

## Introduction

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In the year 2020, the United States of America will commemorate an important anniversary: its first century as a demographically urban nation. By then, more than 80 percent of Americans will live either in cities with populations of at least fifty thousand or in what the U.S. Census Bureau refers to as “urban clusters”—groups of slightly smaller, effectively interrelated municipalities, which most people call “suburbs.” Clearly, American modernity and the American metropolis go hand-in-hand.

Yet, as profoundly normal as some form of urban existence has come to be for the vast majority of Americans, urban space itself is oddly atypical of the U.S. national landscape. Including Alaska, statistically urbanized areas account for a mere 2.62 percent of the United States’ total land area. Remove Alaska from the equation and that number increases slightly, but only to 3.12 percent. This means that in the United States, almost 97 percent of territory—some 3,443,773 square miles in total—remains nonurbanized, or “rural,” in character. It should probably come as little surprise, then, that the *idea* of rurality continues to figure prominently in the collective ethos of American society, and indeed the ethos of many urbanized societies around the world, not just as a name we give to sparsely populated regions, but to something that is imagined to be a distinctive way life complete with its own traditions, institutions, and worldviews.

Not that our persistent investment in an idea of rurality actually requires all that much explaining, especially today when it arguably does more conceptual work than it ever has before. In fact, and as literary critic Raymond Williams noted decades ago, rurality has long served as a kind of constitutive outside to urban life precisely because its overwhelming vastness accommodates an absolutely dizzying array of fanta-

sies and associations, including the popular conceit that rural life is, by definition, unchanging.<sup>1</sup> Or, if not entirely unchanging, then rural life is at least thought by many to be significantly *slower* than life in cities, a characteristic that is itself rife with disparate connotations ranging from stupidity (in people) to welcome relief (on weekends). Slowness can also suggest prudence or stubborn recalcitrance, and people who identify as “rural,” or who have been identified in that way, surely exhibit both tendencies, not unlike the population at large. For example, where the natural environment is concerned, people who make their living as farmers understand far better than most where food comes from, and at what cost. As a result, they tend to be much more attuned to the astounding complexity and fragility of the global food supply than people who have simply come to expect that the shelves of their local supermarket will be fully stocked every time they stop to grab something for dinner on the way home from the office. But many farmers also deeply resent organized efforts to “save” the natural environment, or “protect” it—so much so, in fact, that the American Farm Bureau Federation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have essentially become sworn enemies. This is a deep irony, if ever there was one, particularly given the fact that farmers and the rural communities they tend to live in arguably have more to lose than anyone in the environment’s gradual destruction. But this apparent contradiction is also a perfectly predictable consequence of capitalism’s capacity to erase the history of labor from commodities, even as it transforms everything, including “unspoiled nature,” into one.

Of course, when people talk about “rural” life today, they are not just referring to farming; they are often also referring to things like religiosity, which is typically thought to inform the worldviews of rural and small-town Americans to a much greater extent than it does the lives of city-dwellers. What is more, in the United States, where “rural” religiosity is almost uniformly thought of as being Christian in character, it is usually imagined to be of a distinctly puritanical, fire-and-brimstone, “old-timey,” Southern Baptist variety, not that touchy-feely, “New Age” Jew-nitarian stuff one encounters in more permissive urban churches and reformed synagogues. There is some truth in this, certainly. But there is also a lot of untruth, at least historically speaking. In addition the fact that Roger Williams, who founded the American Baptist Church, was actually branded a heretic by the Puritans of the

Massachusetts Bay Colony and run off into the woods, or the fact that American Unitarianism is almost as old the United States itself, it is also important to remember that Pentecostalism, and various other forms of antiliberal theology that have flowed from the American fundamentalist movement, are decidedly modern innovations dating back to the early *twentieth* century, a period rife with potential for would-be evangelists precisely because it was so uncertain at that point what the future of organized religion would be in the United States.

To be sure, knowing this does not change the fact that urbanization and secularization do seem to have something very important to do with each other as long-term processes of social and cultural transformation. But it does suggest that we need to think twice before acceding to the all-too-familiar notion that a particular kind of religiosity is the inevitable consequence of rural life. Nor, for that matter, are ignorance, racism, or membership in the Republican Party, although these are also attributes that are routinely hinted at when left-leaning political commentators puzzle themselves silly over the behavior of “rural voters,” including their much commented-upon tendency to vote against their own economic interests, narrowly understood.

We also need to think twice before acceding to the notion that rural life necessarily involves isolation from broader national and international trends. In fact, rural America has been quite radically transformed since 1920, particularly through the rise of new communication, information, and transportation technologies, and often in ways that accord remarkably well with the predictions of Karl Marx and others who made prescient note early on of capitalism’s tendency to “annihilate space” by tethering local economies together into national and international markets. In addition to an unparalleled expansion of the national transportation infrastructure in the years since World War II, the United States has witnessed one communications revolution after another, especially over the past century—revolutions that have effectively knit the nation-state together into a complex web of strong and weak ties. As a result, it has in some respects become difficult to differentiate between rural American life and American life in general.

This does not mean that that rural America is going away, however. In fact, since 1920, the number of people who live in statistically rural areas has slowly increased from just over 51 million to just under 60 million,

a figure roughly comparable to the total population of many European nations including Italy, France, and United Kingdom. What is more, as of 2000, the *vast* majority of these people—about 46 million of them, or roughly 16 percent of the United States’ total population—live in areas with population densities of 999 people per square mile or fewer—areas that are so sparsely settled that the U.S. Census Bureau officially classifies those who live in them as people who are “not in a place” at all.

As students of culture, we are always a little wary of statistics. We are also suspicious of the kinds of classificatory terms that seem to arise whenever they are put to use. For example, in the preceding paragraphs we talk about “Americans,” “U.S. territory,” and “nations” as if the meanings of such terms were self-evident and uncontested when nothing could be farther from the truth. Nevertheless, and as conscious as we are of the inherently exclusionary logic that subtends such a vocabulary, we find statistics to be useful here because they help to illustrate the peculiar position that rural space has come to occupy in the context of twenty-first-century American culture.

Put simply, “rural America” is strange. Some might even go so far as to say it is queer. At the very least it is complicated, and at times downright confounding, at least for a concept that is as supposedly commonsensical and familiar as the idea of rurality is often imagined to be. It is simultaneously everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. It is ever-present and yet a thing of the past. It is at once archetypically American and atypical of America. It even shrinks (as a *percentage* of the overall population) as it expands (in real population numbers).<sup>2</sup> Rural America is strange as well in the sense that it has come to represent many qualities that a lot of the people who live there (wherever “there” is) simply do not possess, including whiteness, deeply rooted American nativity, and, most importantly for our purposes here, heterosexuality.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for all that the term “rural” *does* connote in the context of twenty-first-century American culture, one thing that it is almost never used to signify is gender or sexual diversity. On the contrary, when most people talk about “rural and small-town values,” they are referring at least in part to a culture of sexual conservatism that is generally assumed to be intolerant of gender and sexual diversity at best, if not overtly sexist and homophobic.

Given everything we have just said about the capaciousness and malleability of the term “rural”—its astonishing capacity to accommodate and reflexively corroborate demonstrably amorphous and even patently ahistorical presumptions about the character of nonmetropolitan life—the reader will probably not be surprised to learn that the editors of this volume actively resist the automatic yoking together of rurality and pretty much anything, including overt homophobia. But in truth, the perception that “rural” Americans are increasingly arrayed against LGBT Americans is not without some basis in fact. Indeed, over the past several decades especially, rural Americans have arguably done more than their fair share to block various efforts to advance the civil rights, and even the basic human rights, of LGBT people in the United States. What is more, they have often claimed to take these actions *in defense of rural America* and the way of life it supposedly represents, as if to suggest that same-sex desire and gender nonconformity are themselves responsible somehow for the myriad problems that many nonmetropolitan communities have been dealing with since the farm crisis of the Reagan Era—problems that include job loss, persistent outmigration, eroding tax bases, school consolidation, crumbling infrastructure, and, most recently, a surge in methamphetamine use among rural young people that is so extreme that meth addiction has almost certainly eclipsed crack cocaine addiction as the United States’ most significant drug problem.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, for all this—for all the finger-pointing, fiery invective, and viciously discriminatory ballot initiatives to have come out of nonmetropolitan communities in recent years—we have also seen how important rural America can be in the movement to expand equality for LGBT people. Just consider the fact that Vermont, America’s most rural state, was also the first state to legalize gay marriage by legislative action in 2009. Three years later, Maine, which ranks third on that list, became the first state to approve marriage equality by popular referendum. Consider as well that in January 2013, Vicco, Kentucky, population 335, became the smallest municipality to pass an ordinance banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>5</sup> In California, by contrast, where nearly 90 percent of residents live in statistically urban areas, making it the fourth most urban state in the United States, it took a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to restore marriage rights to same-

sex couples after voters elected to ban the practice of same-sex marriage by constitutional amendment in 2008. Similarly, in Florida, America's fifth most urban state, lesbians and gay men were not only barred from marrying by constitutional amendment until 2015 when the matter was decided on the national level by the U.S. Supreme Court; they were effectively forbidden to adopt otherwise unwanted children, a policy that was so blatantly mean-spirited that not even states like Wyoming and Alabama (both of which are predominantly rural *and* notoriously conservative) had it.

To be sure, there are big differences between states like Florida or California and states such as Kentucky or Vermont. Most obviously, Florida and California are unusually large, both in terms of their population and their geographical size.<sup>6</sup> Vermont and Kentucky, on the other hand, are unusually small. Florida and California are also extremely diverse in the sense that both states contain densely populated coastal areas that abut more sparsely populated, agriculturally productive inland regions. As such, their social, economic, and political landscapes arguably more closely resemble the social, economic, and political landscape of the nation as a whole than they do the landscape of smaller, more socially, economically, and politically uniform states like Kentucky or Vermont. Still, the fact remains that when future historians sit down to write the story of lesbians' and gay men's fitful struggle to overcome what some have already characterized as the last and most important barrier to full social and political enfranchisement, they are necessarily going to have to contend with what we might choose to describe as the city's limits within the landscape of early twenty-first-century American politics. For while it is undoubtedly true that "city air makes one free" in certain respects, it clearly does not make one a rights-bearing citizen, particularly in the context of a nation that cleaves as tenaciously as the United States does to centuries-old regional antagonisms and various other sorts of unfinished business with roots stretching back in time to the founding of the Republic, and even deeper in some cases.

To be clear, the significant point here is not just that predominantly rural regions or states can be unexpectedly supportive of gender and sexual minorities; nor is it even that predominantly urban states can be surprisingly hostile to them, although both of these statements have turned out to be true in the American case. The point is that the spatial

politics of gender and sexuality are enormously complicated—far more complicated, certainly, than they are often imagined to be. As recent events have clearly shown, they are also profoundly consequential to pretty much everyone’s everyday life. This obviously includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender individuals, and any number of other queer folks whose access to resources and protections now literally depends in many cases on where they stand. But it also includes the unprecedented number of straight people who increasingly feel obliged to take a position on the “question” of gender and sexual diversity’s proper place in American culture, either by affirming their faith in the durability of social and cultural pluralism or by affirming their faith in a wrathful and, we are told, decidedly angry god—and this regardless of where they live.

Today more than ever, space matters where the politics of gender and sexuality in the United States are concerned, not because it is so powerfully determinative, but because its effects are so wildly unpredictable. Recent developments in the ongoing struggle for LGBT rights suggest this. The American public’s eager embrace of films like *Brokeback Mountain* suggests this. Even geospatially sensitive queer social and sexual networking platforms suggest this. Just try it. The next time you find yourself in the “middle of nowhere,” take a moment to fire up an app like Grindr. Turns out, we really are everywhere. What is more, queers really do want everything, just as the old Queer Nation slogan used to assert. They want friends. They want lovers. Some of them want to get out more; others want to stay in. Some of them are looking for their one and only, others for a third or a fourth. Some are really into muscular arms. Others are much more deeply invested in their Second Amendment right to keep and bear them. All of which is not to say that located-ness no longer matters. Rather, it is to suggest that we can no longer presume to know in advance what located-ness will mean. And in fact, we probably never could.

It is really here—at the place where familiar spatial categories cease to explain Americans’ experiences of gender and sexual difference and instead begin to raise new questions about those experiences—that *Queering the Countryside* aims to intercede. To be sure, many of the essays that comprise this volume do depend for their analytic coherence upon the notion that the concept of rurality continues to mean something in the

context of contemporary American culture. Quite a few of them also shed new light on the experiences of LGBT Americans who reside in undeniably nonmetropolitan locales. But this volume was not conceived as an effort to plug a hole in the existing scholarly literature dealing with LGBT life in the United States. Nor do we intend to spend much time proffering hectoring correctives to queer studies, a field that all three of the editors of this volume have critiqued at various points in the past for its widely acknowledged tendency to turn a blind eye toward the rural and nonmetropolitan. Instead, our primary goal is to explore the conceptual space that begins to open up once we acknowledge that “rural America” is neither a monolith nor an apparition.

If *Queering the Countryside* demonstrates anything, it is that “rural” is first and foremost a name we give to an astoundingly complex assemblage of people, places, and positionalities. In this respect, “rural” is not entirely unlike “queer” itself, a term that surely carries with it both a troubled and troubling past, but one that was actively reclaimed by LGBT activists and scholars beginning in the 1990s precisely because it is indeterminate and unstable, as well as because, frankly, it had often been used as a term of derision, one that was meant to shame gender and sexual nonconformers in much the same way that terms like “hayseed,” “redneck,” and “hick” have been used to shame uncouth nonmetropolitans. Of course, recognizing that rurality shares certainly family resemblances with queerness does not necessarily clarify what “rural America” is; in fact, it may further complicate matters. And this can be frustrating in much the same way that theorizing “queerness” can sometimes be frustrating. After all, one does eventually begin to feel the need to find something definite to hold on to, with space as much as sex—some understanding of what constitutes the “rural” that can help one begin to decide what one should be looking at, or to whom, and where, exactly. Nevertheless, we believe that it is the very conceptual instability that the phrase “rural America” neatly covers over that makes it so interesting, and so rife with untapped possibility.

It is worth noting, of course, that we are not the first scholars to sense this possibility. In fact, this volume might be seen as a direct response to repeated calls issued by a number of scholars over the past ten or fifteen years for paying increased attention to nonmetropolitan America generally, particularly in the context queer studies, a field that has indeed

tended to focus more often than not on urban life. But we also hope that this volume will help to move the current debate beyond a sustained critique of “metronormativity,” a term theorist J. Jack Halberstam coined nearly a decade ago to describe the tendency of LGBT culture, including LGBT scholarship, to valorize the conspicuous urbanity of queer life in the United States and elsewhere, and even to presume it.<sup>7</sup>

At some point, critique does begin to harden into dogmatic orthodoxy. And when that happens, people understandably begin to feel less challenged and transformed than chastened and policed by incessant reminders of all they take for granted. This does not mean that such reminders should necessarily cease or give way simply because some people decide that they are “over it.” But such critiques do eventually need to give rise to something more than endlessly reiterated variations on themselves. So, for example, it is understandable if some queer studies scholars who were initially moved to self-reflectivity by early critiques of rampant metronormativity within the field, and within queer culture generally speaking, have started to push back somewhat by asking what it is, precisely, that their metro-chauvinism has supposedly forestalled them from seeing, or understanding, about the predicament of queer life, or its potential. Equally understandable are encouraging, but we think perhaps premature, pronouncements that the field of queer studies has itself borne witness to a “rural turn” in recent years that is already well on its way toward being played out. “Don’t we already *know* that there are lesbians, gay men, trans folks and other queers in rural areas?” one occasionally hears someone ask these days. “Haven’t we always?”

Our initial response to such questions is “No, not really.” At best, much early work in the field of LGBT studies, and later queer studies, left the possibility open for subsequent investigation; at worst, it dispensed with concern for nonmetropolitan history and culture altogether. But as we have already noted, all that is water under the proverbial bridge so far as we are concerned. Far more disturbing than the glib dismissiveness of such questions, from our perspective, is their astounding reductionism. After all, is that really what LGBT and queer studies have been? What they are? A now three-decades’ long mission to explore queer new worlds, to seek out new lesbians and gays, to boldly go where we (apparently) have always been aware that we were before anyway? Perhaps on some level. Certainly no one can deny the genuine thrill of discovering

evidence of subversion where one had previously assumed strict compliance, or even mere perversion where one previously assumed banal “normalcy.” Still, we can think of no serious scholars of LGBT life in either the country or the city who have ever contented themselves by proving that same-sex sexual behavior and gender nonconformity happens, or happened, or that such behavior has often led to a sense of difference or distinctiveness that some come to think of as a sexual identity.

Nevertheless, let us assume for the sake of argument that we *do* already know this one thing about rural queer life: that it exists, and most likely has existed in some form another for a long time. Are we therefore done? In other words, is that all we really need to know, or even *care* to know, about what is happening, or what has happened, in ninety-seven out of each one hundred square miles of territory that comprise the United States? Is that all we care to know about what has happened in the rest of the world, the vast majority of which is also “rural” in a similar sense? We think not. We think not because this is precisely the sort of instrumental shorthand that has tended to reduce “rural America” to little more than a belated location populated by a dwindling number of people whose primary relevance to the study of American culture are the contributions they made a century ago or, worse still, their seemingly inevitable fated-ness to eventually become, in the words of historian John L. Shover, America’s “last minority.”<sup>8</sup> But we also think not because we know that there are numerous genuinely vexing conceptual problems related to gender and sexuality that the idea of the rural can help us begin to work through.

Take the meaning of “conservatism”—generally, but especially in terms of the role that conservatism supposedly does or does not play in LGBT and queer life in the United States. *Traditionally*, gender and sexual nonconformers of all varieties have tended to be imagined as radical actors within the landscape of American social and political life—and not just by social and political conservatives. *Traditionally*, many gender and sexual nonconformers have tended to imagine themselves radical actors. As Jasbir Puar has noted, however, and Karl Marx before her, vanguardism has a strange tendency to switch polarities. Thus, what was radical yesterday—say, the demand for marriage equality in a society that measures enfranchisement in terms of perceived legitimacy and access to institutions like marriage—can easily come to represent collusion

with the status quo today. This in turn creates spaces for new modes of critique, modes that are often subtended by an impulse to resist interpolation into the highly charged national/globalized discourse of identity politics. Are such shifts and reversals necessarily evidence that queer politicking always operates at what is properly understood as the *leading edge* of political engagement, however? Or are there ways in which the moving of the bar might actually be thought of as a queer form of conservatism—one that involves a lot of bargaining and the acceptance of half-measures, while also seeking to maintain what might be characterized as a tradition of antisexist, antihomophobic dissent in the face of normativity, including ascendant forms of homonormativity?

As we noted above, Americans have shown few signs that they are ready to abandon the term “rural” as an ostensibly meaningful descriptor for particular places, certain kinds of people, and entire ways of life. In fact, there is a strong indication that the idea is actually taking on new life in the twenty-first century. That is, at least in the United States, what the term “rural” names today is something more than sparsely populated territory. Rather, what it names is a world view, and a decidedly conservative one at that. We are not saying that all people who identify with “rurality” are conservative; nor are we saying that all conservatives are automatically appreciative of “rurality.” But we are saying that the term “rural” seems to imply certain things these days, not the least important of which is a stubbornly persistent attachment to highly traditional views regarding gender and sexuality and, by extension, an aggressive, sometimes even murderous, antipathy toward gender and sexual difference. Those who identify themselves and are identified by outsiders as rural are raised with certain orientations toward outsiders, locals, social responsibility, community responsibility, and “how to behave.” The various manifestations of socialization are endless and influenced by social class, religion, and race. The political expression of rural socialization can range from the fundamentalist Christian or the libertarian all the way to the far left of progressive communal living on the coasts.

Unfortunately, the history of nonmetropolitan spaces as locales of intolerance combined with a reluctance for rapid change have fashioned the rural as inherently backward and hostile. Yet, the supposed sharp borders between where overt hostility ends and moves to tolerance and eventually into celebration are less clear when thinking through the sub-

ject positions upon which the rural is constituted. As one heads out to the country, the institutional frameworks positioning subjects become more vague, more customary, more local, and more difficult to discern without insider knowledge. What it means to be rural is mired in power-laden signs, by which individuals are included, excluded, surveilled, and dominated within and by the social field. Therefore, the dominant discourse about the ideal types or the “common sense” of rurality are challenged by rural queers, not by inventing a new form of queerness, but rather by using existing signs from the social field in distinct and novel ways as a critique of limitations on conservatism and rurality.<sup>9</sup>

### The Two Imaginaries and a Rural “Impasse”

The editors of this volume and the scholars who contributed essays to it are attempting to think through a fundamental problem in queer scholarship: the tendency to generate imaginary spaces on the two distinct poles of freedom and intolerance. Traditionally, these poles have been between the small town and the urban. In her landmark essay, “Get Thee to a Big City,” Kath Weston tells us: “The gay imaginary is not just a dream of a freedom to be gay that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between urban and rural life.”<sup>10</sup> The structure of thinking Weston reveals—an urban versus rural dichotomy—is written throughout the history of queer studies as well as through the popular and activist queer imagination. This structure, despite being inadequate for describing queer rural lives, masks the ways in which the imaginary of urban gay emancipation and the imaginary of a heteropatriarchal rural life co-construct one another. We are not denying there is a core of realities to the imaginary, yet the conflation of everyday life with the phantasmal produces and imposes particular subjectivities that gloss over individual and collective constructions of queer selfhoods. Co-constructed imaginaries allow each pole of geographically queer distance to “otherly” reify one another. In this descriptive locality, every story of homophobic violence in Middle America, such as that of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, gives urban America a location for anti-queer violence. In turn, the carefully constructed media activist image of urban gay sexual freedom and emancipation politics gives those living in carefully negotiated

rural contexts an unattainable guidepost for their own subjectivity. Metro- and rural normativity become dependent on one another to signal a form of modern sexual achievement—or a distinct, notable lack of it. Modern urban sexual achievement becomes an azimuth of queer visibility upon which the homophobia clinometric slides increasingly toward the rural. Metrosexuality knows who and what it is based on: its temporal, social, and geographic distance from the heteronormative. Through this construction, what the rural imagines about itself and the ways it is imagined discursively proffer the erosion of visibility and tolerance as one heads north, east, south, or west from the metropole.

Recent work on the queer urban-rural dichotomy focuses on the constructedness of a “metronormativity” and its hegemonic encompassing of queer subjectivity. As Halberstam tells us, “the metronormative story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’ is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy.”<sup>11</sup> The movement from persecution to tolerance is sketched on the life trajectory of rural queers through ideas of coming out and their eventual emancipation through relocation to urban spaces. The temporality of the narrative is given spatial capital by providing the discursive platform for geographic metronormative hegemony. Spatial metronormativity is skillfully harnessed in both popular and academic understandings of queer lives outside the city. Scott Her-ring cautions us to see metronormativity not as only existing in this or any other particular moment of modernity, but instead “to see any particular instance of metronormativity as a historically conditioned social field whose components try desperately to exceed and even more desperately to naturalize this historical specificity.”<sup>12</sup> Naturalizations come in the form of typological renderings of the metronormative, which are the most easily identifiable because they are the most visible. Typologies of metronormativity produced by specific historic moments seen as sociopolitical positives—Stonewall, ACT UP New York—normalize an urbane sexual/gender expression. The naturalization of rural heteronormativity finds its footing in the equally negative experiences of violence, intolerance, and right-wing political discourse. The rural queer lacks visibility not only because of local hostility, but also because the absence of visibility is required as a structural component of metronormativity. Metronormativity itself becomes part of the epistemological apparatus

distancing rural queers from what Karen Tongson refers to as the “enlightened liberal subject [who has emerged] from out of the darkness.”<sup>13</sup>

Drawing on queer rurality to challenge metronormativity has been and continues to be useful for critiquing particular forms of queer spatial hegemony, and the contributors to this volume make good use of this strategy. Yet, what if we move from, or at least amend, a spatially defined dichotomy to a more affective mediated space, such as Lauren Berlant’s notion of “attachment”? For Berlant attachments are relations to “compromised conditions of possibility,” which are inevitably fantasies of perfect life circumstances.<sup>14</sup> These perfect life circumstances circulate in the form of fantasies about a “good life,” which is not sustainable in present sociopolitical conditions. Yet, these fantasies of the good life become “a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.”<sup>15</sup> For Berlant these promises exist in contrast to the conditions that wear on people daily and create a need to adjust to encounters with the realities that challenge fantasy. These encounters generate “impasses,” which are opportunities for melancholy over the poor fit between reality and fantasy. Simultaneously, impasses are also crises of the ordinary, which provide opportunities for “developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on.”<sup>16</sup> Choosing to optimistically attach oneself, and one’s desire, to fantasy rather than recognizing the destructive conditions of attachments reproduces the conditions of hegemonic normativity. Fantasmal optimism masks “a bad life that wears out the subject who nonetheless, and at the same time, finds their conditions of possibility within it.” Thinking through impasses would potentially push “queer rurality” in the realm of “bad attachments.”<sup>17</sup> Berlant’s point, relative to our discussion, is that it is elitist and reproductively hegemonic to dismiss bad attachments simply because they are bad by normative standards, particularly given the fact that bad attachments are often the best attachments that many people can afford.

The sentiment of urban enlightened and sexually free subjects creates an impasse that effectively tells rural LGBTQ-identifying people that they cannot be happily queer right where they are and should expect hostility—and in fact deserve it—if they do stay in their communities. This attitude toward rural queers produces sets of knowledge that ignore

the dialectical relationship between queer desires within the spaces in which they occur and the ways they “mutually shape one another.”<sup>18</sup> The social, economic, and political positioning of rural queers forces a kind of synthesis between desire and secrecy. The synthesis, which may be momentary, marks geographic spaces in hostile environments, but also discursively claims ideological space. This process of mutual shaping, however, is often seen as lacking agency. The synthesis of desire and secrecy purposefully lacks a visibility out of fear or absence of sociopolitical voice and is thus unintelligible to nonrural queers. We also have to consider whether the lack of visibility necessitating the dialectic is less a reflection of the absence of urban-defined agency and more a complex set of negotiations required to synthesize sexual desire with connection to place. In this way, many rural queers struggle with reconciling their deep connection to or pride in their hometowns with the popular representation of their communities as backward, ignorant, and unlivable—not just for queer folks, but for anyone with taste or class. They feel they are not supposed to see their communities as viable places to live, and they are told that they need to choose between being queerly out of place in the country or moving to a big city to find legitimate visibility.

We are also being careful not to gloss over the heterogeneity of urban queer landscapes framed by socioeconomics and race. These landscapes are also the sociopolitical victims of metronormativity. As Jasbir K. Puar writes, “propping up urban scapes as optimal for the proliferation of homonationalisms both effaces the varied topography of cities and functions as a displacement of urban queer bashing in favor of fetishistic renderings of violence encountered in small towns and rural areas.”<sup>19</sup> The negative experiences of the urban queer of color are just now finding their way into the literature and being theoretically considered as an aspect of broader configurations of queer subjectivity. The “effacement” of the race, gender, and sexual “topography” of the urban queer subject continues to undermine the variegated landscape of the urban, and the historic retrofitting of the queer into urban space benefits from a reconsideration of outsider social openings. The rural queer bears a much greater resemblance to urban queer subcultures than either equates to “global gay models” of metronormativity.<sup>20</sup> Both the contours of the rural queer and heterogenous scapes of sexuality, gender, and trans-

identification require insider knowledge of power differentials, cultural hybridity, and a visibility attuned to local history and the realities of social life as it is lived “on the ground,” wherever that ground may be.

### Queer as Country

The political registers of a gay activism and a queer theory position rurality as a marginal subjective space. But like many organizing categories, this one was mobilized selectively and often took the form of a conspicuous preoccupation with *urban* sexual subcultures. This emphasis on the urban was partly a consequence of the serendipity of politics, but it was also a product of the circumstances under which sex and sexuality were brought into the orbit of scholarly scrutiny in the first place. Of course, even if one or more of these things were true—even if the story of queer life in the United States up until now were prohibitively difficult or impossible to write in retrospect—we would still need a variant of queer studies that focused on rural and nonmetropolitan space. After all, and regardless of whether or not there was such a thing as queer rural life in the past, the fact is that there is most definitely such a thing as rural queer life in the United States today. It may not be ideal. It may not even be a form of life that most queers would elect for themselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century given the choice. But that does not mean it does not exist.

It most certainly does exist: just look online. While it is undoubtedly true that the Internet has made the world a smaller place by transmitting cultural knowledge from point A to point B virtually instantaneously, and while it is certainly possible, as Dennis Altman and others have suggested, that this instantaneous transmission of cultural knowledge has had the effect of homogenizing lesbian and gay culture on a global scale, the Internet has also revealed the world to be a much larger and more complicated place than many of us previously thought that it was. For instance, a cursory glance at most lesbian and gay social networking sites reveals just how geographically far flung the modern queer “community” actually is. Of course, users of these sites do not typically spend a lot of time explaining *why* they live where they live. And even when they do, they are seldom free from ambivalence or conflict about their own provincial circumstances. But being ambivalent or conflicted is

something different from being irrelevant, or unimportant; and it is certainly something entirely different from not being at all. If there is one pretense of lesbian and gay historiography that we believe rural queer studies has the potential to unsettle, it is the notion that lesbian and gay identity can (or should) be conceived as homogenous across time and space. For example, it is fairly common for skeptics to concede that same-sex sexuality behavior and gender nonconformity have nonmetropolitan histories while simultaneously insisting that modern gay identity is in fact a product of the social aggregation that occurred in American cities as a consequence of twentieth-century urbanization. This sort of compromise position is certainly a welcome relief from the wildly generalized overstatements about the sheer improbability of rural queer life that passed for empirical knowledge of it during the early years of the field's formation. But even this compromise assumes a great deal. For one thing, it assumes that identity formation is the proper measure of history. For another, it assumes that gender and sexual identities are formed only one way—through the recognition of similarity in others, of sameness. But is it really an awareness of our *similarity* to one another that has defined queer experience in the United States? What about the experience of being *different*? Surely that is not an experience that simply goes away when one passes through the city gates. And if it is not something that simply goes away—if difference is as constitutive of queer experience as similarity—then why would we not have something important to learn from studying rural queer lives even, or perhaps especially, if those lives are marked by forms of difficulty, discrimination, and isolation that are relatively unknown in urban contexts? And even if they weren't unknown, when has popularity or the relative desirability of a subject or circumstance ever determined whether or not we would bring our critical attention to bear on it? As we hope that the reader will discover, the essays that comprise this volume entertain and wrestle thoughtfully with all of these important questions, and then some.

### Queering the Countryside: A First Step

Many of the essays included in this volume were first presented as working papers at a conference held on the campus of Indiana University Bloomington in November of 2010. The scholars who authored them

range widely in terms of both their disciplinary affiliations and professional rank. That diversity is intentional and important: intentional because we wanted to make sure that readers would have the opportunity to hear from both scholars whom they already know and trust and scholars whom they will undoubtedly come to know and learn to trust in the years ahead; important because we wanted to make clear that, like so many of the most transformative fields of inquiry that have emerged over the past several decades, the project of rural queer studies must be conceived of as an emphatically interdisciplinary one from the outset.

We have organized this volume into four sections. Each section emphasizes one perspective on rural queer studies that we believe needs highlighting in order to demonstrate persuasively that this emerging area of inquiry is the viable, intellectually vibrant subfield that we already know it to be.

To date, many scholars have simply assumed that relevant evidence would be scarce or that familiar archives have nothing important to say about queer life in rural and nonmetropolitan contexts. One of our primary goals is to dispel these myths straight away by front-loading the volume with a multidisciplinary selection of essays authored by new and emerging scholars whose work demonstrates in no uncertain terms what the next wave of rural queer studies scholarship is likely to look like, as well as what it has to offer. While the essays in Part I, “New Archives, New Epistemologies,” are topically and methodologically diverse, each one is significant in a scholarly sense either because it engages a new or relatively unknown archive of source materials or because it revisits more familiar source materials, but from a decidedly innovative rural queer studies perspective.

Like so many aspects of American life, the history of rural life in the United States has been powerfully shaped by race and class. The essays contained in the second part of the volume, “The Rural Turn: Considering Cartographies of Race and Class,” seek to foreground this fact. They also seek to demonstrate what new forms of critical leverage might be gained on the discourses of race and class by approaching them from the vantage point of rural queer studies. Some of the essays accomplish these tasks by way of the particular case studies they investigate; others do so by advancing new conceptual frameworks for thinking about race and/or class in relation to gender and sexuality. But all of the essays

share the common goal of demonstrating how race and class can and should take center stage in our consideration of queer life beyond the city gates.

If we have learned anything from two decades' worth of spatially-minded queer studies scholarship, it is that "urban" and "rural" are dynamic terms rather than static ones. Indeed, they are terms that have always existed in dialectical relation to one another even during those periods when urban culture was receiving the lion's share of scholarly attention. Because one of the aims of this volume is to build connections between the emerging field of rural queer studies and the predominantly urbanist queer studies scholarship that has preceded it, the essays contained in Part III turn a critical eye toward the concept of rurality itself *even* as they demonstrate its undeniable importance to the future of gender and sexuality studies. Some of the essays included in "Back and Forth: Rural Queer Life in Circulation and Transition" do this by emphasizing the transit of bodies and discourses across the real or imagined boundaries that appear to separate rural and urban space; other essays interrogate the gendered and sexual implications of the urban/rural binary itself.

Finally, the essays in the volume's last part, "Bodies of Evidence: Methodologies and Their Discontents," take up the question of methodology, albeit from numerous perspectives and always in relation to topics or case studies that merit careful critical attention on their own terms. It is worth noting that we have intentionally deferred addressing methodology until the end of the volume because we sincerely believe that this collection has the potential to be field-defining. As such, our goal was not to assemble a volume that presents itself as the last word on rural queer studies but rather to assemble one that has the potential to function as a catalyst by suggesting exciting new possibilities and novel approaches to the study of queer life in the United States and beyond. Put somewhat differently, we wanted to conclude with essays that we think will help readers begin to imagine their own fruitful new beginnings in this vibrant and still largely unexplored domain of scholarly inquiry. Regardless of their differences, however, what all of the essays that comprise this volume share in common is a clear sense that there remains something exceedingly important to be said about the role that rural and nonmetropolitan spaces play in shaping gender and sexuality

in the United States and beyond. Having scrutinized the work that follows relatively closely over the course of assembling this volume, we are certainly convinced on this point. We hope that you will be as well.

It is difficult to say in any definitive sense how large a percentage of the general population a group needs to be in order for its members' experiences and perspectives to matter in the broader scheme of things. But speaking as scholars of American culture we can say this: our understanding of American life will be grossly distorted unless we allow those individuals' experiences and perspectives at the margins to inform and shape ongoing debates, especially scholarly ones. Indeed, if we have learned anything over the past three decades, it is that scholars ignore the margins at their peril. They also do a great disservice to the complexity of human experience when they habitually separate forms of marginality that actually overlap in the context of at least some people's everyday lives. As an emerging field of inquiry, rural queer studies is obviously in no position to make claims of comprehensiveness where attentiveness to the experience of life live at the margin is concerned. But as we hope the reader will agree, it does have a great deal to contribute to that work—work that should be of the utmost importance to all of us regardless of where we are located.

#### NOTES

1 See generally, Williams, *The Country and the City*.

2 In this last respect at least, then, and probably in quite a few others, “rural America” is a lot like “white America”—which may explain why the two are so easily thought of as being synonymous, even though they are not, as anyone who has lived anywhere besides the Northeast or Midwest can attest.

3 Coleman, “A Camera in the Garden of Eden.”

4 Reding, *Methland*.

5 Barry, “Sewers, Curfews, and a Ban on Gay Bias.”

6 Mason, *Oklahomo*.

7 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.

8 Shover, *First Majority–Last Minority*.

9 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 330–1.

10 Weston, *Families We Choose*, 274.

11 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 36–7.

12 Herring, *Another Country*, 17.

13 Tongson, *Relocations*, 152.

14 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

15 Ibid., 23.

16 Ibid., 8.

17 Ibid., 27.

18 Howard, *Men Like That*, xiv.

19 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 70.

20 Leung, *Undercurrents*, 15.