

Title: Sweeter Voices Still: An LGBTQ Anthology of Middle America

Editors: Ryan Schuessler and Kevin Whiteneir, Jr.

Publisher: Belt Publishing

Copyright: 2020

ISBN: 978-1-9487-4281-8

Format: Paperback

Genre: LGBTQ+ identity

Part of Series: No

“The prairie wasn’t the place for boys who liked boys—that’s what we teach rural children,” Taylor Brorby writes in his reflection on growing up gay in “Boys and Oil” (64). While *Sweeter Voices Still* acknowledges that many people identifying as LGBTQ+ have faced discrimination and even outright violence in the American “Heartland,” it also speaks to how the queer Midwest is itself not an oxymoron. It tells the story of a region that does not, cannot cut out its diverse gender and sexual identities, whose stereotypical whiteness does not define the diverse, multiracial LGBTQ+ community contained in its borders.

Ryan Schuessler and Kevin Whiteneir, Jr.’s book *Sweeter Voices Still: An LGBTQ+ Anthology of Middle America* (2020) contains 72 poems, memoirs, prayers, anecdotes and historical accounts written by people who grew up, live in or returned to the Midwest and identify within the LGBTQ+ community. Despite the limited space in the book, it works to acknowledge and include indigenous voices (“The Midwest is a Two Spirit Place,” by Kai Minosh Pyle), Black voices (“A Tale of Three Seasons,” by Jasmine Burnett), poverty-line voices (“Jell-O Salad”), and religious ones too (“I’ve got a Hard-on for Jesus,” by Elizabeth Harper). While primarily written in English, its stories include Spanish, Cherokee, Hmong, Somali, and Ukrainian and celebrate Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian voices. Readers will celebrate the festival of Navrati with Neema Avashia in a West Virginia basement, cruise down I-70 with Harmony Cox, and attend a funeral with Samer Hassan Saleh. Building on Whiteneir’s research as an art historian in magic and spirituality and Schuessler’s work as a freelance journalist studying race, religion and queer identity, the authors incorporate pieces from LGBTQ+ people in the Amish community and the Ukrainian Orthodox, Catholic, and other Christian churches. This aspect, “the fear of judgement by God and family are among the most powerful forces keeping LGBTQ heartlanders silent and in the closet” (14). This fear of sin, violence, and illicit love impacts the lives of real people whose stories include sex work, suicide, and violence that are contained in these pages. I offer this as a fair warning, knowing the inclusion of these elements is essential to the truth of these stories, to living life in a region heterosexualized by outsiders and insiders alike. As Doug Kiel describes in the forward, this text “highlights that not only do LGBTQ people belong in the heartland, but also they have long created safe spaces for each other, developing alternative forms of kinship” (14). I found it to be a touching tribute to the LGBTQ+ voices in the Midwest, to the many colors that make this stereotypically white territory radiant and beautiful.

Reviewed by Emma Cieslik.