Unearthing Rural Roots: A Reflective Exploration of Queering Place

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This creative/arts-based piece includes poetic voices from the editors of "Rural Education and Queer Identities: Rural and (Out)Rooted" alongside visual art representations from the Queer artist who provided the cover art for the volume. As contributors, Cook and Cain use reflexive poetry as a methodological exercise to engage with themes of insider/outsider perspectives in their research with LGBTQ+ participants. As editors of the volume, we found ourselves citing this practice as a rural Queer methodology to explore the tensions that arose for us as academics and educators while curating the collection. This piece explores three spaces inspired by Pennell's chapter on being Queer across time and space in three rural settings. First, we explore rural taproots, two-steppin' between our Queerness and temporal memories of being closeted youth. Second, we consider root systems as we two-step between our roles as educators and, as Thompson said, "agents of affirmation." Third, we display aerial roots as we symbolically visit home as out rural scholars to unpack those early lessons. The accompanying artwork serves as further reflection into this arts-based inquiry. We conclude by providing two suggestions for future rural pedagogical practice and scholarship.

Using methods, theories, and understandings stemming from the volume *Rural Education and Queer Identities: Rural and (Out)Rooted* (Whitten & Azano, 2025), this piece actualizes reflexive poetic inquiry as a creative/arts-based methodology, in this case used to examine three spaces related to the intersection of rural education and Queerness[1]: childhoods as closeted rural youth, teaching while being rural and Queer, and a metaphorical journey home as out scholars. Namely, we seek to understand a rural sense of belonging related to our own Queer identities and how education shapes those identities. The autoethnographic poetry is complemented throughout with artistic collages accompanied with the artist's statements, which underscore the lived experience of being rural and Queer. The rural Queer poetry and artwork complicate monolithic and often deficit-oriented narratives of rural people while challenging Queer metronormativity.

Rural Education and Queer Identities (Whitten & Azano, 2025) highlights the intersectional joys and challenges of Queer existence in rural education by critically questioning who has felt, and who feels, rooted in rural spaces. Much like this special issue, the collection includes empirical manuscripts along with personal narrative, art, and poetry to Queer the academic space and the possibilities for "what counts" as scholarship while we explore the Queer rural lifeworld. The present piece takes lessons and strategies we learned as editors of this collection and puts them into practice.

[1] We capitalize the term Queer to acknowledge the rich sense of identity, history, and community within the term while also honoring the varied lived experiences within the Queer community.

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Inspired by the poetic exploration of "two-steppin'" (Cook & Cain, 2025), this creative/arts-based piece includes poetic voices from us (Clint and Amy), the editors of *Rural Education and Queer Identities* (2025), and visual art representations from a Queer artist (Casey Anne), who provided the cover art for the volume. As contributors to *Rural Education and Queer Identities*, Cook and Cain used reflexive poetry as a methodological exercise to engage with themes of their insider and outsider perspectives in their research with LGBTQ+ participants. They noted,

> These poems demonstrate how we grappled with ethical tensions, surprising revelations, and struggles we encountered while engaging in this work. Ultimately, we hope to highlight queer-and-Southern joy and the struggles inherent in engaging in identity-based work as well as inspire educators and researchers to also actively reflect upon their identities rather than simply reproducing deficit-driven research about LGBTQ+ communities. (p. 251)

Cook and Cain's hope to inspire worked, as we found ourselves often citing this practice as a rural Queer methodology to explore the tensions that arose for us as academics and educators as we collaborated on this book over the past couple years. For example, one contribution in the book is a "Tale of Two Matthews: The Laramie Project 25 Years Later," in which Matthew Greenberg (2025) shared his experience producing the play—in Laramie—as an assistant professor at the University of Wyoming on the 25th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's murder. Amy was four years older than Matthew Shepard. Apple had just released the iMac. Bill Clinton was being impeached. *Titanic* had swept the Oscars. The hate crime against Matthew Shepard was a bell toll for Generation X, and felt like a reminder that it would never be safe to be out. Clint was three years old, growing up in the legacy of Shepard's and countless other overkillings (Stanley, 2021). (There are reasons we were closeted as rural youth.)

For this special issue, we first provide the backdrop, and our sources of poetic inspiration, from the collection. Then, we model Cook and Cain's (2025) powerful exercise of two-steppin' through reflexive poetry to share the interplay of our academic and personal subjectivities. Our poems explore three spaces, which also take root in Brimmer's artwork. Inspired by a chapter about being Queer across time and space in three rural settings (Pennell, 2025), our first set of poems explores our rural taproots as a way of two-steppin' between indefeasible Queer identities and temporal memories of being closeted in our rural youth. Aligning with the second section of rural root systems, our next group of poems two-step between our roles as educators (i.e., classroom teachers and professors) and evolving into "agents of affirmation" (Thompson, 2025, p. 70). In our final set of poems, inspired by a chapter about returning home to confront childhoods and messages of homophobia (Heasley & Baker, 2025), we each "visit home" as out rural scholars to unpack for ourselves those early lessons. When brainstorming for this issue, we wanted artwork that represented the rural Queer intersections we wrote about. In brainstorming with Casey Anne, the artist, they asked for our photographs—ones that we felt held pieces of our own intersectional histories and narratives. They also asked for handwritten lines from our poems and often asked questions to clarify the significance of a photo. As a result, they produced the art that serves as an additional reflective tool for readers to engage with these complex intersections. We conclude by sharing implications for rural education scholarship and practice.

Foundation to Understanding Our *Roots*

In 2023, we (Clint and Amy) developed a call for abstracts exploring the intersections of rural education and Queer identities with specific intention on curating a collection that featured a variety of research, critical scholarship, creative narrative, and poetry—each uniquely valued in understanding the intricacies at this intersection. Echoing Freire's (1970) idea that power mediates knowledge in historically oppressive systems, hooks's (2009, 2012) critical sense of belonging through poetic expression, and Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place, we believe writing, researching, and reading can be an act of healing with a hope for liberation, especially when journeying with historically marginalized individuals from rural communities. Research at the intersection of rural education and Queer identities cites higher rates of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2022), fewer Queer-affirming resources (Movement Advancement Project, 2019), complex adult attitudes related to Queer and trans topics (Bishop & Mcclellan, 2016; Page, 2017; Thompson et al., 2024), histories of erasure (Carey, 2023), and policy concerns (McQuillan, 2021; Whitten & Thomas, 2023). The scholarship also addresses communities of resilience (Gray, 2009), reclaimed histories (Garringer, 2024), narratives of home and (re)connection (Avashia, 2022; Jamison, 2021), and hopes for pedagogies rooted in liberation (Thompson & Whitten, 2024). Our collection (Whitten & Azano, 2025), by centering rural educational experiences, expands interdisciplinary work that has unpacked the role of geography broadly in research on Queer experiences (Baker, 2016; Stone, 2018), the narratives of Queer out-migration to cities as newly imagined spaces (Weston, 1995), and the complexities that exist in the metaphors related to Queer bodies and the production of space (Valentine, 2002). Built from research and critical theory, this book project was

an act of love, and as editors who are rural and Queer, we found ourselves deeply moved by the collection.

Reading and editing the chapters was not simply an academic endeavor. The process meant revisiting our own pasts, listening with empathy to authors and with each other. It meant becoming more authentic in the very space we were trying to create with the book. "Rooted and *out*rooted," our subtitle, serves as an extended metaphor—a conceit that asks how Queer individuals can be both rooted to their rural places and *out* as Queer individuals. In other words, the "roots" metaphor teases the assumption that rural folks are rooted to their rural places—specifically how Queer folks are (up)rooted in rural education and, for some, *out*rooted from their rural places. As such, the book is organized into three broad sections of rural taproots, root systems, and aerial roots. Taproots are the histories, elders, and backgrounds that remind us of how deep our roots plunge. Root systems are the relationships, communities, and institutions which provide a lens to visualize the complex, interconnected webs of systems that provide nutrition to grow. Aerial roots are the visible parts that exist on the surface, illustrating the rural Queer ability to survive and thrive above ground. As we edited the collection, we found ourselves not only poring over the manuscripts but engaging with our own deep rural roots and Queer histories and experiences.

The intersectional prior scholarship and the patchwork collection of voices coming together for the collection guided us to Casey Anne's artwork and research. Brimmer is a "creator, activist, educator, and scholar that focuses on queer gender and sexuality, disability, neurodiversity, and body and fat positivity" (Brimmer, n.d.), and their dissertation explored a pedagogy of the full self (Brimmer, 2024) to explore the ways in which academic spaces can lift up (rather than tear down) marginalized academics, teachers, and students. Importantly, Casey Anne's "Y'all Means All Progress Pride Flag" photo project serves as the cover photo for *Rural Education and Queer Identities* (Whitten & Azano, 2025). As the three of us have shared and participated in the rural Queer community in Central Appalachia, we were eager to collaboratively develop this poetic and creative visual representation together to explore the concept of Queer rural roots.

Rural Taproots: *Childhood Closets Made of Glass*

Our rural taproots prompt us to consider the core early parts of our rural Queerness; in other words, it's how we learned of ourselves and our places. Scholars and practitioners may note the rural Queer literacies embedded in our poems or the imagery that resurrected our elders and childhood friends. Our poetic taproots are the explicit and implicit lessons taught in childhood about what is good/bad or clean/dirty.

Amy

First Entry

We were riding spider on the swing
When her brother walked up on us
Four legs dangling in every direction
Our bodies squished together on the seat
Giggling and holding each other for balance
He stood staring in disbelief.

For years he'd taunt us with a queered version
of the Barney song (to the tune of *This Old Man*)
    I love you
    You love me
    Ho-mo-sex-u-ality
    People think that
    We're just friends
    But we're really
    Les-bi-ans

Little girls playing little girl games
An innocence we would soon lose to
Time and other people's older brothers
when we'd learn what was expected
of grown-up girls in one-stoplight towns.

After the first time he sang it
I looked up the word
Carrying with reverence
the hardback American Heritage tome
down the hallway to my purple bedroom
in our common 1980s ranch home
Other than the Good Book and the Sears catalog
this was the only one we had with authority
its alphabet on display in the thumb index
I felt powerful just holding it—
all those words at my fingertips!

I remembered being told that "love"
sat smack dab in the middle of the dictionary
so I cracked the mighty spine and found the *L*s
    Lesbian (noun): *inhabitant of Lesbos*
I ran my finger down the list of words to find "Lesbos"
    and since I had never been to Greece
    and since her brother said it like it was a bad thing
I was relieved—
        I was not a bad thing.

Clint

How to clean behind the ears...

Grandma Frances used to tell me every day
wash your face and scrub behind the ears

after a morning of pickin' tobacco
she even had special soap to remove the sticky sap

when college told me I was 'g' droppin'
and using diphthongs to pronounce "ice" and "bike"
I covered my accent in the same soap
to cleanse a dialect I never knew I had.

Walmart parking lots, four-wheeler rides, and pastures
started feeling dirty
when learning about classic literature

wash the ruralness
scrub behind the ears

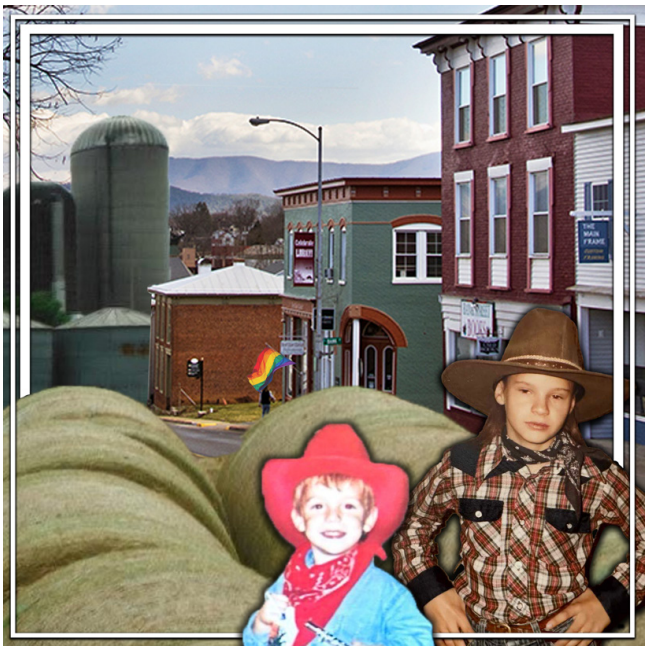
keep fingernail polisher remover nearby
men don't paint their fingernails at family luncheons
only pack solid colored tee shirts
no rainbows, no justice

I have six minutes to blast Nicki, Cardi B, and Beyoncé
mentally shakin' my body in the car
before I see the first tree on Whitten farm.

wash the Queerness,
scrub behind the ears.

I washed and scrubbed
thinking my rural and Queer identities
could be absorbed into a sponge
temporarily washed away
to feel like society's version of
dirt-free

Figure 1
We Belong



Alt-Text: In this image, you can see part of the Whitten Family Farm imposed onto the backdrop of Luray, VA, the one-stoplight town where Amy grew up. Rolled bales of hay from the farm are in the forefront, along with images of Clint and Amy as children in cowboy hats, his red, hers brown. A rainbow flag is imposed onto one of the buildings in place of an "open" flag. Both people in the image are white.[2]
Artist's Statement: This piece combines childhood images of Clint and Amy to explore their rural roots—Clint on a family farm and Amy in a small Shenandoah Valley town. Both shared photos featuring cowboy hats and attire: Clint leaping between hay bales and Amy in downtown Luray, VA, with the Blue Ridge Mountains behind her. By overlaying a rainbow pride flag onto the "open" flag of a small business in Amy's photo, we ask, through the work:

What might seeing Queerness in their hometowns have meant to younger, still-Queer Clint and Amy?

[2] In work addressing power structures, we believe capitalizing "white" contributes to white supremacist narratives.

Root Systems:
Conveyors of Hope and Advocacy through Teaching

We used the metaphor of root systems to illustrate the interconnectedness of classrooms, leadership and advocacy, and community in rural education and Queer existence. This second set of poetic voice speaks to our tenure and practice as rural Queer educators and scholars. Here, rural researchers and scholars may reflect on ethical practices querying vulnerable populations in small communities and consider the role of being "agents of affirmation" (Thompson, 2025, p. 70). This section unpacks the pedagogical practices that shape us as rural Queer educators based on the webs of systems within our place.

Amy

Wine Into Water

I loved teaching *Siddhartha* to tenth graders
Their initial exhaustions gave way to inquiry–
    Wait, this dude's just gonna sit by the river?
    I thought Siddhartha was Buddha or some shit.
Existentialism, I'd write on the board
And they'd begin to deconstruct old lessons
Wrangling with the passive:
everything happens for a reason to
The possible truth of an indifferent universe
For me, it was learning about dinosaurs in elementary school
trying to reconcile fossils in the Garden of Eden
The moments where our rivers split and we find ourselves
alone in a tributary of our own making.
I nearly drowned in mine, baptized in a river of wine
(Take a shot, shotgun a beer, prove you belong)
A rite of passage in small towns that offered no peace.

Asceticism, I'd write on the board
Tenth graders crave the hard questions
The complicated vocabulary words that beg discussion
on the friction and freedom of growing up
They want to be asked
    What can you not learn from home?
    How do we acquire wisdom over knowledge?
At their age I lived down a gravel road
under the Skyline's watch
Stars twinkling so close to the horizon
it looked like a never-ending search party.
Tucked into a holler,
our family was nothing like the Brahmins' high caste
And the mountains held me like a secret
(don't air your dirty laundry)

So I, too, longed to leave on a journey of self-discovery.
As we approached the end of the novel,
I'd chalk "nirvana" on the board
    Aw snap, Kurt Cobain was the bomb
    Do you think Buddha could really levitate?
    I saw a Hare Krishna once at the mall.
Their questions led to essays about
their own journeys to enlightenment
reckoning childhood beliefs as they
aligned or frayed from their families
It was a treasured passage, and I was their shaman.

I always read the book to them
Stopping often for think-alouds
Slowing for effect at the pivotal moments
    "*The reason why Siddhartha has remained alien and unknown to myself*
    Is due to one thing, To one single thing –
    I was afraid of myself, I was fleeing from myself."

I've never been to India
But I recently returned to the Shenandoah,
Greeted her as an old friend and asked her to heal me
My reflection showed a little girl
Free of the world and its despair
It turned wine into water and offered a new baptism
I cupped my hands,
    and became a child again.

Clint

an (in)visible quilted curriculum

I'm a vibrantly colorful, wildly textured,
quilted teacher
carefully pieced together by
sorcerers of teaching
former teachers and classmates
current students and colleagues
Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison
Jacqueline Woodson and James Baldwin
Ms. Frizzle and Dolly Parton
Jinkx Monsoon and Brandi Carlile
Nikki Giovanni
and my Grandma Frances
it's the way *she* taught me.
scraps, shapes
patterns and thread
newly imagined with an old soul
roadmaps of stories near, and far,
crafted with intentions to comfort.

This pedagogical quilt
—invisibility displayed in my classroom —
proudly appeared when we
danced with our finished books
read outloud our poems
hummed to the background instrumental music
gave sassy rebuttals
shared snacks and favorite shows
dreamed of futuristic lifeworlds
modeled our self-expression through fashion
laughed at the thought of being normal
journeyed through lands of fiction and nonfiction
local and global
questioned which rules harmed others
asked each other for help
spilt strawberry milk on our desk

take the bits of fabric
with history and grit
new and unworn
forgotten or (re)discovered
once undervalued
all full of life and story.
Connect them through needle and thread
and give a new generation comfort
through radical joy.

Figure 2
Ripples in Time

Alt-Text: In this image I combined digital and analog art to collage several photos of both Clint and Amy and their loved ones. In the foreground is Clint sitting on a cement wall wearing a black shirt with rainbow stripes across the chest with white text that says "Love wins." Amy, with short hair and round sunglasses, is wearing a black and white flannel shirt, a red kerchief around her neck, and a backpack, standing in front of a large bridge. There are rainbow stripes to mimic water flowing beneath the bridge. Above the bridge are four images of people: Amy with her Dad holding a jar of moonshine, Amy side hugging her Nanny, Clint's Grandma and Grandpa, and his Grandma and her sister. Also in this section are handwritten excerpts of poems included in this work, Clint's on lined paper reading, "Wash the Queerness | Scrub behind the ears," and Amy's writing, "I was not a bad thing!"
Artist's Statement: This image is called "Ripples in Time" because it is the overlap and blending of past selves with future selves and the people who helped shape Amy and Clint with their retrospective texts in their handwriting—something shaped over time. There is rainbow water under the bridge, rippling, echoing, sometimes imperfectly. The faded images in the background are the way memories sometimes work, but the faded rainbow in the top, compared to the vibrant rainbow on the bottom, is symbolic of watering ourselves down to fit into what we believe is expected of us. Time overlaps, it is palimpsestic—the past informing the present, the present informing the future. Therefore, the past

is written into the future, and the future is written in the past. Amy and Clint's young adult selves represent the middle ground of understanding, informed by our experiences and the people in our lives.

Aerial Roots: *Queer Bodies Returning to Rural Homes*

As editors we traveled with the contributors across temporal and geographic boundaries, within reality and the imaginary (Magness et al., 2025). Chapter authors reflected, imagined, and, in some cases, even returned to their rural youths. In our final set of poems, inspired by these authors, we too visited home in verses to unpack for ourselves those early lessons. These poems imagined us returning to our childhood, but now as our out-and-proud rural Queer educator selves—editors of a collection that neither of our younger selves would have dreamed of curating.

Amy

Hillbiloquy

When I was little
I didn't talk fast enough to get heard
They'd be laughing and carrying on
Telling stories on the back porch
Til I don't know when
I couldn't get a word in edgewise
Plus I was told to hush anyway
They'd say, You better get 'fore your daddy comes home
But the thing is—*I loved when he got home*
He was rough around the edges but I didn't mind
He'd take me up to the gravel pit to shoot tin cans
And he'd tell me about the mountains
And how his maw maw once chopped a rattlesnake
Clear in half with an axe while she was splittin' wood
It was like everybody else saw the girl
but my daddy saw the spit and engine
He'd take me fishin' and hand me the can of worms
and then nod at my hook
He wasn't gonna help one way or the other
So I studied him and then zig zagged my worm
like he showed me
He'd pop the hood of his truck and teach me to check the oil
Replace the battery
And, eventually, to change a tire
When he got old
He'd coach from his armchair
or over the phone as I repaired a sink
I was from town but he was from the hills
Not quite the holler but far enough in to be respectable
He could talk to anybody
And make 'em feel heard
And when somebody judged me
He'd wave a hand that said pay them no mind
So I didn't
And I grew prouder
Found that my inner voice was plenty loud
And that you needn't talk fast to be heard.

Clint

Getting rid of homesickness

I never got the chance to come out to my Grandma Frances

as she'd say, God called her home
many years before I was ready

the morning after she passed,
my dad said she came to him in spirit
said she missed the apple of her eye,
me.

In middle school, I went to a Christian summer camp
and when I had a panic attack 'cause I missed home,
a letter from Grandma was waiting to tell me,
on Sunday night they had mac and cheese,
she had to pick string beans alone,
and my principal, her good friend,
had some health concerns.
she included some chewing gum.
I had never felt homesick.

her doctor used to call me her best medicine
since I'd get her moving.
like the one time we played tether ball
and laughed when she said,
"Oooo that one got me in the boobs"

after she left and I was the last
to put the yellow boutonniere
on her casket,
I felt homesick again.

existing is hard without
feeling love.

when I came out,
the nausea gently sank back into the Earth.

I never got to come out to my Grandma Frances
in-person

but as the apple of her eye
and best medicine
she knows.

Figure 3
Trust Your Voice

Alt-Text: The words "Trust your voice" are typed onto a piece of ripped white paper. Behind them, Amy, a white woman with blonde hair and wearing a cream jacket, purple gloves, and a pink winter hat, stretches her arms wide, the corners of a rainbow flag in her hands as it rests behind her. The background includes a brick building, representing institutions like the school where both Amy and Clint work, and black trees with a sepia sky, the contrast boosted. Over the trees, behind Amy's right hand, is a semi-transparent Progress Pride flag where half the chevron is the colors of the Disability Pride flag.

Artist's Statement: "Trust Your Voice" highlights the importance of the present—both as time and as a gift we can offer to our past and future selves. It reflects how Clint and Amy trust their voices to write this article and how they inspire me to trust my artistic voice in representing their work. The piece incorporates my own roots in the hill towns of Western Massachusetts, with trees that surround my grandmother's "farm." A photo of Amy at the 2017 Women's March—a moment of public pride for her—symbolizes how our roots shape who we are and what we stand for. The semi-transparent Progress Pride flag over the trees incorporates Disability Pride colors, emphasizing the diversity of Queer people in rural communities. It represents a spectrum of identities: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, asexual, aromantic, agender, queer, questioning, intersex, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and those of varied neurotypes and abilities. The piece underscores Clint and Amy's shared commitment to queering rural education and uplifting rural Queer communities.

Queer Rural Education Futurism

For us, poetry and artistic expression is how we naturally find voice in spaces of identity, place, and liberation. Through reflexive poetic expression, we find ourselves in metaphorical, critical conversations with our tenants of place, ancestors of identity, and dreams for expression. Through this self-reflexive, arts-based, poetic exploration, we journeyed through the (in)visible messages taught to us in childhood, pedagogical underpinnings that shaped us as educators, and lessons we have learned as out-and-proud rural Queer scholars. Here, we provide two implications for uplifting rural Queerness in relation to education and research.

Nurturing Creative Expression as a Conveyor of Knowledge

Queering education and research practices that exist within rural schools means to embrace and encourage creative expression (e.g., poetry, art, quilting, storytelling, drag, gardening, cooking). Scholars who value and implement artistic, creative methodologies (e.g., photovoice; see Barnes-Gilbert & Prock, 2025) allow individuals who represent a vulnerable population in a tightknit community to find safety in expression. Similarly, educators in rural schools who incorporate creative forms of assessment and reflection may give Queer youth spaces of comfort to be themselves, through reality and imagination. hooks (2012) wrote, "When poetry stirs in my imagination it is almost always from an indirect place, where language is abstract, where the mood and energy is evocative of submerged emotional intelligence and experience" (p. 7). Artistic expressions grant the possibility of a kaleidoscope of experience, knowledge, mood, and energy.

Critical Reflection Encouraged Through Artistic Voice

Another possibility from this piece is the value in critically reflecting on experiences when provided a safe space of artistic belonging. It can be nearly impossible to critically revisit, reflect, and retell parts of our history and experiences, especially for marginalized individuals. Trauma, suppression, fear, guilt, assimilation, stereotype threats, stigmas, and boxes-to-fit-in can be radical roadblocks to healing and liberation, which may be exacerbated in a rural school where *everyone knows everyone's business*. Reflection through artistic voice may be the soil required to produce rich fruits of knowledge and insightful meaning through the sundry of allusions and metaphors noted. For example, the allusion to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* provided Amy with a portal into her own river baptism, while the metaphor of a quilt stitched together pedagogical influences for Clint. These reflexive poems, allusions, and metaphors are bound to questions and conversations shared while two-steppin' between being rural Queer editors, scholars, and educators, both in our present and past experiences. Adding in Casey Anne's images provided a voyeuristic reflection to our experiences and deepened our own understanding of the images and poems shared with the artist.

Final Stanza

As the sociopolitical climate shifts back to one of hostility—carrying with it fears of dismantling public education, implementing Queer/transphobic federal policy, and cultivating mistrust on social media platforms—creating spaces of authentic reflection and inquiry is critical. Educators and researchers leveraging creative methodologies and pedagogies may better situate their subjectivities within their craft, while also providing space for participants and learners to creatively approach the material. This piece specifically contributes to the field of rural education because through the elevation of poetry and art, as it lives in conversation with empirical work, we expand how narratives and experiences get shared. In other words, we not only advocate for the queering of rural literacies, but we also actualize it as a way to combat stereotype threat and monolithic narratives of rural schools.

We have strong hopes that this work will disrupt how our stories of place are told, who gets to share them, and what methods of knowledge articulation are deemed valuable. Our poems, and their visual artistic counterparts, represent our rural education experiences—from the hidden curriculums that taught us in childhood, to voices and stories that influenced our sense of belonging, to new journeys home fully realized. The text provided alongside the images builds upon these implementations and illustrates the ways in which photography and poetry can co-narrate stories rooted in place and identity. Powers (2022) wrote,

> Photography was the tool that allowed me to accept that there is a multiplicity of selves. I can be a complex amalgamation of Appalachian, Southern, four-wheel-riding, hunting, tomboy who is a liberal, city-dwelling artist. I no longer have to choose between the past and the present. I get to be complex and nuanced. I get to be all that I am. (p. 29)

The poetry and photography together allowed us to be all that we are while working together on this reflexive project. It granted us a lifeline as we dove into underwater labyrinths of rural lifeworlds and Queerness. Understanding the multiplicity of ourselves as rural Queer researchers and educators pushes us to care for and find joy in our craft. We hope that readers, especially ones who represent historically marginalized identities and have dreams of academic liberation, keep their self-expressive artistry safe and close. After all, we practiced art and poetry long before we fully acknowledged our whole rural and Queer selves.

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