

*Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other*, edited by Hillary Glasby, Sherrie Gradin, and Rachael Ryerson. West Virginia University Press, 2020. 228 pp.

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This is a queer review—not only because I’m queer, but as I tell you about the counterpublics and counterrhetorics that challenge the boundaries of Appalachia across the edited collection *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other*, I’m also going to tell you a little story of my own. As a queer man native to the rural deep south, the sense of place that reverberates through the hills and hollers of Appalachia are familiar. I consider myself a recent victim of the queer diaspora. Central to this collection is a question delfin bautista poses in their *Storytelling* chapter, “Queering Trauma and Resilience, Appalachian Style!”: “How does one reconcile rural identity with queer identity when rural areas alienate sexual and gender diversities and queer spaces demonize rural areas?” (152). Appalachia, like my Cajun home and the ancestral home of so many queer people, does all but force queer bodies out in search of love in the best cases—and as a necessity for survival in the worst. So, while the stories in this edited collection ask questions imbued with the powerful symbols of Appalachian heritage, they reverberate far beyond rural Appalachia; these narratives have expansive rhetorical force and can resonate with rural queer people everywhere. I despaired, raged, celebrated, and loved along with the stories in this collection because me and my queer, rural Cajun family are represented in those stories. The academics in this collection are brave enough to challenge both the rural normative spaces and urban queer spaces that leave them feeling adrift. They write stories of counterrhetorics—those of silence, resistance, and resilience—that build uniquely Appalachian counterpublics which glorify intersectional queer experiences and identities.

Amanda Hayes pens “A Letter to Appalachia” as the opening chapter of the collection, but this letter isn’t addressed to me—it’s addressed to those who are often the most difficult to convince of a queer person’s inherent humanity. Cisgender, white, privileged to not have to question how their identities mark them as the norm, Hayes asks that audience to start interrogating what it means to be Appalachian. The rural spaces and natural landscapes of Appalachia are consistently othered in relation to elite urban spaces. Hayes argues that rural Appalachia is queered, so why not embrace what is queer about Appalachia (35)? Justin Ray Dutton deconstructs Christianity’s queerphobic rhetoric in the following chapter, arguing that Christianity has no biblical justification to continue inscribing harmful queerphobia. Dutton’s “The Heart Over the

Head: Queer-Affirming Epistles and Queerphobic Challenges” establishes a basis for all Appalachians to speak across the chasm of their differences. Hayes and Dutton challenge heteronormative constructions of Appalachia with rhetorical counterrhetorical force that echoes across the country.

One of the first questions I get meeting new people as a queer, rural native navigating my new scholarly home near Washington, D.C.—one of the queer urban hubs bautista recognizes—is whether I have an accent. “I’ve studied language too intensively,” I say, “to retain my Cajun accent,” but a truer answer would be that “I trained myself out of a Cajun accent to present as more homonormative to elide some of the stereotypes attached to my ancestral identity.” As soon as I “come out” with my rural identity, I’m othured by queer urbanity. “When the promise of home . . . is denied, home becomes a mythology in and of itself; home is scattered with truths and lies, a nostalgic longing for something that is unknown yet strangely familiar,” writes Adam Denney in “A Drowning in the Foothills (63). The myth of the “chosen queer family” is buffeted by the experience of the queer diaspora.

Queer people, as Kimberly Gunter laments, often feel pushed out of Appalachia when they fail or refuse to perform the normative “quare” roleplaying, but “the Appalachian queer refugee may be leaving one home without the promise of another” (101). Stuck between urban-centric queer identities and rural Appalachian identities, “alienation is a constant negotiation for some Appalachian queers. . .” a feeling that is mirrored in Gunter’s identification as a compositionist surrounded by literature scholars (108). Her interstitial identities provoke reflection on her positionality in a way that “helped make [her] a better writing teacher, for it has inspired [her] to stand beside [her] students through the transmutations of subjectivity that only they can initiate and, more important, to do so with empathy” which is a skill that composition scholars and rhetoricians, and possibly all scholars of the humanities, could learn (106). At odds are Appalachia’s subtle linguistic distinctions between the normative “quare” and the nonnormative “queer.” Matthew Thomas Reid theorizes in “Deconstructing the “Quare” Appalachian Archetype” that “[quare is] a subtle tool of control for the suppression of the queer” which concerns the author that “quare” waters queer down to a “generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of the liberal” (qt. Halperin, 93). Queerness is labeled acceptable as “quareness” in Appalachia if one can fit into the normative standards of the “quare” without transgressing into the “queer.”

From the identities that inform Gunter’s queer pedagogy of place, the collection turns to “Intersectional Understandings of Appalachian Queers.” Lydia McDermott and couple Travis Roundtree and Caleb Pendygraft theorize queer movement in (and out) of Appalachia through *metis*. McDermott questions the boundaries of Appalachia and Roundtree and Pendygraft meet

with the boundaries inscribed by their legible queerness while researching in Appalachia: “Metis offers a strategy for queers who work in areas where their queerness sometimes conflicts with the communities, they find themselves in” (142). Alternatively, delfin bautista struggles with the seeming irreconcilability of maintaining idiosyncratic rural and queer identities. bautista establishes a framework for “suggested best practices for university counseling centers to better and more holistically support not only LGBTQ+ individuals but also all the people a center services” using trauma-informed care, intersectionality, and “the expertise of the people we serve” (162). These strategies of queer resilience, metis, and the support systems that employ trauma-informed care imagine new futures for Appalachia, offering glimpses of the rare, loving, queer, rural spaces that resist and persist in these stories and visions of an idealized future that make the struggle worthwhile.

The final section of the collection “Queer Media: Radical Acts of Embodiment and Resistance” showcases activists working to make more space for the nonnormative in rural Appalachia. Stories of a small film festival, zine making, and a local queer legend exemplify what queer Appalachian lives often look like. The compounding intersections of their lives has made it more desirable to stay in Appalachia and make room for their queerness in a rural space than to struggle against their ruralness in queer spaces. Tijah Bumgarner writes of the Appalachian Queer Film Festival “the [festival] and films discussed herein are creating ... a difference that makes a difference by creating ruptures in the master narrative: these ruptures are the multiplicities that make Appalachia what it is” (183). In a direct challenge to the hegemonic trope that queer and rural Appalachian identities are idiosyncratic, the film festival puts the tensions between those identities on display. These tensions are also depicted through zine making, as described in “Trans Zine Making in Appalachia,” a practice that emerged at the Salem College Writing Center. Director Katie Manthey accessed the metis required to make an affirming, accepting safe space of zine writing in the writing center for people exploring queer and trans identities on a campus that was trying to silence their voices and pretend they don’t exist. Bryn Kelly’s influence on Gina Mamone inspired them to start a zine-turned-social media project that celebrates and affirms the queer people who dare to present as unapologetically queer described as “A Praxis of Rural Resistance.” As the editors write, such projects “[offer] a rural, accessible, queer space/place that celebrates representation and visibility at the crossroads of queerness and Appalachian culture” (12).

A conversation that occurs at the margins of this book is one of the feminization and subjugation of Appalachian land that has caused irreparable damage and will inevitably affect future generations of queer Appalachians. The contributors to this collection lament a seeming inevitability of the desecration

of Appalachian land. These rhetorics echo across the Global Souths as rural and marginalized peoples and nations contend with increasingly destructive environmental forces. As queer scholars, the counterrhetorics and intellectual legwork that defend the place of queer Appalachians can be employed to defend the land and water as well. *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia* amplifies intersectional voices and makes queer Appalachia's strong sense of place legible to scholars who study queer storytelling across disciplines.

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