

Review:

Cartwright, Ryan Lee. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity*. The U of Chicago P (2021)

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The anti-idyll is a “longstanding cultural trope and social optic that produces tales of white rural nonconformity” (3). This optic is used as a way to name the presumed failures of rural communities to perform whiteness “properly”—namely, by refusing to adhere to its demands of heteronormativity and ablenormativity. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of Rural Nonconformity* (2021) by Ryan Lee Cartwright seeks to challenge the anti-idyll through an examination of its proliferation in American cultural history and the ways in which it has left rural communities marginalized. The book functions as a genealogy of the sensationalized anti-idyll, in which Cartwright maps out the origins and expansions of the idea throughout the twentieth century. However, they recognize that there is no straightforward history of social difference in rural communities, and instead use their chapters to provide examples of how a narrative of such a history was created through different cultural artifacts and practices.

To achieve the goals of the project, *Peculiar Places* employs what Cartwright defines as a queercrip historical methodology, which they argue is necessary in order to “read against the grain of anti-idyllic texts—for finding the material and the mundane in what is represented to be monstrous” (13)

through the engagement of queercrip analysis. This analysis also allows for the expansion of the definition of what qualifies as disability or queer histories. Indeed, despite or rather because of the use of queercrip analysis, *Peculiar Places*' subjects do not always fit the conventional labels of disabled or queer. This is intentional; Cartwright suggests that "if we do not require our subjects to meet certain standards of legitimacy, transparency, and belongingness, then we can focus less on categorical terms and more on how power flows" (16).

Peculiar Places is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, titled "Harlots from the Hollow," Cartwright describes the origin of the anti-idyll: the eugenics family studies of the 1920s. They argue that the anti-idyll was formed as a way to place "moral values that had no place in an industrial capitalist society" explicitly and only in rural areas of the country (31). These studies aimed to notice bodily and behavioral differences in rural communities and denote them as social pathologies. In this way, these studies created a way of "diagnosing undesirable traits as evidence of a social disease that could only afflict white people" (47). This allowed for society to consider the problem of supposed rural white degradation without calling white supremacy into question.

In "Curious Scenes," Cartwright examines the continuation of the anti-idyll into the 1930s. To do this, they examine the Farm Security Agency's archive of photography, which was created to "chronicle structural poverty" (49) experienced in rural America and to rehabilitate the image of white rurality. In this chapter, Cartwright clearly demonstrates that hidden within the archive, space existed for both disability and queerness, despite the project's goal of documenting the ideal white citizen.

In the third chapter, "Madness in the Dead Heart," Cartwright produces a compelling, complex historiography about how the criminal case of Edward Gein helped to coalesce previous notions of the anti-idyll into a coherent narrative. They examine the 1957 criminal case of Ed Gein and how it shaped spatialized ideas of rurality and rural monstrosity through the examination of local, regional, and national newspaper coverage of the case. Together, these varying interpretations of the case helped to shift the dominant perspective by dislocating ideas of monstrosity from Gein himself and relocating them as a function of his rurality. It is through the Gein case, Cartwright argues, that the anti-idyll was fully articulated.

"Maimed in Body and Spirit" examines the Appalachian poverty tours of the 1960s. A product of the War on Poverty, these tours promised "glimpses

of the sensational poverty, disability, and non-heteronormativity that purportedly accompanied [the] economic exploitation" (119) prevalent in the region. Although these tours perceived these markers of difference as signs of rural moral failing, Cartwright conceptualizes them not only as ordinary but as desirable.

In the fifth chapter, "Banjos, Chainsaws, and Sodomy," Cartwright explores the proliferation of the anti-idyll into the 1970s urbanoia film genre. Films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) amplified the messages of rural monstrosity first demonstrated in the Gein case. However, Cartwright is overtly critical of these anti-idyllic properties of the genre. These properties, they argue, contribute to the idea that nonnormative embodiments and sexualities are inherently violent or monstrous. Cartwright also provides several key alternative readings of the films. One such alternative reading surrounds the perceived proliferation of disability in rural communities. Although ableist ideology suggests that this proliferation of embodied difference is negative, Cartwright argues that the presence of disabled or queer embodiments is a function of community care and resistance to the institutionalization of difference.

The final section of the book, "Estranged but Not Strangers," examines the resurgence of the anti-idyll in 1990s hate crime documentaries. For this purpose, Cartwright considers two documentaries: *Brother's Keeper* (1992), which explores the "anti-idyllic story of fratricide and fraternal intimacy" among four brothers, and *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998), which documents the murder of Phillip DeVine, Brandon Teena, and Lisa Lambert (168). In examining these cases, Cartwright demonstrates that disability, sexuality, race, and class become weaponized to support ideas that rural spaces are inherently violent and less socially enlightened than urban spaces.

Throughout the project, Cartwright clearly delineates the history of anti-idyll, while also providing considerable evidence that rural individuals and communities are significantly more complicated than the anti-idyll suggests. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity* challenges the reader to consider the complex interconnections and interdependencies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in rural spaces in an effective and accessible manner. As such, this book contributes to a better understanding of the anti-idyllic lens through which individuals are taught to read rural America and of "how fraught those interdependencies can be, particularly on the spatial and social margins" (189).