is it as simple as a census number on a page or are there deeper attributes to its meaning? Who exactly delineates what it is and who performs it? Johnson correctly confronts the problems of “urban” to “rural” binaries but never concretely forms his own definition of country life. An Iowa farming community and a Northwestern lumber camp are very different places but are each defined as “rural.” Is what connects them only their opposition to the city? How does this not fall into the binary trap? Perhaps a greater overview of what exactly “rural” is would have helped answer some of these questions.

In the end, however, what makes Johnson’s book so valuable is that it exemplifies the possible scope and weight of agricultural history. As a subject, this field has struggled at times for relevance in an increasingly urban world. While new rural history has been on the upswing since the 1980s, Johnson’s book probes an area that has so far been left to scholars of other disciplines, such as critical theories or professors of gender and sexuality. But *Just Queer Folks* demonstrates what a compelling, lively, and overall *vital* field of study rural history is. It reminds agricultural historians to analyze their own internalized metronormative gaze and explore new topics. Furthermore, Johnson’s work prompts all historians and scholars of gender, sexuality, environment, identity politics, and many others to consider the importance of rural life in American history. For as Johnson noted, “the current state of affairs has not always been what is today but also that it need not be what it is today and actually in some respects is not, even today, what we imagine it to be” (18).