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Book Review

Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Space

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Whitlock, Reta Ugena, ed. *Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Place*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2013. Print. Landscapes of Education.

Accounts of queer experiences (particularly in the South) must be heard to address and disperse the “otherness” surrounding the LGBTQ community. It is the educator’s responsibility to witness students’ multifaceted and multidimensional identities. *Queer South Rising* is the collection of queer stories that strives to facilitate this responsibility.

This textbook is an introduction to the Southern queer community with respect for the Southern affinity for story-telling. An introduction to this introduction can be viewed [here](#).

Parts 1, 2, and 3 of *Queer South Rising*

In her introduction, editor Reta Ugena Whitlock explains that as queerness has many expressions that can be identified many ways, the stories of queerness may be arranged in any number of ways. Acknowledging this fluidity, she followed her “initial impression... [and] loosely arranged them according to rather fluid thematic headings” (Whitlock, xxxiv).

Part 1: Ghosts, Myths, and Treasures: Theorizing South and Southernness

Chapters 1 - 9.

These selections “use recognizably structured forms in the construction of their narratives” (Whitlock, xxxiv).

Part 2: Sacrilege! Confronting Southern Institutions

Chapters 10 – 17

These essays are those “whose underlying focus is on a foundational Southern Institution” (Whitlock, xxxv).

Part 3: Ye Mama ‘Nem: Contemplating Webs of Relations

Chapters 18 – 26

These essays feature “relationships with friends and family as their central focus” (Whitlock, xxxvi).

Reoccurring Themes in *Queer South Rising*

The many voices within *Queer South Rising* converge on certain themes and ideas. The repetition of these themes underscores their prevalence and consequential relevance.

Reconciling Multiple Identities

Chapters: 3, 5, 8, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26.

Many queer individuals find themselves confronted by the difficulty of defining themselves in a way that acknowledges their queerness within the context of their other varied identities without overemphasizes nor neglecting that queerness.

“The assumption that a lesbian sexual orientation is inconsistent with an authentic Black identity represents another expression of homophobia, one that complicates the process of integrating one’s sexual orientation identity with other aspects of one’s person” (Love 45).

“As these identities crashed into one another, I was left to question my southern authenticity and challenge every notion of what I had been taught was right from a heteronormative, Christian and [limited] Black perspective” (Cutts 300)

Minorities Within Minorities

Chapters: 1, 3, 5, 14, 16, 18, 19, 25.

A queer identity may coexist with many other minority identities.

“I, like many queer people of color, found myself occasionally marginalized as a minority, within a minority” (Johnson 259).

“This early knowledge of my multiple marginalizations worked less in terms of strict disavowal from a “normal” life than a disorientation of many sorts” (Bui 227).

The Southern Social Context

Chapters: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26.

The South as a geographical, political, and social environment encompasses a distinct culture that must be examined in its own unique context.

“Although everyone has their own sense of queerness just as everyone has their own sense of regional identity, feeling embattled- both as Southern and as queer- can foster a shared sense of identity where “kin” can mean more than blood relatives” (Jackson 121).

The Three 'R's of Religion, Region, and Race

Chapters: 3, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25.

Extending from the Southern social context, the three R's of religion, region, and race encompass the boldest distinctions between the expressions and experiences of Northern and Southern queer communities.

“Three that factored in the Southern teachers’ comfort levels at the school that did not appear salient in the New England study were the three R’s of regionality, religion, and race” (Jackson 114).

“The south most visibly reflects those values [of devotion to family, church, and state] that represent the heartland of America and that are often associated with negative attitudes and feelings about homosexuality. Yet, with the South’s longstanding history of overt racism and separatism, the attitudes about sexuality are not surprising” (Cutts 307).

A Queer Curriculum

Chapters: 4, 7, 8, 17.

This textbook, as an installment in the *Landscapes of Education* series, both directly and indirectly addresses what a queer space is and what a queer space can be inside the classroom.

“Because of these regional differences, a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to incorporating LGBTQ issues, concerns, and topics, or to coming out in the classroom could prove disastrous” (Jackson 127).

“Narrative of rural formations of queerness is a yearning for practices of freedom and justice. There is a commitment to queering the educational spaces so that there will be inclusion, agency, self-reflection, sustainability, understanding, and democracy. ... we work for profound commitments to democracy and freedom” (Slattery 138).

Chapters in *Queer South Rising*

Chapter 1: Some Odd Place of Ghosts and Shadows: Working Through the Queer Character of Place in Randall Kenan's "Run, Mourner, Run"

The role of location and landscape in Southern literature is to create a dialogue that reaches beneath the narrative to establish the complexity of ideas communicated to the reader, forming a contextual foundation for meaning. The silent conversation between Ray Brown's sexual identity and his land, which is seized by the white landowner through an exploitation of that identity, is explored through the lens of Agrarian ideology, the language of place.

In a textbook addressing what it is to be queer in the south, the introductory essay's role as an analysis of southern literature pushes for the recognition of the physical landscape containing the social landscape that shapes this collection and southern queer life.

Chapter 2: Drag and the Politics of Performance

This essay is an account following the social and practical development of drag in the South. Drag began as an exercise of authority over discriminated minorities because though it displayed behaviors against the social norm, the ridiculing attitude enforced that those activities and those who genuinely participated in them were outside of acceptable behavior. The familial city performance became something larger when drag became an art and sex became politicized following World War II. As an art, drag was first popular inside the military and then from the military into the mainstream culture.

Chapter 3: Examining the Oppressor Within: Lessons Learned by a Northern Researcher in the South

As the author analyzes the influence of social context on Black girls and their self-expression, she explores the influence of social context on her own (queer) expression. A Black lesbian, the author better understands her own integration of and maintenance of her multiple identities through the openness of the girls she studied.

Within this essay, there is a navigation of the role language plays in our perceptions and how both language and perception shape social context and influence expression.

Chapter 4: Dismantling Metrocentric and Metronormative Curricula: Toward a Critical Queer Pedagogy of Southern Rural Space and Place

The pedagogy of the rural South is examined against the context of Northern tolerance of intolerance within this essay. As a result of the South's history of intolerance, there is a certain openness about sensitive issues that does not exist in the North- many northerners believe that because they are more tolerant than their Southern counterparts, their own intolerance is excusable. Consequently, there are wide-spread issues of discrimination and intolerance (against the queer community) in both Northern and Southern schools. The author suggests that the answer (for the rural South, at least) is a critical queer pedagogy that teaches queer students to utilize their home communities.

Chapter 5: Fall Down on Me: Stories of the Club from Black Gay Men in the South

This essay looks at the mask worn by many Black gay men and attempts to peer beyond it. The author explores the importance of group membership and the toll it demands of individual identity.

Chapter 6: A Queer New South City: Lesbians and Gay Men in Mid-20th Century Atlanta

The author analyzes the role of private spaces for white women and men in Atlanta. In a culture that was often openly hostile, private spaces, often revolving around dancing, offered a means of expression that was otherwise unacceptable or even dangerous. These spaces permitted and sustained an illusion of social equality that was otherwise absent. However, even within these private queer spaces, there were social networks divided along lines of gender, race, and class.

Chapter 7: For Queer Teachers, Love Can Be a Battlefield

Addressing the differences between Northern queer teachers and their Southern counterparts, this essay delves into the role of regional identity, the three R's of regionality, religion, and race, and the discussion of queerness in the classroom. Particularly, it affirms that gay rights cannot be a topic for intellectual debate because to do so is to say that someone's rights are up for debate. Further, drawing from the opposing perspectives of Northern and Southern queer teachers, where a queer teacher "coming out" in the North feels their revelation to be healing while the Southern teacher would be told they need a different (spiritual) kind of healing, it is warned that addressing LGBTQ concerns must look different in different classrooms.

Chapter 8: I Was Born on the Wrong Planet: Flights of Fancy, Gone with the Wind, and Other Gay Narratives of the South

Meaning is inseparable from the context in which it is created. Consequently, curriculum and identity reflect their social and geographical context. This essay explores how racial and social identities often define who someone cannot be in the rural South. As a contested place, the South has a commitment to "queering the educational space" within its commitment to democracy and inclusion. LGBTQ voices exist inside of or on top of the complex layers of history.

Chapter 9: Negative Capability in the Mountain South

Through personal reflection and storytelling, this essay explores the conflict against queer individuals that exists inside of a Southern brotherhood. Inside this narrative is an exploration of the second-class citizenship of the queer community.

Chapter 10: Drag You Off to Milledgeville: The Georgia State Hospital and Southern Psychiatric Spaces

The author navigates the politics of identity through Milledgeville's dark past. The ways in which those who are different become the "other" is identified as a significant part of Southern community within this discussion of queer as inseparable from gender and racial identities and socioeconomic status.

Chapter 11: The Hell Train: A Journey from Holy Roller to Feminist Lesbian

This essay follows the challenging development of a queer identity inside (and later outside) of the Pentecostal church. It explores the role of religion and the church on an individual's "outing process." The author explains that development of an LGBTQ identity is markedly different between contexts and highly dependent on those contexts.

Chapter 12: An Open Letter to the Bishop

The author acknowledges the recurring themes of exile and abuse in queer stories from the South, particularly his own. He was sexually abused as a child by a church official. The abuser's actions were condemned by the church, but the official was in a position where he could sexually abuse the author in his youth because of the ideas and attitudes of the church. These perspectives became tools to facilitate abuse, tools that existed explicitly because of the church. However, the author remains hopeful for Southern church culture (although not ignoring its refusal to acknowledge ugly truths and the devastating consequences) for its foundation of grace and forgiveness.

Chapter 13: Becoming Peculiar

This essay is an exploration of the roles of money, religion, politics, and the patriarchy in the author's lesbianism. The author explains how "politics of liberation"- that is, not needing the legitimization of the state to recognize the legitimacy of her relationships and many individual liberations from conformity- can be a form of resistance that is becoming less peculiar.

Chapter 14: Reorienting the South: Locating Queer Refugees and Geographies in Texas

The author, a refugee and queer experiencing multiple marginalizations, navigates and explains the necessity of recognizing a "broad spectrum of queerness" that cannot be accurately or fairly represented in any one-dimensional way. Within this discussion is an acknowledgement of historical forgetfulness, of a queer community that is simultaneously fragmented and connected, and of social capital (and the marginalizations that abound in its absence).

Chapter 15: I Have the Right to Remain Silent

The interactions and intersections between components of identity form the foundation of this essay. The author explains the politics of sexual identity (understanding that to be queer is, in many places, to be immersed in confrontation) within the closet.

Chapter 16: Here's a Little Lagniappe for You....

The author, a sexual and racial minority, explains his expectations that queer communities would be more sympathetic to his experiences with discrimination because they understood what it is like to be a minority. The reality, however, was very different. Color is often just as influential in queer communities as it is in the larger Southern community and queer people of color often find themselves “marginalized as a minority, within a minority.”

By extension, this essay explores the influence of sociocultural forces on homophobia.

Chapter 17: Confessions of a Radical Feminist: Conservative Control of Intellectual Freedom in Higher Education

This essay follows the improvements in the freedom of queer expression and explains why such “queering” is important, particularly in a Southern context.

Chapter 18: Dude

The author, a queer white Southern educator, recounts her relationship with a queer Black educator. The two women are simultaneously brought together and divided by their queerness, a queerness that is different for each woman because of their race. Racism has become less overt and so many people think that it is better to not acknowledge race while still limiting intimacy to members of their same race. Because of this hushed division, one queer woman may not understand the difficulties of being queer for another woman for reasons largely rooted in race. For example, the author explains the role of the church in her life and in the life of her queer Black friend. While the author could walk away from the church that condemned her sexuality, her friend could not simply leave the community that condemned her because that community was central to her social identity. Within this and other examples and stories, this essay identifies and investigates interlocking oppressions.

Chapter 19: My Labels Are [Not] Too Many: My Journey of “Becoming” a Black, Afrocentric, Southern Lesbian

The author examines her own Southern, Black, and queer identities- her multilayered identity. In this autoethnographic exploration, she explains her triple minority status, her familial values that began in Black churches, and the differences between queer experiences dependent on race. Inside of this explanation is an analysis of Critical Race Theory and Afrocentricity.

Chapter 20: Jesus, Dolly Parton, and Solid Gold: Risk and Resilience in a Southern Gay Childhood

This essay is the story of a queer childhood in which the “queer” part was made to be hidden and, somewhat unintentionally, to feel unrealized and unwanted. Following this account of his childhood, the author explains that he has found resolution to this internal conflict in a Jesus and a South (in a dialogue begun by Dolly Parton and Solid Gold) that have helped him experience his life in full.

Chapter 21: The Queering Year

This is a personal narrative following the author’s childhood and the role Rocky Horror Picture Show played in the development of their identity, sexual and otherwise.

Chapter 22: The Way of Holiness

The author relates their personal journey regarding religion with consideration to their queer identity and the conflict within being both queer and religious. The belief system that was the product of this journey is one that recognized the spiritual value in one’s environment and in one’s doubt. Because of the conflict religion has created for queer individuals, the author rejects rules within their personal faith.

Chapter 23: Rubyfruit Masochist

This poem-essay hybrid explores the fear that LESBIAN is a “lark” that ends in social exile. The author practices LESBIAN like sheet music, like something beyond sexual orientation. LESBIAN unfolds, expressed poetically.

Chapter 24: Redneck Sissy: Negotiating Shame as a Queer Male in the Rural South

This autoethnographic essay follows the negotiative process of developing identity when queer in the religious rural South. The author uses his point of view and the consequential perspective shift to guide readers to glimpse themselves while viewing the world of the author. This shift and resulting witness is especially important as studies show that suicide attempts among queer youth have been increasing even inside of a perceived social shift. Shame continues to be prevalent in the queer community and plays an enormous role in the development of a queer identity. In the South in particular, many LGBTQ remain in the church because it provides reassurance in a time when the individual is questioning their self-worth as they navigate and negotiate their shame.

Chapter 25: Trailer Park Queer

The author acknowledges the existence of a mindset of racial superiority that is often particularly rampant in impoverished communities. Inside of poverty, there is often anger because with physical needs often unmet, “secondary” needs- emotional needs- are entirely unacknowledged. This essay follows the consequences of this neglect towards emotional needs on queer children in particular. The dialogue of this is rooted in the author’s own experiences.

Chapter 26: True South

This final essay addresses the function of history in Southern culture and consequently on Southern queer culture. The past continues to enforce the identity of white Protestant males as superior, where everyone else is expected to stay in their place. There exists, then, a conflict inside of the Southern identity. The author's rage at the injustice inherent within this dichotomy fuels a discussion of the contested space that is the South and then, coming from some individual resolution of that confliction, a claim to the South.

Concluding this textbook is this discussion of Southern culture in its entirety, a culture deeply rooted in its past and with a future that seems also to be seeped in discrimination. It serves as both a reflection and a warning to Southern citizens, a final parting remark on the way things are and are becoming, but also how they could be. The volume closes with a tone of concern but also of hope, with a melody that calls for change at the individual and cultural levels.



“Queerness resides not in a coherent rationalized self, but within the contingent movements and fractured thoughts or modes of being that gather to make us into a fragmented but connected community” (Bui 232).