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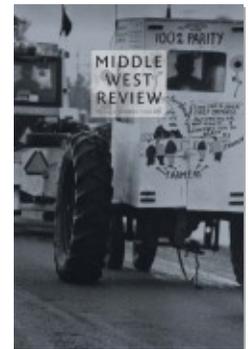
Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America by
Colin R. Johnson (review)

Michael J. Lansing

Middle West Review, Volume 2, Number 1, Fall 2015, pp. 102-103 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0043>



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written while Burroughs was still alive and thus unable to deal with the latter years in Kansas as thoroughly and insightfully as Miles does.

The one drawback to Miles account is that it's overly sympathetic at times. When it comes to writing biography, sympathy can be as compromising as hyperbole, and one often senses that Miles, having maintained a longtime friendship with Burroughs, is too close to his subject, especially in his treatment of Burroughs's killing of his common law wife, Joan Vollmer, in Mexico City in 1951. Burroughs shot Vollmer in the head from a close distance, claiming it was a drunken accident, though changing his version of the events several times when questioned by Mexican authorities. Burroughs fled Mexico soon thereafter and was convicted of manslaughter *in absentia*, later claiming that he was possessed by an "ugly spirit" when he killed Vollmer, an explanation that Miles is willing to take seriously, along with entertaining the possibility that Joan wanted to be killed, and Bill was merely obliging her. The fact that Burroughs's love for firearms never abated in the years following his shooting of Joan, along with the fact that Burroughs viewed women as a viral evolutionary mistake, "a perfect curse," and advocated at times for their outright elimination from the human race, should continue to cloud his motivations with a slight suspicion Miles never seriously entertains. Despite those moments when Miles's admiration for his subject notably influences his perspective, *Call Me Burroughs* is a highly readable, compendious, and intricately rendered portrait of one of the most influential and controversial artists of the twentieth century.

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Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. 264 pp. \$84.50.

Filling a notable scholarly gap, *Just Queer Folks* appropriately critiques the almost unilateral urban focus of most scholarship on queer life in America. But it does much more. Instead of offering a social history of gay and lesbian life in rural districts, the book focuses on how changing understandings of sexuality and gender across the nation during the twentieth century affected rural people's understandings of same sex behavior and gender nonconformity. It utilizes a methodology that outlines "the many forms of

gender and sexual difference that had to be given up or bracketed . . . to forge a sexual epistemology that organizes everything and every body into one of exactly two categories” (17).

Broken into two parts, the book first dissuades readers of any assumptions they have about heteronormativity in rural America. A convincing effort to show the connections between early twentieth century eugenics and agricultural plant and animal breeding is followed by a close reading of the Country Life Movement. The latter drew from the former and imposed binary understandings of both gender and sexuality on people whose understandings of and experiences often confounded such visions.

The second part of the book moves into the 1920s and 1930s. Its chapters examine the homosocial cultures of male migrant workers, queers living in small towns—where their “eccentricities” were often tolerated—homeroetic discourse and gender transgressions in Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and poor white farmwomen deemed unfeminine. The examinations of small towns and agrarian women prove especially useful. Readers learn how community ties might mitigate suspected sexual deviance as well as how urban women shamed farm women for not living up to new standards of womanliness and beauty.

Though the Midwest is not explicitly an object of this study, historians of the region will find the book illuminating. Indeed, the author’s desire to explore these questions emanated from his own experiences growing up in small town Illinois. Some readers will occasionally find the prose off-putting, but those willing to put in the time will benefit from the book’s many insights. *Just Queer Folks* draws from the latest currents in queer theory but does not slavishly depend on them. Indeed, it often pushes back against that literature, demanding that scholars integrate insights gleaned from experiences they’ve oversimplified or overlooked.

The book shatters outsiders’ assumptions about monolithic rural experiences and takes farmers and small town dwellers seriously. Ultimately, *Just Queer Folks* helps historians of every sort to rethink their assumptions about sexual and gender normativity in rural America. That’s a good thing, and it will help future historians create richer and more diverse analyses of the rural Midwest.

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