

TransRural Storytelling Pop-Ups as Sites of Community Knowledge Exchange

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TransRural Lives is the first digital storytelling project that explores the lives of transgender older adults (ages 50+) from nonmetropolitan areas in the Pacific Northwest. This article explores the community-based educational events that have become crucial to disseminating TransRural Lives beyond the project's website, specifically through rural "pop-up" storytelling events. The storytelling methods incorporated into these pop-ups serve as crucial informal learning opportunities that explore the needs of transgender individuals outside metropolises. They engage with diverse topics related to transgender aging in rural areas, intergenerational knowledge and resource sharing, the diversity of transgender older adults' experiences, and the spaces that foster community and belonging for transgender older adults in rurality. In rural areas, where formal educational infrastructure for trans adults is lacking, these pop-ups function as a critical form of informal adult education. They also help develop intergenerational kinship networks that challenge dominant narratives about queer and trans rurality and resist the marginalization of rural lives. In doing so, they offer a model for how storytelling, when grounded in community and place, can reveal hidden histories and make visible the broad range of transgender experiences in rural areas, providing a rich area of study within broader community-facing adult education.

TransRural Lives is the first digital storytelling project that explores the lives of transgender¹ older adults (age 50+)

¹ This article follows uses of "transgender" that have emerged from transgender studies, such as Chen and cárdenas's (2019) articulation of trans as a recognition of "multiple embodiments, expressions, and identities of gender nonconformity and variance" that express a "multidirectional movement" from "one gender toward a different location," which may include identities like transexual, transvestite, queen, nonbinary, and genderqueer within its lineage, while still attending to the differences within each category (p. 472).

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from nonmetropolitan areas in the Pacific Northwest. To address the lack of scholarly attention to their experiences in rural contexts, the project uses unstructured interviews to create short audio vignettes and transcripts featured on the project website (transrurallives.org). The project seeks to create space for nonlinear, short-form, and metaphorical storytelling, allowing participants to retell narratives about instances of joy, repression, or knowledge about their genders. Doing so helps uncover the lesser-known sociocultural, geographic, and historical factors that have shaped transgender experiences in rural areas and small towns. While documentation of transgender experiences in understudied contexts like rural spaces is always significant, given the emergent social and political attacks on transgender people in the United States, capturing and sharing their stories—in their own voices—is particularly urgent.

Few oral history projects exist that focus on trans and queer people—including those living in rural areas. TransRural Lives broadens the scope of the existing work, and scholarly research, by focusing on rural areas, towns, and smaller cities in the Pacific Northwest outside the major metropolitan regions of Seattle-Tacoma, Portland, Boise, and Vancouver, BC. This emphasis captures the diverse lived realities of transgender older adults deeply rooted

in nonmetropolitan spaces. While these areas often share characteristics, such as limited trans and queer visibility and resources, the project recognizes their significant geographic, physical, economic, and cultural differences. Through this focus, we respond to Stapel's (2014) call for rural queer studies to challenge urban-centric frameworks and remain attentive to identities and experiences often overlooked by dominant narratives.

This article explores the community-based educational events that have become crucial to disseminating *TransRural Lives*' goals beyond the project's website, specifically through six different "pop-up" storytelling events outside metropolitan areas over a two-year period. These events create public spaces that are rare outside large cities—transgender-focused, informal gatherings where transgender older adults, younger queer and trans individuals, and other rural community members come together to engage with the vignettes, cocreate zines, share reflections, and participate in collaborative storytelling. In doing so, they foster intergenerational queer and trans kinship networks, or "counterpublics" (Warner, 2002), that challenge dominant narratives about queer rurality and resist the marginalization of rural queer lives. These pop-ups complement the work of the *TransRural Lives* website in documenting and providing needed community-focused adult education on older rural transgender adults' experiences. Unlike the website, their focus on community connection creates opportunities for informal rural knowledge sharing and community building that express the diversity of transgender older adults' experiences.

By situating informal learning in everyday community settings, these pop-ups affirm the importance of nontraditional and informal educational practices in dismantling heteronormativity and building trans-affirming spaces beyond the city. These grassroots engagements, as theorized by Githens (2012) and Mizzi (2021), are integral to queer adult education. They extend from the long history of informal activist meetings and HIV/AIDS educational events that have taken place in bars, clubs, or people's homes, and they enable collective reflection, resource sharing, and cultural transformation. These forms of learning are fundamental to countering "anti-queer perspectives" and to transforming culture through "reflection and collective action"—the personal learning and the praxis that might follow (Githens, 2012, p. 208). Although pop-ups typically produce temporary community spaces, the sharing and learning about nonmetro transgender identities—and older transgender adults in rurality in particular—also contest the homogenization of transgender experiences. Following Grace and Hill's (2004) theorization of unstructured queer knowledge sharing as challenging the prevailing education systems that marginalize nonnormative sexualities and genders—a challenge they identify as aligning

with adult education as a space of social and personal transformation—we identify these pop-ups as needed sites of informal knowledge exchange in rural contexts that often lack focused informative spaces about transgender experiences. Specifically, the storytelling engagements—through conversations, sharing and responding to photos and experiences, and zine making—render these pop-ups as sites of intergenerational community education and informal knowledge exchange. These gatherings are vital in nonmetropolitan spaces that lack other opportunities to disseminate experiences, needs, and information about resources and approaches to finding care and community as an older transgender adult.

We argue that the storytelling methods incorporated into these pop-ups serve as crucial informal learning opportunities that explore the needs of transgender individuals outside metropolises, as they engage with diverse topics related to transgender aging in rural areas, intergenerational knowledge and resource sharing, the diversity of transgender older adults' experiences, and the spaces and groups that foster community and belonging for transgender older adults in rurality. In rural areas, formal educational infrastructure for trans adults is lacking. Pop-ups offer a model for how storytelling, when grounded in community and place, can reveal hidden histories and make visible the broad range of transgender experiences in rural areas, providing a rich area of study within broader community-facing adult educational practices that engage with trans and queer lives.

Background Literature

Studies of Transgender Older Adults

Since its emergence in the late 1990s, transgender studies has developed as an interdisciplinary, humanistically grounded field and has enhanced our understanding of transgender identities and experiences. Yet the aging process and the lives of older transgender adults remain largely underexplored across disciplines. In humanistic studies, transgender older adults are often engaged solely through their involvement in significant historical movements, such as Stonewall, Gay Liberation, and HIV/AIDS activism, which overlooks their present lives and their experiences. And interdisciplinary gerontological research on queer and transgender individuals, which is primarily reliant on surveys and statistical methods, often categorizes transgender, lesbian, and gay older adults together, or analyzes all transgender adults as a single group. Doing so overlooks the diversity of identities within this group across generations; it also ignores how transgender people face distinct health and community challenges and construct their identities through unique gender-affirming experiences, as well as the uniqueness of the current generation of older transgender

adults who have engaged with and been influenced by major gender-based changes since the 1970s (Darwin, 2020; Fabbre & Garveras, 2020; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014).

The lack of information about transgender older adults is exacerbated by a scholastic focus on metropolises or, at most, explorations of trans people fleeing rural areas for large cities. Research neglecting the urban-rural distinction follows what Halberstam (2005) identified as “metronormativity”—a social bias toward cities that universalizes urban “LGBTQ+” narratives. This positioning of queer and trans people primarily as urban subjects has added to the invisibility of how nonmetro spaces inflect our experiences and treats them as less significant or even inauthentic (Ching & Creed, 2013; Halberstam, 2003; Smith & Mancoske, 1997). Despite emerging research on the many queer and trans people in the United States and Canada who live in rural places (Baker, 2016; Stone, 2018; G. Valentine, 2002; Weston, 1995), rural studies has generally overlooked the identities and practices that are subversive and (re)claim rural places and identities from cisheterosexual imaginations and queer metronormative expectations (Stapel, 2014).

In the limited analyses of the relationship between queer individuals and nonmetro sites, transgender experiences again are eclipsed under the larger framing of LGBTQ+, and, when addressed, older adults’ distinct experiences are overlooked. The scant research on transgender individuals and rurality concentrates on chronological experiences of gender transition and defined barriers to care needs, such as access to the trans-competent providers needed to transition or the impetus to “pass” as cisgender after transition (Abelson, 2016; Koch & Knutson, 2016; Lombardi, 2001; Rogers, 2020). But for those who identified as transgender years before current models of care, or for who transitioned later in life, lack of access to support networks and services have necessitated even more complex developmental arcs and responses.

While, compared to urban areas, rural spaces can be oppressive and isolating because of more socially conservative values, homophobia, and transphobia (Butler, 2017), the limited scholarly work on queer and transgender people in rural areas has conveyed that these sites can offer acceptance, validation, and belonging—where individuals create complex and intertwined support networks extending beyond in-group relationships (Baker, 2016; Gray, 2009). Small towns and rural spaces have the potential to produce alternative sites of queer and transgender identity formation and connection that diverge from, yet are as significant as, urban spaces—where, unlike their urban counterparts, individual friendships and small community clusters are more consistent and persistent than large, well-established groups and events (Forstie, 2022; Ghaziani, 2019; Halberstam, 2003; G. Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

TransRural Lives was developed in response to the need for specific scholarly attention to rural transgender older adults. Later, the program was extended to help foster knowledge-sharing about their distinct histories, care practices, and transitioning journeys.

Urban and Rural Queer Pop-Ups

Studying shifts in urban queer nightlife, Stillwagon and Ghaziani (2019) described pop-ups as intentionally planned, dynamic, and temporary events that challenge conventional understandings of “2SLGBTQ+ placemaking” (p. 875). Instead of relying on fixed, often commercialized spaces like gay bars or bookstores, which can reinforce dominant homonormative narratives that are gendered, racialized, and class based, these pop-ups offer alternative types of gathering that center fluidity, creativity, and resistance (Knee, 2018; Stillwagon & Ghaziani, 2019). They create safer spaces for individuals to celebrate their identities, build communities beyond heteronormative constraints, and foster lasting connections that extend both online and offline. As spaces of congregation, celebration, and collective defiance, queer urban pop-ups also expand geographic imaginaries and informal educational opportunities by reimagining where and how queer life can thrive in the city (Ghaziani & Stillwagon, 2018). In rural settings, these pop-ups create geographically diffuse, episodic opportunities for queer and trans individuals to congregate, celebrate, and resist societal norms, as well as to develop bonds that persist on- and offline after the event ends. While such rural pop-ups challenge the prominence of fixed, institutionalized spaces like urban bars and “gayborhoods,” they also confront the assumption that trans and queer people cannot, or do not, create safe, temporary spaces for collective gathering in rural areas and small towns, thus expanding the geographic imagination of queer and trans culture.

Informal Community-Based Education

Like broader trans and queer rural studies, queer-focused educational scholarship often overlooks older adults and the depth of rural identities and practices, including subversive queer (and trans) learning opportunities that reclaim rural places and identities from cisheteronormative narratives and queer metronormative expectations (Stapel, 2014). Unlike urban settings with more visible, formalized, and better-resourced queer spaces (e.g., gayborhoods with dedicated venues), informal rural learning often occurs in places marked as heteronormative, such as churches, homes, or workplaces, and thus may go unrecognized as “queer” (Stapel, 2014). Accessing rural queer spaces and opportunities for queer learning also are hindered by geographic isolation and fewer community resources, reinforcing the misconception that queer and trans spaces are not viable or desired in rural contexts (Charnpis,

2020; Stapel, 2014; Steel & Fahy, 2011; Stelmach, 2011). Additionally, trans individuals may be excluded even from LGBTQ+ spaces, whether fixed or temporary, due to cisnormative bias (Cook-Daniels, 2010).

Despite these complexities, queer and trans individuals outside metropolises have long engaged with alternative forms of learning and knowledge sharing, fostering informal educational engagements with their rural experiences, practices, and histories of their communities. Whitten (2023) proposed that “rural Queer people explore physical spaces that provide community or exploration within their own flux Queer identities,” producing “new spaces to float in between the binaries of invisible and visible,” including informal spaces of learning (p. 42). Grace and Hill (2004) similarly argued that queer knowledge production and praxis have “shifting, multiple, and overlapping sites of adult education” that are often “constituted as sites of non-formal learning” (p. 174). These sites include workshops and “everyday learning” within queer bars, bookstores, arts spaces, homes, and public locations. The learning opportunities within these spaces do not necessarily reflect the purposes of these sites, and may include workshops, arts-making events, exhibits, storytelling, and any combination thereof. In rural settings that may lack “visible Queer histories,” engaging with both individual histories and “community histories” developed through social interactions and shared experiences can profoundly influence how people learn about their own and others’ identities (Whitten, 2023, p. 44). These shared sites of education are thus vital sites of community building where knowledge about gender, sexuality, identity, community, family, and relationships is collectively explored and produced. Further, these informal educational interventions generate knowledge amid the “similarities, difference, tensions, and contradictions” within the diversity of “loosely configured” queer and trans communities while allowing space to acknowledge an array of distinctions within each (Grace & Hill, 2004, p. 179).

Although much of the limited exploration of these informal learning spaces focuses on queer participants, the practices and significance of “everyday learning” and community building therein can be extended to transgender people in rural spaces and small towns, even as they have different social, medical, and community needs and face distinct forms of exclusion. As Knutson et al. (2018) noted, rural transgender people depend on resourcefulness, creating unique online and in-person communities by sharing knowledge about care practices and transitioning journeys that extends beyond the expertise of medical providers and knowledge. They acquire information about social opportunities, ways of furthering interpersonal relationships, and care needs through these interactions and modes of informal education. In addition to formal opportunities for education, engaging with these informal

learning opportunities and knowledge sharing in rural spaces and small towns are vital practices, particularly when queer and transgender voices and experiences are rarely centered in everyday life and public spaces. As such, these forms of informal adult education in community spaces within a lived and knowable community are well-positioned to be what Grace and Hill (2004) referred to as an “intellectual and practical project with epistemological, political, and strategic purposes aimed at inclusive praxis” as they engage with a plurality of being in the world (p. 168).

Storytelling and Informal Learning

Butterwick and Roy (2018) identified how “informal, non-formal, and community settings” that enable engagement with creative, storytelling, and arts-based practices can help build “pluralistic public space with unheard voices” (p. 3) within the framework of adult education. This practice is particularly vital in rural spaces and small towns where more formal educational spaces may not meet the needs of more marginalized populations. Storytelling as a form of public education does risk placing minoritized storytellers at risk of being objectified or viewed as informing audiences about the “truth” of their marginalized experiences; it also exposes trans individuals’ identities, potentially placing them at risk of violence or discrimination. But the process of storytelling also can be as informative for the participant who is narrating their experiences as it is for their interlocutors. Poletti (2011) argued that storytelling “focused on affective connection” can “foster and promote community bonds through the exchange of narratives of life experience” (pp. 74, 76). Both Gruber (2015) and King (2008) proposed that storytelling is a vital part of education about queer and trans experiences, offering people outside these communities opportunities to learn more about individual and collective histories, as well as about modes of inclusion and exclusion. Such storytelling also can provide queer and trans individuals with methods of documenting and working through their experiences while creating connections with and mutually learning about others’ identities and experiences.

For transgender individuals in particular, storytelling as a form of informal community education provides a method of disseminating their lives and becoming more materially present in community spaces without having to relay their experiences through linear narratives of transition and progress. Medical and academic rhetoric about transgender experiences has overemphasized ideals of chronological transition from one gender to another as a way of determining who precisely meets particular standards for care, which has shaped how activist spaces, legal discussions, and cultural discourse broadly engages with what it means to be “truly” transgender (Ashley, 2021; Stryker, 2017). Storytelling can be especially productive for

transgender people whose nonsequential gender journeys may “loop” between identities, for those who choose not to relate their experiences to consecutive milestones such as name changes or medical transition (Bettcher, 2009; Salamon, 2010; Stryker, 2017), or for those seeking to “imagin[e] futures” that are “new and unscripted,” amid present or past experiences that have denied or restricted their identities (Jen & Jones, 2022, p. 136). Transgender storytelling also offers participants the chance to forge new relationships in spaces where they are accepted while exchanging knowledge about their lived experiences, which, as Vivienne (2011) asserts, often “affords a sense of participating collectively and creatively in a cultural space that is greater than the individual” (p. 3). As trans storytellers share their experiences and listen to others’ experiences, they engage not as an “index of marginality,” but instead as a crucial locus of knowledge production and the “central cultural site where meanings about gender and sexuality are being worked out” (D. Valentine, 2007, p. 14).

Storying Older Transgender Experiences Through Rural Pop-Ups

Storytelling through different media, including by sharing the TransRural Lives website and in-person events, is the primary way through which pop-ups foster community-based, informal adult education. The in-person events, held primarily in small towns in central Washington, have drawn attendees from across the state and the broader Pacific Northwest, complementing the public-facing website by fostering spaces centered on community and presence within rural spaces. Organized in partnership with Helen House, the only queer and trans youth-focused physical space in central Washington not affiliated with a medical provider, these pop-ups have provided ways to center the experiences of transgender older adults while also creating broader social opportunities and connections. The specific types of events—such as intergenerational panels, Trans Day of Remembrance gatherings, or zine-making workshops—were shaped over time through ongoing interactions with older transgender adults and community partners, including Helen House staff and youth, and were part of the original project’s vision and expansion.

Given the relatively small population of transgender adults in rural areas and the scarcity of trans-centered spaces, creating intentional, affirming environments is essential. TransRural Lives pop-ups center the lived experiences of transgender older adults while also fostering broader opportunities for social connection across generations, identities, and geographic areas. Interviews from the project revealed that transgender older adults in rural communities often build relationships across a wide range of identities. As Stapel (2014) argued, many rural queer subjectivities and spaces are not visibly “queer,” and understanding these

dynamics requires scholars to consider what it might mean to “dequeue” the countryside. Because of the absence of trans- and queer-owned or focused organizations and businesses like bars, coffee shops, or bookstores in Kittitas County and the surrounding areas, pop-ups have happened in other venues, such as a university multipurpose room, a brewery’s outdoor patio, the shared outdoor space of a skateboard and wine shop, a local museum, and artist spaces. These pop-ups have allowed for the creation of trans-centered events but also have facilitated broad participation and public access, including cisgender heterosexual allies, while keeping the events trans-centered. The presence of cisgender allies and non-trans attendees at pop-ups does not dilute their purpose—it instead reflects the diverse, relational fabric of rural trans life.

While some pop-ups have been exclusively for trans, queer, gender-nonconforming, or Two-Spirit older adults, others have been intergenerational, bringing together younger trans and queer people and cisgender allies, friends, and family members. Each pop-up is thematically focused on the experiences and stories of transgender older adults in rural spaces and small towns in the Pacific Northwest. Along with the TransRural Lives website, these pop-ups provided important, community-based educational experiences, including opportunities for knowledge sharing, storytelling, and relationship building across generations and identities. Although organized by the TransRural Lives directors, most pop-up activities are peer led. Community members share knowledge grounded in lived experience, offering insights often more resonant than formal instruction—particularly in areas where professional trans-centered services are limited. The pop-ups also are highly responsive to local needs, addressing immediate concerns such as navigating public services, identifying trans-inclusive spaces, and confronting discrimination.

Storytelling at these pop-ups has taken place alongside multicourse dinners; arts and crafts, including zine-making and screen printing; drag bingo, where individuals identify significant events in queer and trans histories; trans trivia; resource sharing; and roller-skating and skateboarding. Each event attracted both new and returning attendees, with many participants bringing friends or community members to subsequent gatherings. As directors of TransRural Lives, and queer and trans humans ourselves, we were deeply engaged in every stage of the events—from organizing to attending and debriefing with community members who helped shape or participated in the pop-ups. We were fully present throughout, facilitating events, and then actively listening to stories shared during both structured discussions and informal conversations in small groups. We took notes and recorded select stories with permission and were responsible for acquiring material ephemera, like zines, and feedback from the pop-ups.

Below we detail three specific pop-up event activities that exemplify how they serve as community-based educational opportunities that, while informal in nature, help attendees from all identities learn more and exchange knowledge about the experiences of transgender older adults in rural spaces and small towns.

Guided Group Storytelling: Intergenerational Community Exchange

In May 2024, TransRural Lives collaborated with Kittitas County Pride (KCP), a nonprofit that hosts the county's annual pride parade and related social events, to host a pop-up event titled "Community Exchange: Exploring Rural Trans and Gender Expansive Identities" at Gallery One Visual Arts Center in Ellensburg, WA. The Community Exchange event was designed as an educational dialogue and visual exploration of gender identity in rural communities, featuring intergenerational panel conversations followed by zine making. The evening began with unstructured social interactions, allowing attendees to connect while enjoying food together. An informal panel discussion followed, featuring two trans elders who had shared their stories for TransRural Lives, and three other gender-diverse individuals ranging from ages 19 to 30—one of whom is Two-Spirit and nonbinary. About 75 individuals attended, including local Two-Spirit, trans, and queer community members and allies; youth and their families; small business owners; K–12 educators; and faculty, staff, and students from Central Washington University. As planning events like these in smaller towns often relies on word of mouth and relationship building, rather than on advertisements targeted toward particular identities or age ranges, the pop-up was able to bring together diverse individuals with a wide variety of experiences that might not otherwise be reflected in mixed spaces.

We introduced the discussion, initially asking participants how their gender identities and lived experiences were shaped by their rural context, while encouraging them to steer the conversation in directions they felt compelled to explore. This conversational, open-ended approach sparked a rich discussion among the panelists, with follow-up questions and dialogue emerging organically, as participants bounced between topics and the stories shared by others.

For instance, an older transgender participant, who grew up in rural Idaho and proudly identified as a "country girl," shared that she never wanted to live in a city—challenging the common assumption that trans people are always drawn to cities and that rural areas are unwelcoming to trans people. Despite the difficulties of living openly as a trans woman in her small Washington town for over 20 years, she took pride in the relationships she had built, even with conservative neighbors. She recounted the joy she felt when a local church—made up mostly of strangers—held

a yard sale in the early 2000s to help fund her travel to Thailand for medical transition. Her story highlighted, for both older and younger trans participants, how rural spaces can foster belonging, with shared interests—like community construction, working on cars, or advocating for immigrant rights—serving as powerful social connectors. Following this discussion, another older trans panelist, who grew up in the queer communities of 1980s San Francisco, discussed similarly finding comfort living in rural Washington. Drawn over the years to both urban and rural places by social justice work, he is grounded now by proximity to his son and grandchildren, as well as a local queer and trans community—even in a largely conservative town. He identified the social networks and resources he has found particularly meaningful, including in faith-based spaces, despite their associations with conservatism or a lack of acceptance for transgender individuals. Younger attendees responded to these stories by sharing their own transition stories and their appreciation for learning about how the older adults present built the community they needed, while identifying the struggles to transition in rural spaces when their identities are more gender fluid or less recognizable than binary gender expressions.

These stories sparked a broader group discussion on being "out" in rural areas; the capacity for local change; and how some small towns focus more on community involvement than gender identity, which challenged perceptions, particularly among younger attendees, about acceptance within rurality. This discussion helped to reinforce the visibility of trans and gender-diverse individuals and collectives in rural spaces, as well as the contours of their identities and needs that differ from the expression of trans identities most often captured in metropolises. It also fostered opportunities for attendees—ranging from trans individuals to parents of trans children—to build new support networks and discover practical resources outside online spaces or those available in larger cities, as attendees identified spaces which they have found surprisingly hospitable or accepting of transgender people, both on and offline.

In reflecting on stories from the younger, nonbinary panelists, the older trans adults identified how this conversation served as a site of knowledge gathering and exchange, particularly as they reaffirmed the validity of their own identities and expressed appreciation for the younger generation's expansive understanding of gender, after learning more about emerging identities and expressions of trans-ness they might otherwise not encounter through their limited networks. For younger generations, the stories from older adults affirmed and helped visualize the potential for transgender futures and aging in rurality. It also provided insight into older trans people's efforts and activism, which have helped make such exploration possible. This context and types of historical knowledge sharing remain

particularly salient given the relatively reduced life expectancy of transgender people, coupled with prevailing discourses that render trans identities as relatively nascent and only emerging in response to upswells in popular culture. Even those attendees who did not speak were witnesses to older trans and queer visibility in a public, cisnormative space, showing an act of resistance and affirmation. The intergenerational and community-building aspects of the event, particularly the panel discussions and informal social interactions, thus revealed a trans presence in rural areas—past, present, and future.

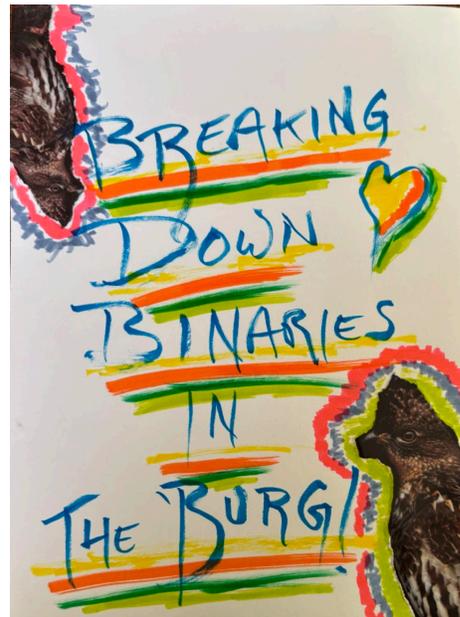
Storytelling and Learning Through Zine-Making Pop-Ups

Zine making in community settings also emerged as a vital method of storytelling and knowledge sharing at these pop-ups. As Whitlock (2011) described, zines combine visual and verbal elements to express experiences “on one’s own terms” (p. 115). Accessible and low-cost, they invite free choice learning and are ideal for informal, community-driven gatherings. The act of collective zine making leaves meaningful traces—through both the physical creations and the narratives embedded within them—and fosters reflection and identity work.

Following a TransRural Lives event that included an intergenerational panel—where transgender, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse individuals told stories about their lives in rural areas and small towns and discussed perspectives on aging—TransRural Lives held a pop-up zine-making event. Attendees were free to move through the space at their own pace, eat, chat, and use their phones to take notes or share information as they made their zines. This structure reflects what Ballantyne and Packer (2011) identified as “free-choice learning” sites, where learning is voluntary, interest-driven, and deeply personal (p. 27).

As part of this free-choice learning structure, participants were encouraged to engage in conversation and share their ideas and process when creating the zines (Figure 1), with the goal of exchanging ideas or experiences that otherwise would not occur in structured educational or health-focused settings that overemphasize gender transition and identity alone. Instead, participants would be able to self-represent their own experiences, while adapting their zines based on conversations and information shared about life in rural spaces as transgender people. Given the limited scholarship about what types of knowledge exchange are particularly productive for transgender people in rural spaces, fostering less-structured opportunities to consider what types of

Figure 1
Examples of Zines Created During a Pop-Up Zine-Making Event



engagement and learning is crucial for determining future forms of effective engagement. The ephemeral, unstructured quality of zine making lent itself to contingent community building during the pop-ups, as participants shared in a collective “playful” artistic activity, which invited lively conversation, particularly as participants shared the tools needed to create their zines and were seated together at different tables full of zine-making supplies. Organizers provided no fixed themes but encouraged reflection on stories from the panel discussion and *TransRural Lives* audio vignettes. The topics covered included experiences of coming out in conservative small towns; the queer and trans popular culture media they consumed when younger; rural and small town activism; being transgender in the outdoors; Pride flags and queer and trans history; more experimental zines with images related to transgender identity, rural spaces, and small towns; and community.

As a low-stakes and expressive practice, zine making fosters self-reflection, shared learning, and enduring connections across queer and trans rural experiences. In the context of the pop-up, they became a site of material knowledge exchange in and about rural spaces. Attendees built off ideas expressed in one another’s zines, exchanged images and stories about their experiences, and discussed similarities and needs related to belonging in a small town. Through this collaborative, creative process, zine making at events becomes a form of subject-becoming and community history, where the lives of transgender people are documented for future educational events in informal and formal settings. In rural spaces where trans people have fewer opportunities to gather in public in groups with other trans people, these forms of semi-structured free-choice learning offer participants not only connection, but also ways of materially documenting the stories about transgender lives they have heard or experienced, and that may otherwise remain obscured.

Open Mic Pop-Ups: One Picture, One Story and Aging in Rurality

Stories ranged from a trans elder sharing photos of herself on her motorcycle that were taken for her 70th birthday—marking a powerful act of visibility and self-documentation—to a Two-Spirit Nimiipuu elder sharing a childhood photo of herself in tribal regalia at their grandfather’s funeral, linking cultural memory with identity. Others, including an older adult trans rabbi and a trans priest, spoke about finding joy and support in religious spaces later in life and coming out multiple times—challenging assumptions about exclusion in faith and religious communities, particularly those outside major metro areas. A participant who used to work in tech

shared how they model their community-building practices in rural areas on the virtual social networks they helped develop. The sharing of these stories and the questions and answers that followed emerged as a significant moment of knowledge sharing, where attendees gained further insight into, and then discussed, the potential acceptance and types of safety and resources within rural areas and small towns for older transgender people as they age. They also focused on methods for building community in later life, countering the metronormative narrative that these rural spaces are inherently more discriminatory than larger cities. The curiosity that filled the event highlighted how rare it is for older trans, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse individuals to connect across identities and share physical space—particularly outside large conferences or intentional intergenerational events in cities—and the wealth of information that can be disseminated when bringing these individuals together.

As Couldry (2008) and Nicolazzo et al. (2017) noted, storytelling by minoritized voices plays a vital role in shaping public narratives and developing epistemologies grounded in lived experience. The pop-up underscored the value of capturing the range of lived experiences among multiple generations of aging transgender people to inform these narratives and epistemologies. The discussion highlighted the vast diversity of gender identities and experiences, including expressions of trans joy in rural areas, emphasizing how factors such as age, ethnicity, proximity to trans-competent providers or safe spaces, and internet literacy shape these narratives and experiences. More crucially, the pop-up visibly challenged narratives that frame trans identities as new or limited to younger people and that assume aging in metropolises is inherently preferable to rurality. In particular, the pop-up inspired a larger conversation about the benefits of being openly out in small towns and rural spaces, such as the ability to affect change within the community, and what aging in rurality may look like for transgender people. The nonlinear narratives older adults shared revealed the ways in which they had and continue to “work out” their gender identities as they aged and underlined the limitations of dominant knowledge about older trans identities and experiences commonly located in formal educational settings, which again follow a linear trajectory from pre- to post-transition. The pop-up also revealed, in the absence of formal educational spaces thematically focused on transgender aging in rurality, the potential of non-queer spaces to serve as safe spaces for those within older Two-Spirit, trans, and queer communities to share information and develop individual and collective knowledge about these histories.

Conclusion: Challenging Cisnormative Educational Frameworks Through Informal Community-Based Transgender-Focused Knowledge Exchange

For transgender older adults, the pop-up events have served as important spaces to connect, share experiences, and exchange knowledge with others who have navigated similar gender journeys in rural areas and small towns. In rural areas lacking dedicated LGBTQ+ spaces, these gatherings become transformative sites of community building, informal education, and collective empowerment, offering alternatives to oft-exclusionary institutions by prioritizing safety, joy, and celebration of gender and sexual diversity. As Stillwagon and Ghaziani (2019) argued, such gatherings illustrate the value of relational networks and collective action over fixed, physical infrastructures. One benefit is gaining awareness of trans-affirming healthcare providers, online platforms for rural trans communities, and trans-friendly businesses. Events that include community gatherings, panel discussions, art making, and peer-led support groups centered around skill sharing and lived experience provide access to information and resources on healthcare, legal rights, and social support that may not be available through formal institutions in rural spaces. These gatherings also foster intergenerational exchange, enabling older trans adults to share resources and advice with younger individuals while in turn learning from them.

The pop-ups also highlight the need for informal community-based education to challenge cisnormativity within both the education system and broader society. In rural areas, where adult education centering trans people is particularly limited, such informal learning holds significant potential. Much existing discourse on trans lives reflects urban, youth-centered perspectives (Stapel, 2014), while trans adults, especially in rural settings, are often excluded in formal education. As Keenan (2022) has argued, the U.S. education system continues to uphold rigid and prescriptive gender structures, and education researchers have largely failed to critically examine the restrictive and harmful gender norms embedded within the system. Even well-intentioned educators often receive inadequate training that reinforces, rather than dismantles, stereotypes (Green, 2010; McQuillan & Leininger, 2023), and few interventions result in structural change (Frohard-Dourlent, 2016; Meyer & Keenan, 2020; Smith & Payne, 2016).

Additionally, research suggests that educational leaders may prioritize their own discomfort—or that of the broader public—over the needs and well-being of trans students (Payne & Smith, 2022). While formal education must be reimagined, informal community-based engagements offer vital alternatives. As Grace and Hill (2004) argued, such practices can support “tactical and transformative adult educational practices” by grounding them in everyday life, challenging heteronormativity, enabling oppositional narratives, and fostering commitments to social change (p. 169).

In rural contexts where isolation and stigma around gender diversity can be acute, these events provide critical emotional support and connection. Building on Fraser’s (1997) concept of subaltern counterpublics, Nicolazzo and colleagues (2017) have emphasized the importance of trans kinship—actively choosing to support and care for one another. We argue that informal, community-based learning among trans people strengthens personal and communal networks in geographic areas where such connections are rare and amplifies the voices of older trans adults who share their experiences of finding belonging and affirmation in rural areas. These events create a vibrant, oppositional ethos that reimagines placemaking, emphasizing that transness can thrive in transient, shared moments. By highlighting mobility and relationality, they also challenge dominant narratives that depict rural spaces as static or inhospitable to trans and gender-nonconforming individuals. They foster a sense of belonging and offer opportunities for participants to develop practical skills in advocating for their rights, navigating healthcare systems, and responding to bias, which are especially vital in areas with few trans-focused resources. Ultimately, the relationships built through these gatherings lay the groundwork for deeper communal ties and collective action.

Pop-ups not only support individual well-being but also strengthen the broader fabric of rural trans communities by offering vibrant sites of education. This work is especially urgent amid escalating political and social attacks on transgender people in the United States, where efforts to silence, marginalize, and criminalize trans lives are intensifying. In this climate, sustaining spaces for intergenerational knowledge sharing and communal affirmation becomes not only an act of care, but one of resistance, survival, and documentation amid erasure.

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