

Carly Thomsen. *Visibility Interrupted. Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

By Maite Escudero-Álias. University of Zaragoza, Spain.

What does it mean to be (in)visible for the LGBTQ women living in the rural Midwest? Is visibility the only political project that enables progress and community building for LGBTQ persons? What political possibilities are foreclosed when becoming visible is the political project? These are some of the questions that Carly Thomsen poses in her recent book and that are placed at the heart of recent debates within rural queer studies. Faithful to queer's inherent volatile contingency, this book convincingly reverberates antinormativity as the foundation of its political scope. In a span of ten years, Thomsen critically engages in a constant interrogation of metronormativity discourses that often take for granted the benefits of outness and LGBTQ visibility and render the rural backward and unintelligible. Drawing upon an eclectic methodology that comprises a set of interviews to LGBTQ women living in South Dakota and Minnesota, close readings of books, media texts, bloggers' articles, social network posts and a short documentary produced and directed by Thomsen herself, this work rigorously attests to the importance of examining "the unexplored problematics of visibility politics" (x) in the subfield of rural queer studies. *Visibility Interrupted* relies on concepts and theoretical moves that will be familiar to the informed reader in queer theory; from Judith Butler's discursive formation of abject, (un)intelligible and (un)grievable subjects, through José Esteban Muñoz's "disidentification practices" exerted by marginalized people, to Sara Ahmed's envisioning of (queer) "use" as the precept that may "call for knowledge that is useful to others, with this 'to' being an opening, an invitation, a connection" (qtd. in Thomsen 143). Indeed, we are invited to travel to the rural Midwest and to listen to the voices of LGBTQ women who shake the normative foundations of progressive discourses that align rural queer lives with backwardness, sadness and oppression. Their experiences and testimonies should alert us, Thomsen contends, "to rethink the cultural narratives that pair closeted, violent, and homophobic with the rural and liberated, safe, and tolerant with the city, challenging the idea that same-sex desires and experiences in rural spaces are rare, invisible, dangerous, or isolated" (xxxiii).

Aimed at developing a more "capacious queer theory" (2), this book continues the definitional turn of previous queer theorists to "the political utility of queer" (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz, 2005), that have also sought to "reanimate queer" (Chen, 2012)

in order to embrace notions such as relationality, unbecoming, “rural, queer, and politics” – the three words in this book’s subtitle. More recently, David Eng and Jasbir Puar have proposed three key terms, “debility, indigeneity, and trans, that produce, manage, and animate new queer subjects for recognition in the political sphere today” (2020: 2). Thomsen’s claims, while contributing to enacting new “archives of feelings” (Cvetkovick 2003) in a varied and yet specific cultural and geographical context, are more concerned with the temporal, spatial and political contingency that rural queer backgrounds can elicit. Rather than merely add the rubric “rural” to the list of representations and narratives of LGBTQ persons, she explores in-depth the lack of women-focus in rural queer studies and cogently draws possibilities of *being* and *unbecoming* that are not necessarily negative. Instead, such positionalities prompt transgeographical aesthetics of transformation and “quiet forms of resistance” (37) to the very politicization of visibility discourses. In developing the theoretical concept of “unbecoming”, Thomsen calls for the usefulness of such unintelligible positions (for the dominant metronormativity), as it interrogates “what possibilities might open up—in our scholarship, in our politics, in our desires—if we reflect on the relationship between that which is largely considered distasteful, disdainful, and that which is prevented from coming into existence precisely because of these affects?” (xv). The women interviewed in this book explicitly challenge the dyad urban-rural that reinforces the rural as the constitutive outside (i.e. a site of abjection) and reifies the urban as the ontological and epistemological site that always already defines intelligible and livable lives. For Thomsen, the premises of the politics of visibility are contested from these rural spaces because “community is made up of people who support you, rather than people that are like you” (xvii). Interestingly, what these women do is to expand queer epistemologies by focusing on a type of knowledge that escapes metronormativity; that is, the circulation and production of knowledge in rural communities is deeply rooted in the cultural practices embedded in these small places, where everybody *knows* everybody and where to be out does not necessarily entail coming out. Those of us who have been born in rural small areas are both *seen* and *recognized* as LGBTQ persons, even though we may have never publicly acknowledged it. They, that is, our rural community, and we, just *know*. There is a strong connection between knowing, belonging, and affects that can be only grasped if you are part of the rural community. In this respect, Thomsen astutely introduces context and place in her study, which allows her to explore the intricate relation between gender, race and space in the rural Midwest, as well as to deconstruct the common view of visibility as a safe

place. Concomitantly, she highlights two diverse and heterogeneous places, South Dakota and Minnesota, in terms of politics, and convincingly argues that these women's diversity of social class, race and age, disrupt the homogeneity of representations of the Midwest and undo metronormativity in highly self-conscious ways, as they "prioritize solidarity and loyalty to the familiar over public declarations of difference" (xxxv).

All throughout the six chapters that comprise this book, Thomsen weaves a palimpsest of different lenses that both blur the politics of visibility and forge new epistemological and political possibilities for LGBTQ rural women. In Chapter 1, "Metronormativity as Legacy. The Cases of Matthew Shepard and Jene Newsome", she discusses how the dominant discourse of metronormativity rendered Shepard a "pitiable, knowable, and mourn-able gay subject" (10) to urban audiences and gay rights organizations, representing him as a martyr of anti-gay hate crime and ignoring other possibilities that may challenge classist depictions of Matthew and his assassins. These metronormative discourses often fail to offer a true account of oneself, as in the case of Jene Newsome, whose outness was used by gay national rights groups to repeal the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell Policy", disregarding her race and "informing how South Dakota is imagined more broadly as white" (30). Thomsen's focus on the erasure of race reveals the ambivalent nature of outness and visibility when it comes to different contexts, as some of the interviewed women see their Native American race as political, but not their sexuality, privileging their cultural and racial background over mainstream LGBTQ politics of visibility. Chapter 2, "(Be)coming Out, Be(com)ing Visible" delves into "disidentification practices", as proposed by J. E. Muñoz, that these women adopt with respect to mainstream visibility politics, dislodging coming-out-narratives from the sense of liberation that these narratives ostensibly seek to achieve. Because the interlocutors here disidentify with normative epistemologies of visibility, they enact their own forms of resistance, "deeply indebted to anti-assimilationist thought" (37), and disavow an LGBTQ-centered identity of the "out, loud, and proud" (49). These practices of LGBTQ women in the rural Midwest must be rethought in order to value geographically contingent possibilities which are rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. In Chapter 3 "Post-Race, Post-Space. Calls for Disability and LGBTQ Visibility", Thomsen expands her line of thought by exposing how disability rights advocates deploy similar discourses to LGBTQ visibility politics, ironically ignoring other visible markers such as race and space that truly forge one's identity. She brings to the fore two interesting notions, "post-racial" and "post-spatial", both signaling ideologies that situate race and

racism in the past and simultaneously assume urban spaces as the epitome of social progress, thus ignoring “processes of rural place making” (65) in one’s identity. The role of race and rurality is retreated from liberatory discourses of visibility which encourage LGBTQ people of color with disabilities to come together around their disability rather than their race or nationality, recurrently praising sexuality and ableism over other differences. The interviews, thoroughly carried out, demonstrate that multiple concepts such as disability, sexuality, race, visibility, space and place converge, and ultimately highlight the equation between visibility discourses and their post-racial and post-spatial practices.

Chapter 4, entitled “Queer Labors. Visibility and Capitalism” contests the widely-accepted assumption that one should come out at work, for coming out “would create trust, alleviate workplace tension, and increase productivity” (97). Framing her discussion within queer Marxist thought, Thomsen seductively argues that becoming visible as LGBTQ is itself a type of labor aligned with capitalism and neoliberalism. If “becoming recognizable as an authentic LGBTQ subject occurs through labored processes so insidious that they are illegible as such” (87), then, becoming visible is also a commodity, “and the commodity being fetishized is authenticity, actualized via visibility” (87). One may further deduce at this point that the politics of visibility enact old and well-known processes of objectification, since the dynamics of seeing/being seen has been traditionally endorsed by feminist and queer theorists alike. The tension between visibility and invisibility, between being legible, grievable, “out, loud and proud” or unintelligible and unlivable, significantly fosters discussions of working-class and poverty-class experiences, which are far less common than discussions of race, gender and sexuality. As it follows, the production of visibility reproduces coercive practices that fail to attend LGBTQ rural women, “rendering them even more unintelligible and inauthentic” (116). In Chapter 5, “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same. Metronormativity on the Move”, Thomsen discusses the new turn to the rural in gay politics and illustrates how most of the representations of LGBTQ rural persons still rely on a male-centered metronormativity. By analyzing photos and posts from Flickr and Instagram, as well as by participating in the first Rural LGBT Summit, she contends that both liberals and conservatives reproduce the same prejudices when representing rurality. This very “cultural illegibility” (133), paradoxically promoted by HRC’s Project One America, ignores “ongoing oppressions that transpire in urban and coastal places along the lines of race, class, gender, ability, nation, age, religion, and, yes, despite HRC’s

suggestion to the contrary, even sexuality” (135). The erasure of the specificities of rural queer life in the above-mentioned Summit, which “entrenched dominant ideas about rurality and reaffirmed their willful ignorance of place” (141), also reveals that attention must be paid to the enabling possibilities that may emerge from “discussing and understanding rural LGBTQ side outside of the logics of metronormativity, even when the stated focus is on the rural” (142). Finally, in Chapter 6, “What’s the Use? Queer Critique in Motion”, Thomsen draws on the political and epistemological value that Ahmed grants to “use”, opening up “queer doors” that inform “thinking and action within and beyond the academy” (144). Making the short documentary *In Plain Sight*, in which Thomsen conducts additional interviews to her interviewees some years later, proves her vigorous commitment to this unique project, and further corroborates “the focus on similarity and normalcy cut across interviews” (157). While the film aims to offer positive representations of these women’s lives, it also adds critical work to metronormativity, asserting that what visibility looks like is always context specific, and “that is valued differently along geographic and gendered lines and that its political utility is far less capacious than gay rights have suggested” (161).

Visibility Interrupted alluringly encapsulates “queer use”: “queer use enables. Queer use creates. Queer use affects and effects” (162). Through her critical lens to metronormativity, Thomsen unfolds the complex connections between “what we despise (rurality) and desire (visibility)” (164), offering a vivid kaleidoscopic view of LGBTQ rural women who challenge the premise that invisibility leads to social death. Furthermore, this book enables queer critique to travel outside the U.S. Midwest and create something akin in other rural areas across the world, Western and non-Western alike, each with its own geographical and cultural specificities. Undoubtedly, the politics of visibility resonates like a mantra everywhere, especially for rural LGBTQ people, so it is high time we celebrate this audacious book, as it allows us to examine the contextual character of unbecomingness and open up new “queer doors”.

Maite Escudero-Alías was born to a coal miner family in Martín del Río, a small village of 470 inhabitants that belongs to Teruel, an impoverished province of the so-called “emptied Spain”. She currently lectures at the University of Zaragoza, where she has been working for the last two decades. She would like to thank the author, Carly Thomsen, for writing this book, in which so many of us see ourselves reflected and identified with.

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