

ANTJE KLEY AND HEIKE PAUL, EDs. *Rural America*, American Studies—A Monograph Series, Vol. 253 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 510 pp.

In his Executive Order 13575 of June 9, 2011, then-President Barack Obama established the “White House Rural Council” in order to “promote economic prosperity and quality of life in our rural communities.” “Strong, sustainable rural communities,” the Order stated, “are essential to winning the future and ensuring American competitiveness in the years ahead.”¹ Given the importance of rural America not only for the future, but also the past and present of the U.S., the relative neglect of the rural in American Studies—especially when compared to related and partly overlapping concepts such as the pastoral, the regional, or the agrarian—is somewhat surprising. It was thus only fitting that two years after Obama’s order, the German Association for American Studies dedicated its 60th Annual Conference, hosted by the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), to the topic of “rural America” in order to address this long and undue oversight.

Problems of definition may be blamed, amongst others, for the neglect of the rural in academic investigations of American history, culture, and politics: as is well known, the U.S. Census Bureau uses “rural” as a default

category, employing population density and, since 2010, land use as well as other criteria to first define urban areas and then referring to all population, housing, and territory that is left as “rural.”² In their introduction to *Rural America*, in turn, editors Antje Kley and Heike Paul identify five different ways of thinking about rural America: “as history, as national allegory, as category of difference, as regional, and as critical regionalist” (9). Hence, the phrase “rural America” simultaneously designates a vastly heterogeneous cluster of actual geographic and social spaces as well as an almost equally diverse array of images and mental concepts.

The 21 essays collected in *Rural America*, engage with “rural America” in both senses. Ariane Schröder, for instance, discusses “vampire” rituals used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural New England to fight tuberculosis and finds that both the disease itself and the practices employed to treat infected patients served as a tool for social distinction—between different classes in the former and between supposedly progressive cities and stagnant country in the latter case. The contributions by Jerry Hagstrom and Rogelio Saenz, in turn, focus on minorities in rural America, with Hagstrom tracing the institutional discrimination of African-American, Native American, Hispanic American, and gay and lesbian farmers (as well as women farmers) and Saenz using Census data to document the demographic and socioeconomic development of Latinos in rural areas. Both agree that the future of rural communities will heavily depend on minority and particularly Latino populations, although, as Saenz notes, it is unclear whether this will also impact popular and artistic imaginations of rural America (272).

It is these imaginations and representations of rural America in cultural artifacts from literature, fictional and documentary film, photography, landscape design, and music, as well as in social practices such as tourism and food foraging, that the majority of the contributions are interested in. Daniel Danbom opens the volume with a broad historical overview of

¹ The White House. “Executive Order 13575—Establishment of the White House Rural Council.” *Federal Register* 76.114 (June 14, 2011). <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-06-14/pdf/2011-14919.pdf>. Obama’s Order has recently been revoked by Donald Trump’s Executive Order on “Promoting Agriculture and Rural Prosperity in America” (signed and released on April 25, 2017), which, however, quite similarly stresses the centrality of rural communities for “America’s national security, stability, and prosperity” and replaces Obama’s “White House Rural Council” with an “Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity,” designed to “remove barriers to economic prosperity and quality of life in rural America” (The White House. “Presidential Executive Order on Promoting Agriculture and Rural Prosperity in America.” *The White House* [April 25, 2017]. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/25/presidential-executive-order-promoting-agriculture-and-rural-prosperity>).

² Ratcliffe, Michael, et al. “Defining Rural at the U.S. Census Bureau: American Community Survey and Geography Brief.” *U.S. Census Bureau* (December 2016). https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/ua/Defining_Rural.pdf.

the role of the rural in general and the agrarian in particular in American political and social discourses from the Revolution to the twenty-first century, thus providing a useful background for the essays that follow. Dambom finds that due to its increasing conservatism, rural America, “once *the* America, is moving ever farther out of the national mainstream” (30).

In the arts and in popular culture, such a clear trajectory is more difficult to discern. Literary works discussed range from Charles Brockden Brown’s gothic novel *Arthur Mervyn, or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799/1800), Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), and John Rollin Ridge’s dime novel *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (written in 1854) to twentieth-century prison writing, James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Flannery O’Connor’s “A View of the Woods” (1957), Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991), and Suzanne Collins’s young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010). The essays on these texts alone testify to the versatility of the concept of the rural: whereas, for instance, Mark Büchsel reads Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* as articulating a reformed and purged pastoralism that is deeply rooted in a specifically rural context, Carmen Dextl and Kerstin Knopf show how Johnson’s *Autobiography* and American prison literature, respectively, depict the rural as the origin site of lynch logics and plantation regimes (which by no means, however, remained confined to the rural). According to Jochen Achilles, finally, O’Connor’s “A View of the Woods” portrays the rural as the site of a struggle over land use between industrial modernism, conservative agrarianism, and an almost Transcendentalist, idealized view of nature without endorsing either of these positions.

Filmic depictions of rural America are no less diverse, with the rural—or, more specifically, agrarianism—mostly being relegated to the margins in the Western while taking center stage in such fictional movies and documentaries as Robert Redford’s *The Horse Whisperer* (1998) and *Fire from the Heartland* (2010), where rurality, pastoralism, and agrarianism are inextricably linked with (ultra-)conservative social values (see the contributions by Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, Monika Sauter, and Katrin Thomson, respectively).

The supposed dichotomy between country and city, which also plays a role in the essays

by Dextl, Knopf, and Thomson, becomes particularly relevant for the analyses of Berenice Abbott’s photo book *Changing New York* (1939) by Sina A. Nietzsche, New York City’s “High Line” park by Florian Gross, and Vermont’s “Cheese Trail” tourism by Klara Stephanie Szlezák. Nietzsche, for instance, reads Abbott’s pictures of the Spuyten Duyvil neighborhood in the Bronx as examples of an “urban pastoralism” that combines markers of urbanity and rusticity. Similarly, Gross discusses the High Line park in Manhattan as a carefully designed synthesis of the urban and the rural that functions as a museum of the city’s rural and industrial past. At the same time, however, Gross also points out how the park has served as an agent of gentrification that more or less consciously produces the rural in the interest of capitalism. This also applies to the Vermont rural tourism industry, which simultaneously capitalizes on and further perpetuates the traditional vision of the state as a prime example of rural America, for example by packaging the production of artisanal cheeses for tourist consumption.

The issue of the commodification of the rural for urban and even global markets is also taken up in the three essays on country and folk music by Christian Schmidt, Nadja Gernalzick, and Frank Mehring. Schmidt opens the discussion by stressing the contradictory notions of authenticity that lie at the heart of country music, while Gernalzick focuses on the critical re-evaluation of established country traditions in the alt-country genre. Mehring, finally, discusses Kurt Weill’s folk opera *Down in the Valley* (1945/48) as a remediation of American popular music destined for non-professional, urban performers. Especially the latter two essays are also particularly noteworthy for suggesting the potential of transnational perspectives on the rural.

Rural America distinguishes itself from edited collections based on earlier GAAS Annual Conferences by including a short section on “Artists’ Perspectives,” which offers two contributions by artists featured in the cultural program of the 2013 meeting: Stewart O’Nan’s “Calling,” a short story that originally appeared in the American writer’s 1993 collection *In the Walled City*, and “Heartlands” by Austrian photographer and filmmaker Andreas Horvath, a selection of black-and-white photographs from Horvath’s 2007 photo book with the same title. “Calling” tells a story familiar from much farm fiction—

namely, that of the loss of the family farm—in jumbled chronological order and through short, highly detailed, and often misleadingly banal vignettes that nevertheless make the tragic end seem all the more inevitable. Similarly, Horvath's pictures offer story fragments that, as Karin Höpker correctly points out in her introduction, are "equally specific and generic" (483) and whose combinations of vast landscapes and often worn and fragile signs of human presence simultaneously evoke past

struggles and an uncertain future. The openness of Horvath's pictures not only provides a fitting closure for *Rural America*, but also, and like the collection as a whole, an excellent starting point for future studies of rural America. The latter are sorely needed, for as both Obama and the 2016 electoral map have suggested,³ rural America is "essential for winning the future."

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³ See, for instance, Gamio, Lazaro, and Dan Keating. "How Trump Redrew the Electoral Map, from Sea to Shining Sea." *The Washington Post* (November 9, 2016). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/election-results-from-coast-to-coast/>.