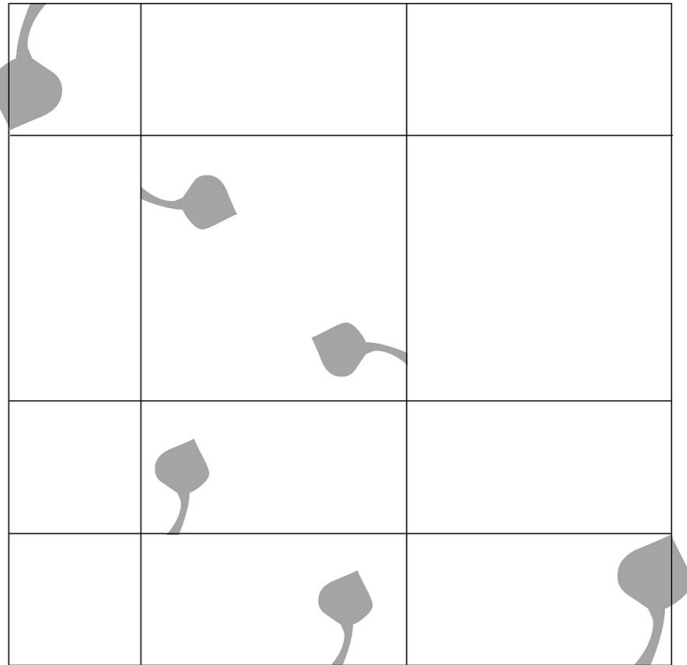


Extended abstract

*Queer Ruralities. A Bibliographic Review
of the Field: Genesis, Debates, and Horizons*



Paulino Ramos-Ballesteros

Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla, Spain

DOI: 10.4422/ager.2026.2

ager

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

Highlights:

1. Metronormativity remains the dominant framework, marginalizing the rural.
2. Queer rural subjectivities combine agency with experiences of isolation, suffering, and precarity.
3. Cinema, literature, festivals, and archives are key sites of queer rural representation and contestation.
4. Greater attention must be given to trans, racialized, migrant, and other underrepresented voices through intersectional and decolonial approaches.
5. Future directions include political ecology, oral memory, and queer reappropriation of folklore and rural heritage.

Abstract: This article provides a critical review of the emerging field of queer rural studies through the analysis of more than fifty academic texts published over the past three decades that address sexual and gender diversity in rural contexts. Situated within broader debates concerning the relationship between space, power dynamics, social inequalities, and the construction of sexualities and genders, the article examines the concept of metronormativity as an urban-centered narrative that has come to dominate the epistemological and representational landscape of queerness. It also explores the emergence of research grounded in diverse geographical contexts that foregrounds queer subjectivities beyond major metropolitan centers. The aim of the article is to situate the most significant works, theoretical currents, and scholarly debates within this field, while identifying the principal challenges it faces, particularly within the context of the Spanish state. A narrative and critical review methodology is employed in order to trace the field's genealogies, delineate its main thematic axes, and identify its current tensions and challenges, thereby contributing a systematic framework for future research on the subject.

Keywords: Rurality, metronormativity, sexual geography, LGBTQI+ studies, rural sex-gender diversity.

Extended abstract

1. Ruralities, Sexualities and Spatiality

Cities have historically been framed as privileged sites of visibility, liberation, and community for LGBTIQ+ subjects, while rural spaces were portrayed as homogeneous, asexual, or repressive. Metropolitan centers, especially in the Global North, offered anonymity, access to rights, cultural circulation, political mobilization, and theoretical innovation, reinforcing the urban as inherently progressive. Urban-centric research consolidated this perspective, marginalizing rural sexualities and portraying rurality as heterosexual or asexual.

This hierarchy reflects broader urban-centric political and economic structures. Globalization further naturalized the association of cities with modernity, diversity, and prosperity, while rural areas were linked to backwardness. LGBTIQ+ identities became markers of cosmopolitan modernity, reinforcing the urban-rural divide. By the late twentieth century, the "spatial turn" prompted critical reassessment, emphasizing symbolic and cultural dimensions of rurality. Rural and urban spaces are now conceptualized as relational, dynamic, and embedded within global systems. Early public health, social work, and gender studies expanded attention to rural LGBTIQ+ populations, acknowledging sexuality as socio-spatially situated and shaped by power.

Critiques of post-Stonewall urban liberation narratives introduced the concept of metronormativity, which naturalizes cities as authentic queer sites. Subsequent research examined non-metropolitan sexual "others", rural-urban mobility, and sexual exile, positioning spatiality as a central analytic category. This review follows a four-stage qualitative methodology (identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion), focusing on works addressing rural sexual diversity, especially in Spain, within international debates.

2. Emergence of the Field: Queer Ruralities as an Epistemic Space

Queer rural studies emerged from 1990s cultural geography, emphasizing the interplay of space, power, and sexual identity. Foundational work by Bell and Valentine recovered rural sexual lives as legitimate sites of desire, agency, and community. Studies like *Bachelor Farmers* and *Spinsters* highlighted rural gay and lesbian experiences, challenging heteronormative portrayals and showing negotiation of family, tradition, land, and masculinity.

This approach diverged from deficit-focused public health and social work studies, framing rural queer subjects as agents in socio-spatial configurations. By the 2000s, scholarship in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand questioned the presumed universality of urban, white, middle-class gay identities. Feminist geography destabilized assumptions of rural heterosexuality, revealing national distinctions shaped by territorial history, religion, economy, and urban-rural interdependence.

2.1. *The Conceptual Turn Toward Metronormativity*

Metronormativity frames urban space as authentic for queer liberation while rural space is seen as repressive. It underpins rural queer studies, prompting analyses of anti-urbanism, rural aesthetic politics, and non-metropolitan contributions to LGBTQ+ emancipation. Studies of rural-urban mobility complicate linear narratives of sexual exile, showing circular or negotiated trajectories. Urban spaces may liberate but also discipline, imposing normative gay identities.

2.2. *Internationalization and Intersectional Expansion*

Initially Anglophone, the field expanded globally. Australian scholarship conceptualized the "cosmopolitan country", hybrid rural spaces influenced by urban culture. Canadian research documented resilience through oral histories. European and Latin American studies questioned the urban-rural dichotomy where rurality permeates national identity. Spanish and Brazilian scholarship emphasized localized performances, migration circuits, and intersectional dimensions of race, class, and coloniality. Mid-2010s studies foregrounded Black, Indigenous, Chicanx, and non-binary experiences, alongside digital infrastructures reshaping rural queer sociability. Spanish research now covers rural sexual diversity, policies, activism, cultural representation, and historical repression.

3. *Analytical Dimensions*

Queer rural studies pivot around socio-spatial constitution of sexualities and critiques of metronormativity. Key dimensions include mobility, rural queer subjectivities, structural vulnerability, cultural representation, activism, and intersectional diversification.

3.1. *Mobility, Return, and Geographies of Desire*

Mobility has been central, with sexual exile narratives linking migration to emancipation. Empirical research shows rural queer lives involve circular, temporary, and negotiated mobilities shaped by class, gender, family, and resources. Urban migration is neither universally desired nor fully emancipatory; urban settings can

impose exclusion and normative pressures. Returning or remaining rural can strategically reconfigure desire, identity, and belonging. Rural queer geographies involve negotiations across multiple spatial scales.

3.2. Rural Queer Subjectivities

Three subject positions emerge: rural natives embedded in land, kinship, and community; cosmopolitan locals maintaining rural roots while connected to urban networks; and transplanter or neo-rurals relocating from urban areas to form intentional communities or replicate urban practices. Identity construction involves selective visibility, "active invisibility", and affective networks emphasizing care and relationality over urban productivity.

3.3. Belonging, Structural Wounds, and Ambivalent Agency

Rural queer life balances resilience and vulnerability. Isolation, moral repression, lack of services, and family silence persist, especially for trans and gender-diverse individuals. Vulnerabilities intersect with race, class, age, disability, and regional marginality, cautioning against romanticization while recognizing potential for creativity and situated resistance.

3.4. Representation, Activism, and Memory

Cultural media—film, literature, festivals—and territorial activism reshape rural queer imaginaries. Rural Pride events, grassroots festivals, and hybrid "cosmopolitan country" initiatives integrate urban culture and challenge marginalization. Archival and memory work reconstruct suppressed genealogies, situating queer presence within historical rural temporalities.

3.5. Intersectionality and Global Diversification

The field now includes trans, non-binary, intersex, racialized, and Indigenous perspectives, alongside decolonial critiques. Comparative research shows rurality is context-specific: colonial history, inequality, state structures, and cultural practices shape experiences differently across regions. Rural queerities destabilize universalist narratives, emphasizing material, cultural, and policy-specific determinants of subjectivity.

4. Limits, Challenges, and Opportunities

Challenges include urban-centric imaginaries, limited funding, weak policy integration, and treating rurality as a "special case". Romanticized depictions risk erasing inequalities and silencing lifelong rural inhabitants. The category "queer ruralities" may not reflect local self-identifications, requiring reflexive methodologies.

Research overrepresents white cisgender subjects, underrepresenting trans, non-binary, racialized, migrant, and digitally excluded populations.

Opportunities include ethnographic, longitudinal, and collaborative approaches, integrating decolonial perspectives. Examining rural contributions to folklore, music, rituals, and traditions revitalizes territories and reconfigures imaginaries. Recognizing rural influences on urban LGBTIQ+ movements helps decenter urban–rural hierarchies.

5. Reflections

Queer ruralities have shifted from marginality to epistemic centrality, revealing paradoxes: coexistence of control and freedom, utopian imaginaries and material constraints, invisibility and territorial activism. The field redefines categories such as belonging, visibility, community, archive, body, and territory. Geographically and disciplinarily, it encompasses North–South perspectives, intersectionality, collaborative methodologies, and cultural analysis, demonstrating rurality as a complex constellation of lived and contested spaces.

Challenges remain: urban dominance, rural romanticization, marginalization of migrant and non-normative subjects, and limited dialogue between rural and queer studies. Addressing these requires rigor, institutional sustainability, and ethics of territorial engagement. Rural territories emerge as critical sites to rethink space, mobility, temporality, and belonging. Decentering the urban is both geographic and epistemic, enabling situated, plural, and rooted queer theory that expands conceptual and practical horizons.