

Rooted and Resilient: A Queer Identity Journey in the Rural South

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Citation: Wallace, A. (2025). Rooted and resilient: A queer identity journey in the rural South. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 41(6), 13–16. <https://doi.org/10.26209/JRRE4106-03>

The mixed-media artwork “Rooted and Resilient” pairs with the autoethnographic narrative to examine queer identity formation in the rural U.S. South. The artwork visualizes a life split between coercive conformity and chosen belonging: a blue, nonbinary figure braces between a frayed rope of church, family, and school expectations and a vibrant colorful braided rope of community and self-embrace. A barren field that demands “conform” and vibrant terrain that invites “embrace” encode a pull from survival to flourishing. The narrative grounds these symbols in fundamentalist religiosity, familial control, and school climate, while tracing countercurrents—rural gender “wobble room,” clandestine literacies, and quiet peer solidarities. Together, image and text articulate how small acts, such as notes in lockers, shared books, and coded friendships, become a praxis of belonging that enables letting go of the ties that bind rigid rural traditions and stepping into chosen family and open selfhood. By rendering interior struggle and communal repair in accessible visual-narrative form, the work offers a lens for educators, counselors, rural advocates, and rural queer and trans youth and adults to recognize normative violence and to cultivate conditions where queer and trans youth can move from isolation toward collective resilience.

The Art of Being Rooted and Resilient

The artwork shared in Figure 1, *Rooted and Resilient: A Queer Identity Journey in the Rural South*, is a visual representation of my journey. It captures the emotional and physical tension of growing up queer in a rural, conservative community and the long, painful process of breaking free to become fully myself. The image is split in two, reflecting the duality of my upbringing and identity.

On the left, the landscape is muted in browns and reds, symbolizing the barren emotional terrain of my early life:

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This article is part of a special issue of JRRE, “Queering Rural Education,” which is a collaboration with the *Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education*. Click [here](#) to see the full issue.

JRRE is associated with the [Rural Education Center at Kansas State University](#).

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church, family, and school. A chapel rises in the distance, symbolizing the religious systems that sought to dictate who I was allowed to be. Further to the left, a barn and silo rest quietly on the horizon. While these spaces never fully embraced my truth, they offered moments of refuge through the subtle gender flexibilities found in rural Southern farm work and carpentry—places where I could move, build, and be without the same scrutiny that shadowed other parts of my life. The word “conform” is plowed into the soil, as if the land itself demanded obedience. My nonbinary figure, blue and bowed, kneels at the center, pulling on a frayed rope tethered to this side—a metaphor for the emotional exhaustion of trying to meet expectations that never made room for my truth.

The right side of the image shifts dramatically. It’s full of color, movement, and growth. A vibrant rainbow arcs across a green field toward an open locker—a direct reference to the moment I found a graphic novel and a note that read “Welcome to the club” tucked into my locker at school. Inside the locker, a stack of books carries the words, “Books Are Where Hope Begins.” That line is a truth I lived: Stories saved me and brought me to others who shared my struggles as a closet queer student in the rural South. The

braided rope grasped in the figure's right hand is bright and whole, unlike the frayed one on the left. It symbolizes the strength I found through community, through chosen family, and through resistance. Just below it, the word "embrace" is woven into the grassy landscape, offering a quiet invitation to live openly, to be held by love rather than fear. At the center of it all is that version of me, stretched between two worlds. One side asks me to disappear. The other invites me to live. This artwork is about that pull. It's about the moment before letting go of the ties that bind and the courage it takes to reach for something better.

Church

In the heart of rural landscapes across the United States, the echoes of tradition often drown out the whispers

of individuality. My journey of growing up Southern, queer, and closeted felt like a solitary struggle against an unyielding tide. My story began in the rolling hills of Kentucky's unbridled bluegrass in the western karst region. My parents were bound by the strict indoctrination of a Southern Baptist church to which we drove over 30 minutes to attend three times a week. The imposing brick facade of "Living Hope" felt less like a sanctuary and more like a mausoleum. Here was a place where my hope went to die.

Although I was perceived as a quiet, sweet "girl," I held within me the fiery rage of a tornado tearing through the blue hills, unpredictable and unstoppable. The pastor's monotone repetition of fire-and-brimstone warnings gave me ample time to scrawl corrections to his biblical mistranslations in the margins of my bulletin. I loved

Figure 1

Rooted and Resilient



Note. Mixed-media work on paper (oil pastel, chalk pastel, colored pencil, ink, yarn, and fishing line; 11×14 in.). A blue figure braces itself, pulling between a frayed brown rope and a braided colorful rope, across a seam between a barren field marked "conform" and a vibrant landscape woven with "embrace." Image by author, 2025.

critiquing the pastor's sermons and often got in trouble in Sunday school for asking too many questions about the context of scripture. I was always skeptical that some entity could hate me just for being born "me." My questions often shook the ground to which other Christian fundamentalists clung, with their own power agendas of hate and oppression they called "good Christian love." This response gave me smiling satisfaction. My sharp, teenaged retorts, armed with fledgling academic critiques of scripture, quickly earned me a reputation as a troublemaker and resulted in a quiet but firm exile from Sunday school. Many church elders chastised me saying that I "shouldn't question God." Therefore, I needed to follow obediently or leave the church all together. Fearing the wrath of my family, I was forced to conform in anguished silence for just a few years more.

Family

My momma and daddy told me the only thing I needed to fear was God and them. Even in the 21st century, Momma and Daddy still used the three-foot wooden paddle my grandfather made for them when my brother and I were born. God's law was their law, and punishments for suspected misbehavior were met with swift physical and verbal curses just like the plagues of Egypt. I couldn't ever say that I felt contrary to my parents or come to them for advice without harsh punishment and judgment. I often thought my parents didn't love me. They told me often I wasn't what they wanted, and I wished I was. With all my heart, I longed for them to want me. Momma often recounted, with a weary edge, how God "pressed" her to have me, as if I were less a blessing and more an obligation. She told me she argued with God about me as she didn't want another kid to raise. And if she was forced to have me, it'd have to be God that took care of me because she wouldn't. Maybe if I had been their "ideal" child, I would have had more value to them. I still long to be loved by my parents for who I was, rather than for achievements, but I worked really hard in school, made good grades, refined my skills, and won numerous awards of achievement. None of it was ever enough. Their response to my achievements was always the same—a curt, "You just better thank Jesus He did that for you," as though my efforts were irrelevant.

The best part about growing up in the rural South was the little "gender wiggle room" it afforded me. Even as a girl, I could throw myself into what folx called "men's work," and I loved it all. It wasn't just the tasks but the freedom and belonging that came with them. Using my hands, getting dirty, and being part of something tangible felt real and earned. Unlike the city women with their tidy routines of dressing up and housework, life in the country let me run wild, climb trees, dig in the dirt, and learn skills that truly mattered. Carpentry was my favorite. My dad's woodshop, filled with the scent of sawdust and the hum of

possibility, became a sacred space. Sometimes, he'd let me help with sanding edges or handing him tools. One year, he gave me my own toolbox—a gift that felt like pride, excitement, and quiet validation all at once. It wasn't just a box of tools; it was a symbol of trust and belonging. Every year after that, he'd add a new tool based on what I'd learned—small badges of honor that marked my growth. Those moments, filled with teaching, learning, and doing, became my favorite rhythm of life.

School

The rigidity of church and family was a constant drumbeat that echoed through every part of my life, including school, where the same dogmas took on new forms in classrooms and hallways. Every fundamental part of a Christian upbringing was infused into the halls, lockers, and desks, like unsightly nicotine stains on the worn-out school building to which I rode the bus every day. My school was the place where you could find a farmer's kid riding their horse or tractor to school to avoid the two-hour bus ride. The school sponsored weekly prayer groups and an annual "meet you at the flag" event, the purpose of which was really to judge your life. It ended with the ever-famous Southern quote, "Bless your heart"—which couldn't be fully determined as a blessing or curse. Every school sport, art performance, and assembly started with the Lord's Prayer like we were all gonna die.

History and science classes were often laced with out-of-context biblical condemnations of "those homosexuals," as if the curriculum itself was wielded as a weapon against anyone who didn't conform. These comments weren't just casual asides; they were pointed and deliberate, like tiny barbs meant to wound anyone who dared to stray from the norm. Sitting there, I couldn't help but feel like a target, even though no one explicitly knew. It was as if they could sense it, this invisible mark I carried. Those moments made me feel like a freak of nature, as though my very existence was a mistake. The weight of it all pressed down on me, heavier with every passing day, until I often found myself wishing I could just disappear, to stop feeling so alien in a world that didn't seem to want me. I never told anyone I was queer—not a soul—but there were days when it felt impossible to hide, as if my very existence betrayed me with every glance and gesture. The isolation was crushing. I felt like I was the only one in the world experiencing this suffocating pain. Struggling to live felt like my daily reality, each day a battle just to keep going, even though I wasn't sure why I bothered. The loneliness was profound, but the fear of being discovered, of being seen for who I really was, kept me locked in silence.

Just when I felt like I couldn't keep going, like the walls of my world were closing in, I opened my locker to find something I didn't expect. Amid the piles of my chaotic,

barely organized belongings, there it was: a graphic novel perched neatly on top, almost glowing in its incongruity. The cover featured bold, vibrant artwork, and the title hinted at a story about a high school girl wrestling with her own identity, her own sexuality. I froze for a moment, unsure if it was meant for me or left there by accident. Curiosity overcame my hesitation. When I opened the book, a small note fell out from the unused library card slot tucked behind the front cover. The words, written in an unsteady but deliberate hand, read: “Welcome to the club.” My heart thudded in my chest. Someone, *someone*, knew, or at least understood enough to leave this gift, this lifeline. I devoured the story in private, hunched over the pages late at night, my desk lamp casting a cone of light into the darkness. I had never related to anything as deeply as I did to this book. It was like seeing my reflection in a way that felt validating, even freeing. But I wasn’t ready to share this piece of myself with the world. To protect my secret, I swapped out the book’s dust jacket for one from an old religious text I’d found, something guaranteed to make others glance and then look away without a second thought. That book wasn’t just a story; it was hope—something I hadn’t felt in a long, long time. And it wasn’t the only one. Over the weeks and months that followed, more books appeared, each one left with the same quiet care, each one full of characters who felt like they were reaching out to me through the pages, whispering: “You are not alone. Your identity is not wrong. You are enough.”

Each book left in my locker was an act of quiet rebellion, a reminder that I wasn’t alone and that others were willing to resist the suffocating norms around us. Eventually, the secret became something sacred. Three of us found each other—quiet rebels with shared silences and hidden stories—and started meeting at lunch. We never called it a club, but we made one anyway. We spoke in code, built our own language, and passed weathered books wrapped in camouflage. The stories were armor. The sharing, resistance. In that tucked-away corner of the cafeteria, behind smuggled pages and sideways glances, I found belonging. These small but powerful acts of solidarity helped me reclaim my voice, proving that even in the darkest moments, resistance could light the way. I still kept my identity to myself, locking it away like a treasure too precious to risk losing. But inside, something was changing. I wasn’t just surviving anymore, I was starting to believe I could thrive. If the heroes of these stories could make it, so could I. And for the first time, I felt a glimmer of hope for the future—a future where maybe, just maybe, I could finally be myself.

Cutting the Ties That Bind

My upbringing taught me that tradition is the key to a good life. In my community, God came first, then family, then everything else. You can’t just up and leave tradition

like it’s last week’s table scraps you toss to the chickens because it isn’t fit to eat. Family’s not something you can shake off easily, not when love and obligation tangle up like a mess of fishing lines. My family would tell me God’s plan for me was laid out plain as day, but my heart said otherwise. It was like there were two voices inside me, one begging to please the family and the other whispering, “My child, be who you are.” I learned quickly to put on a good show, but there’s no pretending when your spirit is split down the middle. I’d often let myself dream about being whole, about dancing in the open air, my true self shining like fireflies on a summer night. That hope kept me going, even when the weight of expectation felt heavier than an August sun. It’s a hard thing, living between worlds like that. But one thing I knew for sure—sooner or later—my soul had to find its own way home. All I had to do was let go of the rope that I clung to so tightly. Breaking free from the ties that bound me wasn’t a single moment of courage but a series of small, defiant steps. Each step, though painful, carried me closer to the life I dared to dream of, where love and acceptance weren’t conditions, but gifts freely given. And that took years.

Free to Be

Now as I study my reflection in the mirror, I stare in awe of the person who let go of the rope and ran as far as they could just to be themselves. Teenage, queer me would be so happy that this is where I ended up. Though building this life meant cutting ties with my biological family, it also allowed me to cultivate a chosen family filled with love and belonging that I never knew I could have. My supportive spouse stayed with me every step of the way these past years as I navigated letting go of those unhealthy ropes of tradition. There are still days when the past crashes through me like wind gusts of an angry April spring, but now I stand grounded in a community of people who love and accept me for exactly who I am. With the unconditional love of my chosen family, I see a horizon filled with endless possibilities—proof that love empowers and liberates. And I wouldn’t trade that freedom for anything. So, to the teenager I used to be—and to every rural queer youth and adult quietly navigating a world that doesn’t see them yet—this is for you. There is nothing wrong with you. You are not alone. There is a life ahead where you can breathe deeply, laugh loudly, and be loved fiercely for exactly who you are. The road there might be long, but it is yours to claim if you will only let go of the ties that bind and embrace who you truly are. And if you ever doubt it, let this be your note tucked inside the cover of your story: Welcome to the club.