

**Robertson, Mary. *Growing Up Queer. Kids and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity*. New York, NYU Press, 2018.**

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1 When conducting research about LGBTQ people, it is easy to fall into the trap of taking individuals' sexualities for granted. Feminist scholars have discussed the social construction of gender at length. However, while we often pay lip service to the idea that sexuality, too, is socially and historically contingent, research rarely takes this idea as a central point of departure. Professor Mary Robertson's recent book, *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity* (2019) is one rare example of research looks at how one *becomes* sexual. *Growing Up Queer* provides an ethnographic analysis of Spectrum, an LGBTQ youth center in an urban center in western United States in 2012-2013, to explore how the youth at this center become sexual and gendered through the social contexts they occupy.

2 Dr. Robertson argues that in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century sexuality and gender politics, many LGBTQ youth are developing subjectivities that are queerly oriented, rather than developing 'normalized' gay identities. Robertson frames her study through Sara Ahmed's (2006) concept of queer orientation, which describes a way of being that opposes the normal, whether by choice or not. Furthermore, Robertson positions her work in response to Ritch Savin-Williams (2005) and C. J. Pascoe (2007). Savin-Williams (2005) argues that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been characterized by greater normalization of homoeroticism and therefore acceptance of homosexuality. Pascoe (2007) suggests that the homophobia exhibited by young people is based more on disciplining gender nonconformity than disciplining sexual orientation. With these interventions in mind, Robertson describes youths whose claims to queer identity are in direct reaction to the growing sense that normalized LGBTQ identities do not capture their experiences.

3 Chapter 1 puts Spectrum and other LGBTQ youth centers in the context of growing acceptance of LGBTQ people in US society during the time of her fieldwork. Chapter 2 explores how the youth at Spectrum become sexual, describing it as having little to do with sexual behavior and more to do with gender non-conformity and resistance to heteronormative sexual scripts. Bringing in intersections of race and class, Robertson shows that LGBTQ acceptance is not equally accessible to everyone. Chapter 3 explores how the youth of Spectrum form their gender identities.

While attention is paid to the binary trans youth at Spectrum, Robertson also describes Spectrum as a genderqueer utopia, where youth can play with gender expression and embrace ambivalence.

4 Chapter 4 explores the influence of alternative media on the participants' sexual identities, with emphasis on the role of anime and fan fiction in providing youth with positive depictions of gender non-conformity and queerness. Chapter 5 discusses the family as another strong influence on youth's sexual and gender identities. The youth in Robertson's study had mostly supportive parents, and a significant portion of the youth had family members who were LGBTQ-identified. Robertson concludes by considering how normalization relies on queer to prop itself up. She critiques most identity-based rights movements, who often overlook the most marginalized in their numbers, and points to the transgender and Black Lives Matter movements as examples of multi-coalitional queer organizing.

5 The sections where Robertson brings in race and immigration status are compelling, particularly in discussing the undocumented immigrant experience as queer in the book's conclusion. This discussion helps to illustrate the concept of queerness as something beyond sexuality and gender. Robertson brings in queer of color critiques of the family, arguing that the Standard North American Family model is tied to white, middle class, heterosexual privilege. However, these sections would have been more satisfying with an even deeper analysis of the ways in which heteropatriarchy and white supremacy co-constitute one another.

6 *Growing Up Queer* is a thought-provoking ethnography of LGBTQ youth experience in the 21st century. The book fills a gap in the literature by challenging the focus on "risk and resilience" (24) that other academic work on LGBTQ youth often perpetuate. Instead, Robertson provides a more nuanced look at these youths' lives, emphasizing their narratives of struggle, play, and exploration. She deftly illustrates how queer goes beyond sexual identity. Rather, it is a relationship to the normal that is influenced by gender, race, class, ability, nationality, etc. Therefore, book is relevant to scholars interested in the development of gender and sexual identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Robertson's accessible writing makes the complex ideas from queer theory easily digestible, making the book well-suited for undergraduate and early graduate courses in gender, sexuality studies, or childhood/youth.

### **Works Cited**

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2006.
- Pascoe, C. J. *Dude, You're a Fag*. Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 2007.
- Savin-Williams, Ritch C. *The New Gay Teenager*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2005.