

# Introduction: Queering Rural Education

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Across the United States, in response to an increase in state legislation and executive orders targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals, schools and institutions of higher education are shuttering LGBTQ+ student resources and support services, K–12 schools and public libraries are banning books with characters who identify as queer<sup>1</sup> or are interpreted as being queer, and educators across the education spectrum are stopping or questioning how they teach about gender and sexuality and support queer students (Baêta et al., 2025; Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2024; Flannery, 2024; Strunk et al., 2024; Whitten & Thomas, 2023). While these state laws and executive orders have an impact across geographical contexts, they can have particularly devastating consequences for the 15–20% of LGBTQ+ people in the United States who live in rural communities, as they already have less access to queer-

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<sup>1</sup> In this special issue, we often use “queer” to be inclusive of individuals who identify as trans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and intersex.

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affirming structural resources (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). However, while LGBTQ+ people in rural communities face challenges, such as LGBTQ+ youth in rural and small towns reporting less queer-affirming communities and schools (The Trevor Project, 2021), it is critical to challenge monolithic and deficit-based portrayals of rural communities (Movement Advancement Project, 2019; Wienke & Hill, 2013). For example, Wienke and Hill (2013) found that lesbian and gay people living in rural communities had similar well-being and happiness rates as lesbian and gay people living in urban communities. Additionally, queer youth and adults living in rural areas can experience and find joy and community in the face of and despite social and political forces that seek to dehumanize queer and trans people (Movement Advancement Project, 2019; Tate et al., 2025; Whitten & Azano, 2025).

The editors and authors of this special issue, “Queering Rural Education,” seek to center the intersection of rurality, sexuality, and gender in rural education, highlighting nuanced studies and stories of joy, community, and resistance. While scholarship about queer students’ and educators’ experiences in rural education and communities is increasing, such as Clint Whitten and Amy Price Azano’s (2025) published coedited book, *Rural Education and Queer Identities: Rural and (Out)rooted*, the need for scholarship on the intersection of rurality, queerness, and gender in education continues. This special issue is a collaboration between the *Journal of Research in Rural Education (JRRE)* and the *Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education (JQTSIE)*, intended to disrupt the erasure of queer communities in rural education scholarship by centering scholarship across the PreK–20 educational spectrum and across multiple contexts (e.g., educational settings, community settings).

As guest coeditors of this special issue, we collaborated with the editors of both journals, *JRRE* and *JQTSIE*, to determine how best to *queer* rural education and highlight the experiences and stories of queer youth and adults living in rural communities. In summer 2024, the coeditors of the special issue put out a call for proposals, and we received 48 proposals. Darris managed the manuscripts slated for *JRRE*, while Leia and Ty managed the manuscripts slated for *JQTSIE*. The articles in *JRRE* for this special issue center arts-based scholarship, including visuals and poetry, to spotlight individual and collective storytelling of queer students, educators, and adults in rural areas. Given the focus of the articles in *JRRE* for this special issue, many of the articles are shorter in length to make space for art to be centered as an important form of data and a critical expression of experiences and ideas. The articles that will appear in *JQTSIE* are empirical studies that highlight key findings on LGBTQ+ students and educators in rural education. The special issue for *JRRE* is being published in December 2025, while the special issue for *JQTSIE* will be published at a later time, allowing for scholars and educators to have continued dialogue about the intersection of rurality, queerness, and gender in rural education.

The six contributions in this special issue of *JRRE* focus on joy, resistance, resilience, belonging, community, and possibility for queer students, educators, scholars, and community members living in rural communities. In the first contribution, Stephanie Anne Shelton uses paper dolls and narrative vignettes to explore experiences as a queer educator working in a rural school. The second contribution is from Roman Christiaens, who uses a digital storymap to examine their educational journey as a queer rural college student. Ailidh Wallace, in the third contribution, engages an autoethnographic narrative and mixed media artwork to explore their queer identity formation within the context of the rural U.S. South. In the fourth contribution, Carrie Hart and Charlie Mayock-Bradley imagine a textbook on the LGBTQ+ history of a rural town that could be integrated in the local school curriculum, highlighting the richness of queer stories and lives. The fifth contribution is from M. Eliatamby-O'Brien and Griff Tester, who highlight TransRural Lives, the first digital storytelling project that centers the lives of older transgender adults living in rural areas. The final contribution is from Clint Whitten, Casey Anne Brimmer, and Amy Price Azano, who employ poetry and visual art to explore their experiences as editors and the artist who designed the cover art of *Rural Education and Queer Identities: Rural and (Out)rooted*. As editors of this special issue, we want to thank the authors for their powerful stories of queering rural education. We hope all who read this special issue are moved by the transformational stories of hope, joy, and resistance.

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# “Why You Wearing Them Barrettes?”: A Playful(ly) Queer(ing) Reflection on Teacher-Self in Rural Education

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*This arts-based autoethnographic piece explores my layered experiences as a queer educator working in a rural high school, where heteronormativity and small-town familiarity often complicate notions of teacher identity, professionalism, and belonging. Using paper dolls and narrative vignettes, I explore how a queer teacher-self is negotiated and expressed within the cisheteronormative and gendered expectations of schooling. Emphasizing the disruptions possible in queer work, I emphasize that rural schooling can be a site of empowerment and joy through disruptions that students and I called “gray spaces” of possibility and affirmation—for both them and me. By highlighting moments of tension, joy, resistance, and community, I challenge notions of rural schools as solely hostile terrains for queer people, and underscore how they might alternatively be spaces of relationality, playfulness, empowerment, and transformation. Through the use of paper dolls as both metaphor and method, I accentuate that teacher identity, like pedagogy, is always layered and richly textured by context.*

“So, Ms. Shelton, if you’ll fill out this form, we’ll add it to the school newspaper.”

A new teacher to a rural high school, I was a stranger in a small town. I had grown up in a neighboring rural county, so I understood that I was an outsider to the community—an oddity when most people had known one another for years, if not generations (Shelton, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). I felt my hands clench and my stomach tumble as I scanned through the provided form. The questions highlighted the degrees to which I truly was an outsider. Items such as “Your spouse’s name,” “List your children’s names,” and “Local

church you attend,” reverberated in my gut as reminders of heteronormativity.

The school’s newspaper advisor looked at me expectantly, effectively shoving the paper into my hands. “I’ll come back after your planning period to get that,” she said, smiling quizzically at my hesitation and silence.

## Layerings of a Queer Teacher-Self

I am a queer gender-flexible lesbian who is often, but not always, masculine-presenting. Within the field of education, teaching as/while queer “is a complex business” because being an educator is to be constantly layered with conventional notions of “professionalism,” feminized gender conventions, and a commitment to being authentic in ways that sustain one’s self and support students (Gray & Harris, 2014, p. 2). Adding in the additional layer of teaching as/while queer, working in a rural context complicates those concerns and efforts. Queer rural people often experience a “sense of isolation and vulnerability” both generally and specifically within educational settings (Brockenbrough, 2018, p. 122). As “schools reproduce discourses of heteronormativity” (Johnson, 2017, p. 14), the effect is “silencing processes” (Johnson, 2017, p. 15) that situate queer teachers to “negotiate the terms of their [queer] participation in the homophobic milieus” of schooling (Brockenbrough, 2018, p. 125). Exacerbating these realities, a rare large-scale study of rural education found that “LGBTQ [people] in rural schools faced more

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hostile school climates [than those] in urban and suburban schools” (GLSEN, 2020, p. xxviii). The layers of a queer teacher-self within the cisheteronormative expectations of a highly feminized profession, while situated within rurality, are challenging.

This article draws explicitly on this concept of layers and layering to offer an arts-based piece grounded in queer theorizing of layered selves. Haraway (1988) pointed out that all experiences are “embodied accounts” comprised of “every layer of” ourselves and our contexts (p. 578). Specifically, an arts-based exploration offers new ways to explore “how meanings and bodies get made ... in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance” for authenticity and agency within sociopolitically oppressive and normative spaces (Haraway, 1988, p. 580). This creative approach affords new possibilities, particularly as the constantly growing literature on LGBTQ+ issues in education typically focuses on students—effectively erasing queer educators’ perspectives and experiences (Gray, 2014; Wright, n.d.; Wright & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, within the need to more fully consider the experiences of queer teachers, an additional gap exists in considering queer experiences within rural educational spaces, which have traditionally been understood to be hostile to queer people and possibilities (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019; Shelton, 2022; Shelton & Lester, 2020), but that are often vibrant with playfulness and joy, which this artful approach centers.

I explore these concepts of layers and layerings through paper dolls and personal narratives, such as my initial paper doll creations in Figure 1 (Shelton & Jones, 2025). The cutting and assembling of the layers of dolls,

clothes, and objects reflect the queer process of being “cut together-apart” as a human “patchwork made of disparate parts” (Barad, 2014, p. 169). This dynamic, messy, and shifting collaging of self, contexts, and concepts offers a way to be “in play” and playful in exploring queer(ness)/(ing) (Haraway, 2016, p. 129) in rural schooling. The literal layering of paper dolls and the accompanying narratives highlight the often stark realities and challenges of being/doing queer in rural education, including the moments when the self is bifurcated across ranges of expectations and norms, while also underscoring the joy in constructing and continuously building a queer teacher-self in a rural high school.

### “Why You Wearing Them Barrettes?”

I was standing on a chair trying to reach extra textbooks on top of a cabinet when I heard a student ask, “Ms. Shelton, why you wearing them barrettes?”

My hand involuntarily fluttered to the butterfly clips holding my hair back. My gut knotted and bubbled, as my mind tumbled with hyperawareness of the contradictions in my appearance and interactions. As an openly queer high school teacher in a sociopolitically restrictive rural school district, my combinations of men’s shoes, sparkly nail polish, metal-studded belts, and butterfly barrettes disrupted conventional notions of what a teacher looked like, and, indirectly, what it means to be a teacher.

Climbing down with the dusty and duct-taped-together books, I wanted to be defensive. “What, I can’t wear barrettes?” was vibrating unspoken on my lips. Instead, I looked at the student’s face and saw genuine curiosity. Why

**Figure 1**  
*Initial Paper Dolls Representing Me as a Rural Queer Person*



was I wearing barrettes, given that I regularly wore clothes bought in the men’s sections of stores? I smiled and touched the hair clips.

“I like that they sparkle while they keep my hair out of my eyes.”

Eyes widening, the student smiled and nodded. “Yeah, they’re cool,” they agreed, and helped me to move the books to my desk. Every day that I stood in my classroom, I was constantly aware of the ways that my appearance disrupted what students had been taught to expect of teachers, and that particularly within this small school, I was an embodiment of *other* for most students and colleagues. Figure 2 offers an example of those disruptions in paper doll form, with the

contrasts of a pink barrette alongside “masculine” clothing. My tattoos, my dozen piercings, my rainbow bracelet all visually reminded them and me that my presence de/reconstructed who/how a teacher might be. While I often felt “the tiredness of making corrections and departures” through and due to my queerness (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147), “direct or indirect forms of self-revelation” constantly expanded for them—and, importantly, for *me*—how I might exist as an educator (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147). To reflect these tensions, Figure 3 “blurs” the rainbow flag as a way of visually representing the ways that LGBTQ+ people and imagery often exist as resistance and/or as contentious with(in) educational spaces.

**Figure 2**  
*My Queer Teacher-Self, With “Men’s” Clothing and a Barrette, Surrounded by Markers of Teaching in a Rural School*



**Figure 3**

*The Same Image as Figure 2 but With the LGBTQIA+ Flag “Blurred” to Represent “Gray Spaces” as Discussed in This Piece*



### **“We Gone Stay in These Gray Spaces, Ain’t We?”**

I had worked at the high school for over 7 years. Parents/guardians/families knew who I was and often stopped me in the local grocery store to say, “I’m really glad my baby is in your class” and “I went up to the school yesterday and told them to put my child with you for next year.” I was still an outsider, as I regularly failed locals’ quizzes about “Who’re your folks?” and “Where your family from?” when people did not know the names and locations that I provided, but I was a valued member of the community whose contributions were important to, at this point, hundreds of children and their families. These connections were a source of joy for me, as I built relationships with families and communities,

taught siblings of past students, and learned the rhythms and relationships of the school and surrounding areas.

I had also noted, as are the national rural trends, that the high school was experiencing high teacher attrition (Gutierrez, 2016; Showalter et al., 2023). After several years, I was one of the most senior teachers at the school, and the constant turnover and years of experience had made me bolder about who I was and how I taught. I was openly queer, with rainbows, trans flags, and pictures of locations such as Gay Street in New York throughout my classroom. The curriculum, however, was controlled by the district, so while I had LGBTQ+-affirming texts available to students, what I taught was generally not my decision. *How* I taught, however, was.

There were ranges of what the students and I called “the gray spaces,” which were opportunities for us to (re)imagine how we might learn, while still technically following mandates. They were, as reflected in the paper dolls complementing these narratives, ways to affirm queer and trans people and concepts, as and alongside rural-specific explorations, in educational spaces that seemed otherwise restrictive. An example from my classroom leveraged the administration’s requirement of a daily warm-up activity that incorporated standardized testing skills. While I initially bristled at this activity, I found that it was a wonderful opportunity to invite students to read and discuss ranges of texts that were otherwise impossible. Our conversations were not limited to LGBTQ+ issues but were expansive and centered rural communities. We read news stories about livestock illnesses affecting our county, essays about poverty and hope in rural communities, and, I ensured, ranges of texts that included diverse representations of queer and trans people, particularly within rural communities. Students had been surprised to learn of large concentrations of queer families across the U.S. South and of small-town hospitals that defied state legislation to provide gender-affirming care. I ensured that accompanying questions focused on items like vocabulary, grammar, and critical reading skills, so that they were easily defensible to any who might object.

On this day, students walked in to find a news story about a rural school district that had canceled prom because a young woman wanted to bring her girlfriend. I prompted students to analyze the rhetorical word choices that the author made. Students also considered how they would feel if something similar happened in their school.

One offered, “Look. Prom is a big deal, man. It’s one of the few things that happens for teenagers here. I’d be mad. Just meet up with your girlfriend after prom.”

Another student responded, “Nuh-uh. This isn’t on the student. This is the school. They could let them come. I’ve gone with girls who are my friends, and it was fine. Why’s this gotta be a big deal?”

At the end of class, one student stayed behind, shuffling her feet and staring determinedly at the floor. I cleared my throat, asking, “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

She grimaced and said slowly, “The news story today. Did you know that girls are required to wear dresses to prom?” She paused. “I want to wear a suit. Why can’t I?”

Unsure of how to answer, I reviewed the prom dress code and found that although “girls will wear dresses” was the way that the teacher prom committee articulated the policy, the actual language was, “Students shall wear attire that is fitting for the occasion, not too revealing, and teacher approved.” I shrugged and looked at her, “I mean, I approve you wearing a suit.” Her eyes lit up, and she nearly skipped to her next class.

On the day of prom, I dug out a tuxedo that I had worn to a friend’s wedding. Tying the silver bowtie, affixing my sparkly silver hair clip, and tying my shoes, I set out to supervise the punchbowl and teenagers. Assuming my position near a decorative cardboard waterfall, I saw the prom committee chair rushing toward me. I was prepared to be asked to deal with kids making out, but instead she hurriedly said, “One of the girls is in pants, and she said that you said that she could wear that?!?”

Several students whom I taught were nearby getting snacks and drinks, and I peripherally saw them begin to subtly listen to this drama. Looking my colleague in the eyes, I responded, “Yeah. I read the policy, and based on what’s written, she’s fine. I approved her attire. I mean,” gesturing to my own tuxedo, “I can’t very well take issue, can I?”

Her eyes widened as she took in my outfit. “This isn’t what they’re supposed to wear! That’s why we have a dress code!”

I shrugged, “Okay. That’s certainly your position. But the dress code doesn’t say that she can’t wear what she has. I read it. Have you read it? Where are you getting these requirements that you’re describing?”

She spun on her heels and stormed away, muttering “I know the policy,” but did not reapproach the student in question. As that student walked over, she spun with her arms outstretched so that I could see her prom attire. I smiled and applauded, as several of her previously eavesdropping peers joined us.

One laughed, “Hey. Ms. Shelton just had to fight with Mrs. Township [pseudonym] about your clothes!”

The student looked at me, immediately concerned, and I shook my head. “Nah,” I told her. “There was no ‘fight,’ just me telling her that the policy said you were fine.”

One of the other students put their hands on the tuxedoed student’s shoulder and said, “Yeah. Ms. Township thought she was gone argue with Ms. Shelton about reading something, and Mrs. Township ain’t had *nothing* to say back. She ain’t said nothing to you since, either.”

Another student nodded and said, “Yeah, see, that’s why we read for those gray spaces, ain’t it? Because of stuff like this and people trying to change rules that don’t exist. We gone stay in these gray spaces, ain’t we?” We all laughed and agreed that we would.

As they walked away to dance, I adjusted my bowtie and considered the ways that my queer(ing) of self had opened new spaces not only for me but others, and the ways that blurring and rupturing norms and expectations had empowered both students and me.

“This,” I reflected, “is how all of those layers of a queer teacher-self matter and, necessarily, shift rural school spaces.” Figures 4 and 5 draw on these layers, as Figure 4 situates my paper doll self at a decidedly queer

prom, including a “Prom Quee(r) sash” and fracturing of the traditional prom dress. Figure 5 again “blurs” LGBTQ+

celebratory images to visually represent the “gray spaces” of doing this work in potentially challenging contexts.

**Figure 4**

*My Queer Teacher-Self, Layered at Prom with a Rupturing/Cutting of a Dress to Wear a Suit*



**Figure 5**

*My Queer Teacher-Self, Layered on Top of Figure 2, With a Rupturing/Cutting of a Dress to Wear a Suit, but With LGBTQIA+ Symbols, Such as an LGBTQ+ Flag and “Prom Queer” Sash “Blurred” to Represent “Gray Spaces” as Discussed in This Piece*



My existence as a queer teacher was layered with complexities and uncertainties, but also community and connections. Numerous studies accentuate the challenges of queerness in rural spaces, and those are important discussions, but they are not complete pictures of queerness in rural education. The playfulness and joy—in my connections with students, my engagements with the paper dolls, and my reflections on these moments—also shape

schooling in important ways that work to empower students and educators.

As I watched my students admired their peer’s tuxedo, they turned together as a group to the dance floor and joyfully bounced to House of Pain’s “Jump Around” in the school cafeteria. They would have to finish the festivities by 9 p.m., so that the local Farm Extension Office could use the same space, but for now there was joy and celebration.

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# Queer Rural Liminality: Storymapping My Educational Journey as a Queer Rural College Student

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*This article explores the creation of a digital storymap tracing the author’s journey as a white, queer, and transfemme college student from a rural background. Prompted by a graduate school narrative, the project revisits and reframes the story using the framework of queer rural liminality (QRL), which understands queerness, rurality, and liminality as co-constitutive and dynamic. Using ArcGIS StoryMaps—a digital storytelling platform—the project weaves together images, theory, personal narrative, and past writings to represent the fluidity of place, queerness, and rurality. Through restorying the author’s educational journey as a queer rural college student, the storymap resists binary assumptions of rurality and queerness as being incompatible. It demonstrates how educational environments can serve as sites of resistance and possibility for queer rural college students. In doing so, the project contributes to emerging scholarship on queer rural student experiences and illustrates how digital storytelling can be a powerful tool for identity exploration and meaning making in educational contexts.*

Queer college students who have a rural identity or come from a rural background and pursue higher education are a relatively overlooked student population in higher education research and literature (Christiaens, 2015; McNamee & Tate, 2022; Sorgen & Rogers, 2021; Sorgen et al., 2024). As an attempt to intervene in this absence and provide layers to the experiences of queer college students from rural backgrounds, I created a [storymap](#) about my experiences as a white, queer, transfemme college student

who grew up in a rural environment (Christiaens, 2022).<sup>1</sup> The storymap project was built through ArcGIS StoryMaps, a storytelling tool and web-based application which allows the storyteller to share maps in the context of narrative text and other multimedia content. ArcGIS StoryMaps provided an opportunity to revisit this personal narrative through a creative and spatial medium in order to demonstrate the fluidity and complexity of queerness and rurality.

The inspiration for the storymap came from a personal narrative I wrote while in graduate school (Christiaens, 2015) at a midsized university in New England. This

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my storymapping project and this narrative, I position my transfemme identity as part of my queerness in order to provide cohesion with my original work (Christiaens, 2015) and how I understand myself in the present moment. Therefore, I will use the following terms—queer and queerness—as a way to holistically capture how I think and write about my gender and sexual identities and their co-constitutive nature. Also, I chose to represent my racial identity (e.g. “white”) in the lower case format. This choice reflects current debates in critical whiteness studies in education and is informed by the work of Pérez Huber (2010) who recommends not capitalizing “white” in order to reject the grammatical representation of power which occurs when capitalizing this word.

narrative was a personal project, prompted by the theme of student transitions for the 2015 issue of the student-run graduate journal, *The Vermont Connection*. In the narrative, I responded to the lack of queer rural college students' perspectives in the literature by retelling my own story and experiences with rurality and queerness during my transition from high school to college. Since my personal narrative was published, scholarship with this focus has increased. At the same time, so many aspects of queer rural college student life have yet to be explored, and many stories have yet to be told.

### **Coming Into My Story: Rural Background and College Transition**

I grew up in central Montana, under the big sky and next to the towering Rocky Mountains, where some of my earliest memories are of a small rental farmhouse under the shadow of an impressive landmark called Rattlesnake Butte. I was a creative and ambitious child whose embodiment of difference at a young age, especially around my gender and weight, meant I had frequent experiences in school of being othered. My youth occurred during the early years of the internet, and I sought to understand these experiences of being othered through the limited digital resources available to me at the time. However, because of a lack of queer role models, I was not prepared to embrace those parts of myself until college. When I received a postcard from an undergraduate Jesuit institution in Seattle, WA, I was determined to do something my parents had never done: leave the state of Montana to pursue a college degree in the *big city*. During my time in undergrad, I connected with queer and trans students, staff, and faculty and finally had access to the resources I needed to help me come into my queer and transness.

Even though my educational journey involved moving to the big city of Seattle as part of my queer journey, in my story, I wanted to challenge the urban normative (Thomas et al., 2011) and queer metronormative (Halberstam, 2005) frames regarding queer rural college students. These frames position rural spaces as being inherently conservative, unfulfilling, underresourced, homogenous, and undesirable. Because of stereotypes and expectations of rural spaces and the social imaginary of rurality (Muller, 2019), these frames also view rurality and queerness as irreconcilable and diametrically opposed. When attending my undergraduate institution, I internalized these messages of urban normativity and queer metronormativity, believing the place I used to call home would never fully accept me and believing in the rural deficit narrative which typically follows rural students who aspire to college (Maltazan,

2006). In undergrad, I embraced a queer identity entirely removed from my rural upbringing and my values, such as resourcefulness, collectivism, and interconnectedness (Crumb et al., 2023; Gray, 2009). The ultimate aim of the three-page personal narrative I wrote in graduate school (Christiaens, 2015) was to explore my rural background and queer identity in tandem in order to resist these deficit and normative frameworks of queerness and rurality.

### **Revisiting My College Story Through Storymapping**

At the time of writing my narrative in graduate school, I simply wanted to reclaim who I was told I could not be and what my experiences of rurality were. However, this reclamation relied on capturing a specific place and time and reified hegemonic understandings of queerness and rurality. In particular, while I was able to think about and describe my queerness as fluid and contextual in my personal narrative, I still wrote about rurality in a fixed, static and deficit way. Several years after writing my personal narrative, I found myself in another schooling environment, pursuing my doctorate in higher education at a large Research 1 public land-grant university in the Southwest. I had an opportunity in my program to take a class on critical geographies in higher education. This class explored the role of space, place and power in postsecondary educational environments and how these dimensions influence students' sense of belonging, educational inequities and identity meaning making. In the class, I also learned about ArcGIS StoryMaps as a digital storytelling tool. Taking the class inspired me to revisit my narrative from graduate school and refashion a new story which paid more attention to place, described rurality as a liminal concept, and deepened how I understood my queerness and rurality in higher education.

In revisiting my story and my thinking, I wanted to represent the fluidity of place, queerness, and rurality through creative means beyond the written word. A specific limitation of my original personal narrative was a lack of imagery and visuals, elements often critical to constructing understandings of rurality. ArcGIS StoryMaps provided me the opportunity to add a visual and spatial sense to my own narrative, emphasizing how rurality coexists as a place-based identity (Cain, 2021) and as a lens of meaning making. The storymapping project (Christiaens, 2022) foregrounded my experiences as a white, queer, transfemme college student from a rural background. In particular, it explored and demonstrated how my own understanding of these identities and experiences was greatly influenced by the educational institutions I attended in both rural and urban settings and the educators who supported and mentored me. Throughout the storymap, images of my rural upbringing are threaded

across personal storytelling, quotes from my graduate school narrative, and academic writing to reflect how stories and meaning making are a nonlinear, imaginative, and contextual process, ever evolving and always in flux. I refer to my storymap as a (*re*)mapping project to signal coming back to my experiences in education time and time again in order to generate new insights on those experiences and my own conceptualizations of queerness and rurality.

### **Elements of the Digital Storymap**

The storymap begins with a question about where my story of queerness and rurality should start: Does it start with my personal narrative, my earliest memories of rurality, or my current context as a doctoral student? This reflection demonstrates the liminality of place and storytelling while disrupting an expectation to tell queer rural stories of education in a linear way. What follows in the storymap project is a description of my positionality and context setting, which highlights the article I published in graduate school and why I felt compelled to return to this piece of writing. After the positionality and context section, I included a chronological timeline of the educational institutions I had attended until the present time, represented through a map of North America and geographical place markers for each school or college. This part of the storymap characterized my location, locale, and sense of place (Agnew, 1987) to represent how sites of education informed the ways I came to know myself and my identities more fully. Each geographic marker in the timeline describes the physical place of the school or college and salient aspects of the educational institution I attended, including brief descriptions of the specific influence the institution had on my queer and rural sense of self.

The storymap continues with an explanation of the framework I used to revisit my graduate school narrative—queer rural liminality (QRL)—which views the concepts of rurality, queerness, and liminality as co-constitutive and understands space, place, and power as central to understandings of queerness and rurality. As it relates to education, the QRL framework intervenes in the perception of educational environments (both primary and postsecondary settings) as inherently and perpetually hostile or marginalizing to queerness and rurality. Instead, it proposes how those environments can be sites of disruption, resistance, transition, and possibility for individuals who view and experience the world as an in-between place. Because relationships and relationality are central to queerness and rurality, QRL also recognizes how the individuals in these educational environments (e.g. educators, student peers, administrators) are essential to the meaning-making process of queer rural college students. The storymap then briefly covers relevant literature on

queer rural college students and emerging explorations on the rural assets these students use to navigate, thrive, and succeed in college settings.

In the second half of my storymap, I returned to my graduate school narrative through the lens of the QRL framework. This analytical process surfaced newfound insights around my queerness and rural background. The restorying of my personal narrative included several reflection questions, which encouraged me to consider aspects of my story differently and added nuance to the conclusions I drew about my story. In this way, the restorying played with the “gray space” brought forth by queerness, rurality, and liminality, and it also demonstrated the fluid nature of the storymap itself. Therefore, the storymap was a continuation of the reclamation process with which I engaged (and with which I will continue to engage) around my younger queer and transfemme self who was unable to envision their full self while growing up in the Mountain West in the 1990s and early 2000s. In doing so, the restorying aspect of the storymap recognized the reality of the cisheterosexism embedded within my rural upbringing and rural educational environments, while naming the sites of queer possibility in those rural and urban educational settings. Therefore, it connected the rural assets of my upbringing with the generative knowledge and insights derived from my queerness and my experiences of liminality.

### **Insights From Storymapping as an Educational Tool**

The storymap was a creative and academic endeavor to reclaim, reconstitute, and restory my educational journey as a queer rural college student. The use of ArcGIS StoryMaps as a storytelling tool—particularly how it attended to space and place—sought to challenge static ideas of queerness and rurality, which tend to limit and constrain how educators and researchers understand the queer rural college student experience. The storymap also emphasized liminality (Banfield, 2022; March, 2021) as a useful concept for examining the experiences of this student population. In this way, the storymap gestures toward how educators and administrators can think about the unique needs of queer rural college students and engage in mechanisms of support for this student population in ways which honor students’ context, positionality and educational background.

Because the idea of the storymap emerged from an experience in class, it also demonstrates the creative and expansive utility of storymapping for students’ storytelling and meaning making. Storymapping as an instructive teaching and learning tool is not only a platform for queer rural college students to reclaim rural sights and spaces and explore their own identity development. It also can be a useful platform for students whose identities are tied to

space and place, such as international students. Therefore, this (re)mapping project honored the queer rural college student experience while offering implications for students who want to explore the role of space and liminality in their experience of higher education.

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

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*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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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.

# ***The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County: Excerpts from an Imagined Textbook***

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Charlie Mayock-Bradley

Citation: Hart, C., & Mayock-Bradley, C. (2025). The LGBTQ+ history of Rockbridge County: Excerpts from an imagined textbook. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 41(6), 17–24. <https://doi.org/10.26209/JRRE4106-04>

*To explore the possibilities of and make a case for LGBTQ+ representation in the formal K–12 curriculum of small-town Rockbridge County, Virginia, the authors have imagined a history textbook called “The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County.” The excerpts from this imagined textbook, created to represent what local LGBTQ+ curriculum could be, are both an exercise in creative writing and design as well as a collection of concrete stories and experiences from our home county. With the help of input from Rockbridge County High School’s flagship LGBTQ+ Alum Network (gathered via survey, email correspondence, and online focus groups), the authors designed textbook pages that provide a window into the people, places, and practices central to LGBTQ+ survival and life in Rockbridge County. Although this textbook does not exist (yet) as a complete standalone work, these pages may serve as a foundation for future projects about LGBTQ+ life in our home county and in other similar rural communities. By referencing traditional textbook aesthetics and providing a small glimpse into a rich local LGBTQ+ history, these excerpts illustrate both the costs of our erasure and the possibilities of our inclusion in formal K–12 curricula.*

When you step foot in Rockbridge County, it might not initially resemble a typical “safe space” for LGBTQ+ people. Nestled in the Shenandoah Valley of southwest Virginia, Rockbridge appears to be more like a stereotypically conservative, rural community than a queer mecca. Civil War history (with an emphasis on the Confederacy) features prominently in the local tourism industry as well as in named institutions (e.g. a local university named for Confederate general Robert E. Lee). Agriculture is

a part of the landscape and a source of income for many residents. Christian churches (which are almost exclusively Protestant) serve as the most available community centers for people living in the county and in the county seat, the city of Lexington. Embedded in the lush landscapes and fraught Southern heritage of Rockbridge County, however, are decades-long traditions of LGBTQ+ placemaking and storytelling. We know, because some of these histories are our own. This yet-untold history of LGBTQ+ life in the place we call home inspired the textbook excerpts you see in this piece.

What would it look like for local LGBTQ+ histories to be represented in Rockbridge County schools’ formal curriculum? What impact could such representation in formal schooling have on our community? To begin to answer these questions, we combined a community-engaged research process with graphic design to create a series of pages “ripped” from an imaginary textbook titled *The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County* (Figures 1–5). Although we created these textbook excerpts as a pair of individual authors, this project emerged from the collective work of the Rockbridge County High School (RCHS) LGBTQ+ Alum Network. This grassroots group (of which

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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.

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we are members) formed in 2022 after an oral history project that Carrie conducted (and in which Charlie participated) that resulted in a zine about the LGBTQ+ history of RCHS (Hart, 2022).

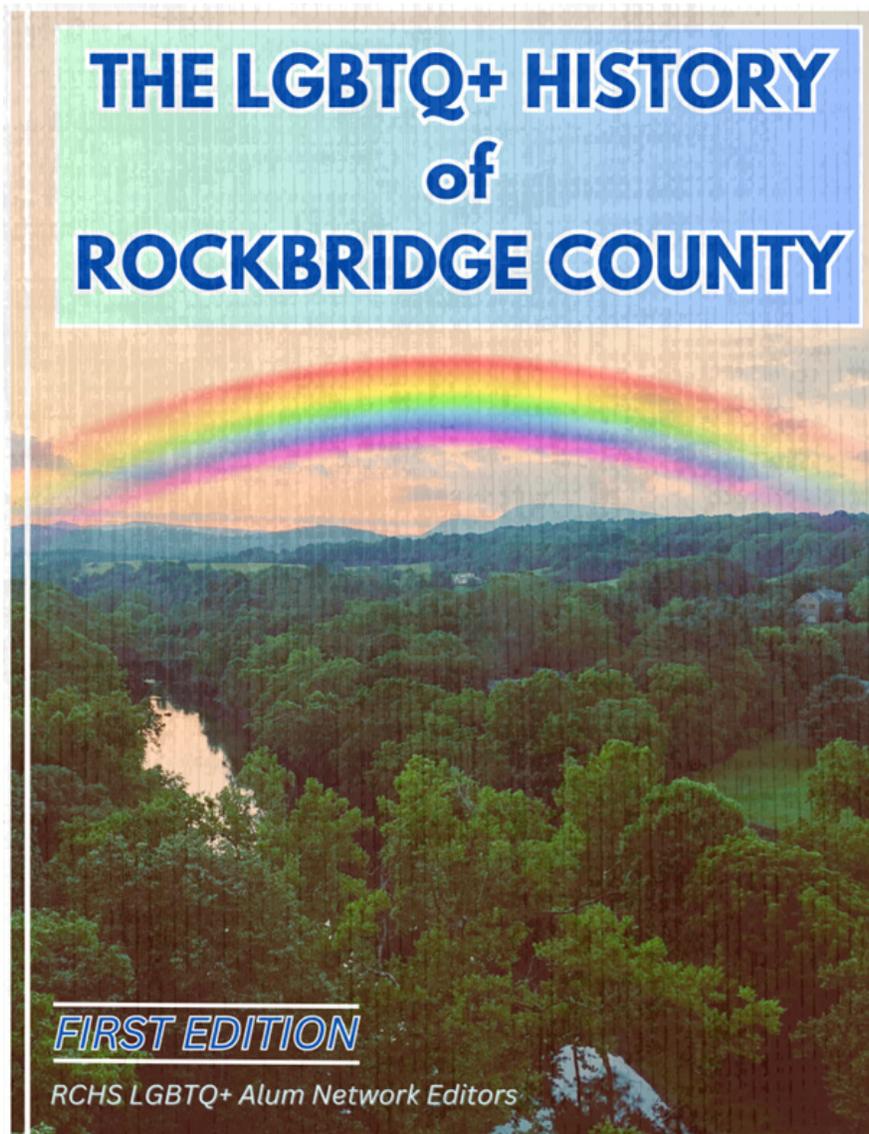
Since then, the goals of the Alum Network have been to foster community among its members and to be in solidarity with LGBTQ+ students who currently attend Rockbridge County schools. The Network's membership includes alums from over two decades of graduating classes. This makeup facilitates one of the Network's key goals: sharing knowledge between generations about queer survival and joy in the sometimes hostile environment of Rockbridge County. Through participation in this group, we have noticed intergenerational patterns of LGBTQ+ exclusion from school curricula that inspired us to explore these kinds

of stories through the medium of a high school history textbook.

The excerpts from our imagined textbook represent both an exercise in creative writing and design as well as a collection of concrete stories and experiences. The project is an exercise in imagination and hope because this learning resource about Rockbridge's LGBTQ+ history does not exist (yet) beyond the pages included here. In designing these pages, we attempted to reflect LGBTQ+ life in Rockbridge County accurately, as any textbook authors would do, and we also imagined what material life such a textbook could have in a future in which it exists as a material object that is taught in (and carried around) Rockbridge County schools. We imagined the textbook becoming scuffed and worn in school lockers and overstuffed backpacks at Rockbridge

**Figure 1**

*Cover of The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County Imagined Textbook*

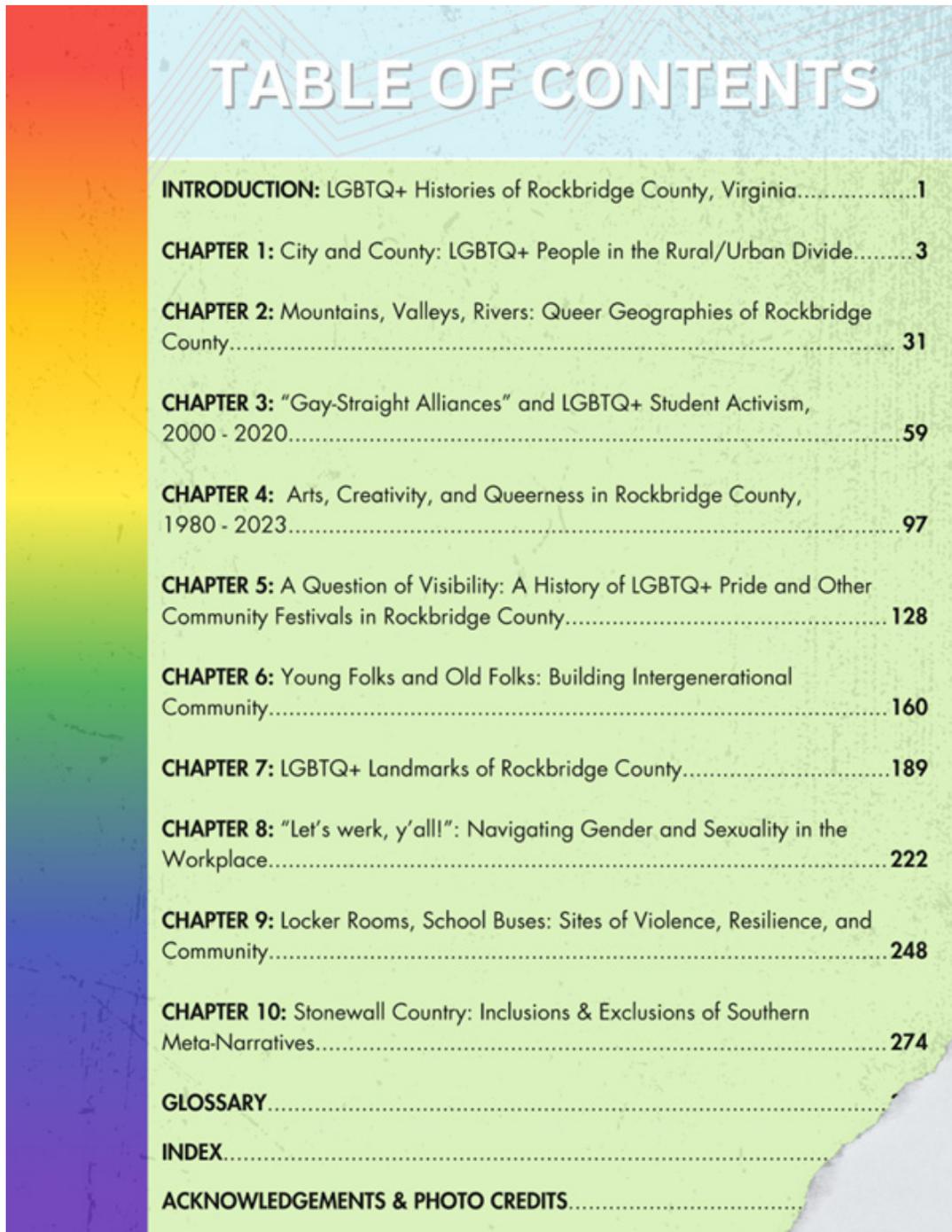


County High School, its pages becoming ripped over the years as students flip through them to study for quizzes and complete their homework. Though we created these pages digitally, we dreamt a tactile life for them, particularly in a geographical area where internet access (and therefore access to digital resources) is not a given. Although the

pages are fragmented and imagined, they contain real names, places, and themes relevant to LGBTQ+ life in Rockbridge. To add to the sense of place, we incorporated original photographs taken by Charlie of the rivers and mountains of Rockbridge County. We identified the chapter themes (Figure 2) and index terms (Figures 3 and 4) by

**Figure 2**

*Table of Contents of The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County Textbook*



<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION: LGBTQ+ Histories of Rockbridge County, Virginia.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: City and County: LGBTQ+ People in the Rural/Urban Divide.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: Mountains, Valleys, Rivers: Queer Geographies of Rockbridge County.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: "Gay-Straight Alliances" and LGBTQ+ Student Activism, 2000 - 2020.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: Arts, Creativity, and Queerness in Rockbridge County, 1980 - 2023.....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: A Question of Visibility: A History of LGBTQ+ Pride and Other Community Festivals in Rockbridge County.....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: Young Folks and Old Folks: Building Intergenerational Community.....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7: LGBTQ+ Landmarks of Rockbridge County.....</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8: "Let's werk, y'all!": Navigating Gender and Sexuality in the Workplace.....</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>CHAPTER 9: Locker Rooms, School Buses: Sites of Violence, Resilience, and Community.....</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>CHAPTER 10: Stonewall Country: Inclusions &amp; Exclusions of Southern Meta-Narratives.....</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>GLOSSARY.....</b>	
<b>INDEX.....</b>	
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS &amp; PHOTO CREDITS.....</b>	

combining our own knowledge and by incorporating Alum Network members' input through an online survey, email correspondence, and online gatherings.

As of now, most young people growing up in Rockbridge see little (if any) mention of gender and sexual diversity

in their formal schooling. Rather, their history, literature, health, science, and language classes center a heterosexual and cisgender norm that can leave LGBTQ+ students feeling like they have no place in the broader world. This erasure is representative of a nationwide trend in rural education. As

### Figure 3

The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County *Textbook Index (A-L)*

**308 | INDEX**

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  - Ally Week (84)*
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- Dinosaur Kingdom (193)
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- drag (120, 136)
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- embodiment (117)
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  - burning in (234)*
- Equality Gala (133)
- family, chosen (162)
- flamboyance (124)
- Glasgow (36)
- Goodwill (115)
- Goshen Pass (34)
- Gorman, Linda (68)

*The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County, Virginia*



Photo credit: Charlotte Mayock-Bradley / Rockbridge County, VA Collection

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  - Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery (196)*
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  - Lexington High School (28, 257)*
  - Lexington Presbyterian Church (201)*
  - Lexington City School Board (253)*

RCBS LGBTQ+ Alum Network Publishing

the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network reports (GLSEN, 2022), students in small-town schools are the least likely to have LGBTQ+-related resources, as compared to students in urban or suburban schools. Indeed, students attending primary and secondary schools in Rockbridge County likely learn little local history at all, LGBTQ+ or otherwise. We hope that our imagined textbook could begin

to address these gaps in curriculum and public knowledge, particularly if the resource were ever to be expanded and a full version of it were to become a reality.

Projects that center LGBTQ+ stories in rural education are especially urgent given the uptick in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the United States over the past few years. Much of this legislation specifically targets school curricula

**Figure 4**

The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County *Textbook Index (L-W)*

<p><b>309   INDEX</b></p> <p>LGBTQ+ visibility (98)  <i>LGBTQ+ RCHS Alum Network (126)</i>          Lime Kiln Community Theater (110)          love (36, 99, 184)          Luder, Rose (60)          Mann, Sally (99)          mascots (253)          Maury River (35)  <i>Maury River Middle School (263)</i>          MLK Jr. Community Parade (290)          metronormativity (126)          mountains (32)  <i>Big House Mountain (34)</i>  <i>Jump Mountain (36)</i>  <i>Little House Mountain (34)</i>  <i>Hogback Mountain (39)</i>          mutual aid (64)          narrow-mindedness (130)          Natural Bridge (52, 193)          non-discrimination policy (65)          The News-Gazette (67)</p>	<p><i>The LGBTQ+ History of Rockbridge County, Virginia</i></p> <p>Project Horizon (130)          pronouns (64)          prom (268)          queer joy (129)          radicalization (17)  <i>adults radicalized against children (62)</i>          Ramsey, Liz (68)          Read, Kirk (99)  <i>"How I Learned to Snap" by (99)</i>          redneck (9)          The Red Hen (236)          The Red House (81)          Rockbridge County  <i>Rockbridge Community Festival (129)</i>  <i>Rockbridge County High School (59)</i>  <i>Rockbridge County School Board (92)</i>  <i>Rockbridge Regional Library (99, 197)</i>          Rockbridge Justice Coalition (136)          role models (162)          Rude, Jesse (88, 170)          safe space (62)          sexuality (62)  <i>sexual orientation (62, 223)</i>  <i>Sexual Orientation Week (65)</i>          Sheetz (220)          solidarity (19, 86, 182, 300)          survival (124, 161)          Southern Virginia University (23)          STAND (Student Association for Non-Discrimination) (63)          Stonewall Jackson Hospital (276)          substance misuse (17)          tokenization (15, 261)          tolerance (130)  <i>Tolerance Awareness Month (65)</i>          trauma, religious (170)          Twombly, Cy (99)          vibrant (37)          Virginia Military Institute (82, 275)          Wal-Mart (218)          Washington and Lee University (80, 280)</p>
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photo credit: Charliie Maycock-Bradley / Rockbridge County VA Collection

RCHS LGBTQ+ Alum Network Publishing

and LGBTQ+ students and teachers. For example, a report by PEN America shows that school book bans targeting books with LGBTQ+ characters and/or characters of color increased drastically in the 2023–2024 school year as compared to previous years (Meehan et al., 2024). This trend is present in Rockbridge County, too, as we have seen attempts to ban certain books containing LGBTQ+ stories from school libraries and proposals for club policies that would discriminate against the high school’s Sexuality and Gender Alliance (Spivey, 2023). In response to this increasingly unwelcoming school environment, our Alum Network has sought to support students through LGBTQ+ book drives, campaigns to contact our local school board, supportive advertisements in local newspapers, and now the textbook project that we present here. By seeking input from the Network’s members about key people, institutions, places, and concepts in our area’s LGBTQ+ history, we were able to make the content of our textbook as accurate as possible while also uplifting local queer and trans voices in the face of institutional hostility.

The full scope of our textbook is outlined in the table of contents page (Figure 2), which lists our imagined chapters, as well as in the index pages (Figures 3 and 4), which articulate the main people, places, and ideas that the textbook would explore. With the help of the Alum Network, we identified 10 chapter topics that are key to the LGBTQ+ experience in our area, including student activism, connections to local geography, and navigating gender and sexuality in the workplace. The end-of-chapter review (Figure 5) excerpt we chose to flesh out corresponds to the imagined fourth chapter, which would focus on arts, creativity, and queerness. Although this chapter (like the textbook itself) does not exist in full, the review allows us to delve more deeply into what it might be like for students to have key terms and discussion questions for formal study.

We chose the arts topic because many queer people in Rockbridge use dance, theater, painting, photography, writing, and other artistic mediums as means of expression, survival, and community building. For example, a notable artist mentioned in the excerpt is Cy Twombly. Born in Rockbridge in 1928, Twombly painted abstract works that allowed him to express himself in ways that his “Southern and queer and closeted” life did not (Lacey, 2018). More recent visual artists in Rockbridge, like photographer Sally Mann, have also used art as an outlet, portraying moments of violence and intimacy within rural Southern landscapes (Boxer, 2018).

Performance artists, too, have played a role in translating local queer stories into art. Halestone Dance Studio has provided a safe space for several generations of young dancers. Theatre performances (like a local university’s controversial 2018 production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *The Musical*) similarly provide

opportunities for self-expression while communicating LGBTQ+ experiences to the county’s wider public (Drohan, 2018). Given this wide array of artistic people, places, and practices, it was a natural choice to focus on this topic in our portrayal of LGBTQ+ life in Rockbridge County.

So far, we have discussed the need for and content of our excerpts, but what about the form? To understand why we opted to create an imaginary history textbook, visualize the standard textbooks used in U.S. history classes across the United States. Textbook authors’ aesthetic decisions about what concepts and imagery to include shape how young people understand and imagine history. We took specific inspiration from the popular U.S. history textbook *The American Pageant* (Kennedy et al., 2001). The stylistic choices of the textbook’s designers emphasize a patriotic vision of the United States, including stars-and-stripes imagery and blue and red text. Chapters like “New World Beginnings (33,000 B.C.-A.D. 1769)” and “Testing the New Nation (1820-1877)” frame U.S. history as linear and inevitable while downplaying some of its more violent realities (Kennedy et al., 2001).

We kept these choices in mind while designing our textbook, opting to center our framing of history around the personal experiences of those in our group as well as an ideological commitment to the existence of LGBTQ+ people in rural spaces (and our rural home place specifically) in recent history. We do not seek to emulate the whitewashed tellings present in *The American Pageant* and the rest of the U.S. history curricula with which many of us grew up. Rather, we recognize the power of textbooks’ aesthetics and framing to shape young people’s perceptions of history. Through our imagined textbook, we aim to wield this storytelling power to offer an alternative way to understand Rockbridge County history. Instead of the stars-and-stripes graphics of *The American Pageant*, our text is framed by pride and rainbow imagery. We traded red, white, and blue motifs for greens and blues that represent the mountains and rivers that many Rockbridge folks hold dear. Charlie’s original photos of local landscapes emphasize the connections that LGBTQ+ people like us feel to the rural places we call home. Through these aesthetic choices, we hope to encourage readers to rethink their notions of who belongs where and to create a bit more space and recognition for LGBTQ+ students in Rockbridge County—past, present, and future.

For now, the textbook is only fragmentary, with the selected pages ripped and frayed at the edges, as if we (or an imagined future student) had pulled them out of an existing work. We hope, however, that this project will have a longer life within our county and beyond. Locally, an LGBTQ+ history textbook would make a valuable addition to school curricula and local libraries’ collections. Perhaps students in Rockbridge and in neighboring counties

**Figure 5**

End-of-Chapter Review for “Arts, Creativity, and Queerness in Rockbridge County” Chapter

**127 | CHAPTER 4** Arts, Creativity, and Queerness in Rockbridge County, 1980 - 2023

### END OF CHAPTER REVIEW

This time period saw a general cultural shift toward more acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the United States. The increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people in creative fields (e.g. movies and television) contributed to this shift, which some may argue made public support for policy changes protecting LGBTQ+ people more possible. As a microcosm of U.S. culture, Rockbridge County saw some of these shifts as well, though LGBTQ+ visibility was not necessarily always as overt. For many LGBTQ+ people living in Rockbridge County, creative practices were a form of both expression and survival. Spaces like Halestone Dance Studio and Lime Kiln Community Theater provided some degree of safety, though even havens like these were not entirely insulated from homophobia and transphobia. Importantly, even when creative spaces were not overtly LGBTQ+ friendly, LGBTQ+ people living in Rockbridge often found ways to utilize art as a method of self exploration and actualization.

While many formal opportunities for creating and witnessing art existed (and continue to exist) in the town of Lexington through established performance venues, opportunities for cultivating creative practices were also available in the more rural areas of Rockbridge county, albeit in potentially less visible or formal ways. From experimenting with personal style with clothing thrifted from Goodwill and the Stonewall Jackson Hospital thrift shop to writing poetry in the privacy of their own bedrooms, LGBTQ+ people living in Rockbridge County have always utilized creativity as a way to understand the world, learn how to survive in hostile conditions, and affirm themselves.

As a place known for the natural beauty of its mountains and rivers, the landscapes of Rockbridge County have at times offered inspiration to LGBTQ+ artists of all ages; concurrently, a social environment informed so staunchly by historical ties to the Confederacy and exclusive forms of Christianity has often sent signals to LGBTQ+ people that they do not belong in Rockbridge County. Particularly because of this confluence of factors, creative expression has played a significant role in affirming LGBTQ+ Rockbridge residents' access to self expression, healing, and affirmation of their sense of belonging in a sometimes hostile climate. ✦

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Considering what you learned about Rockbridge County geography in Chapter 2, what role do the mountains and rivers of the region play in inspiring LGBTQ+ art?
2. LGBTQ+ themes were not always obvious in the art that community members produced in this time period, yet LGBTQ+ people sometimes found a sense of belonging through artistic practices. Why do you think that is?
3. Based on what you have learned in this textbook so far, what do you think the future of art for LGBTQ+ people in Rockbridge County might involve?
4. While some notable artists (Sally Mann, Cy Twombly) have made their homes in Rockbridge County, many younger LGBTQ+ artists leave and seldom or never return. Why do you think this is? How do you think Rockbridge County would change if more LGBTQ+ artists stayed?

### KEY TERMS & FIGURES

- authenticity** (101)
- assimilation** (105)
- embodiment** (117)
- drag** (120)
- Halestone Dance Company** (117)
- Kirk Read** (99)
- LGBTQ+ visibility** (98)
- Lime Kiln Community Theater** (110)
- Mauri Connors** (118)
- metronormativity** (126)
- Ryan Burke** (120)

Next chapter: A Question of Visibility: A History of LGBTQ+ Pride and Other Community Festivals in Rockbridge County

could lead book clubs or share excerpts online. Should we find a way to distribute the book widely enough, a series of local “LGBTQ+ histories” accounts representing rural communities could even emerge across the country, as we firmly believe that each rural place has its own LGBTQ+ histories to explore and share.

This exercise in imagination may seem far-fetched in this current climate of book bans in schools; threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; and attacks on the very existence of trans youth. Nevertheless, a guiding principle for us, and for our collaborators in the Alum Network, is that imagining a better world for queer and trans youth is a necessary step to making it a reality. By aesthetically referencing existing textbooks that exclude marginalized groups while retelling our county’s history through an LGBTQ+ perspective, we hope these textbook excerpts can illustrate both the costs of our erasure and the possibilities of our inclusion.

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# 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 transgender<sup>1</sup> older adults (age 50+)

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<sup>1</sup> 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](http://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 (Charmis,

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.

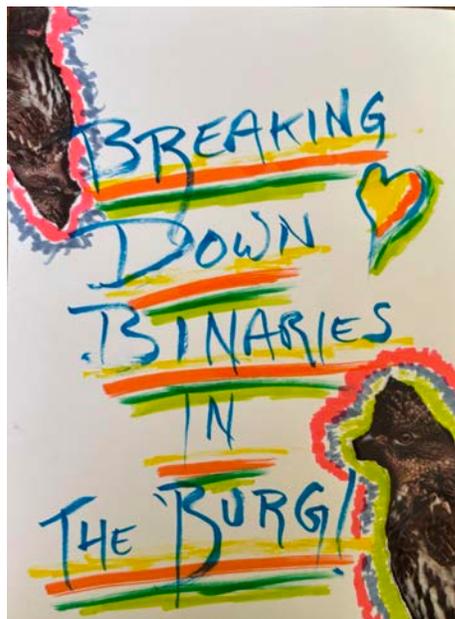
**Storytelling and Learning Through Zine-Making Pop-Ups**

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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# 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<sup>1</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> 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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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.

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 infeasible 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 *outrooted*,” 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, *outrooted* 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

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.

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.

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 *Ls*  
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*

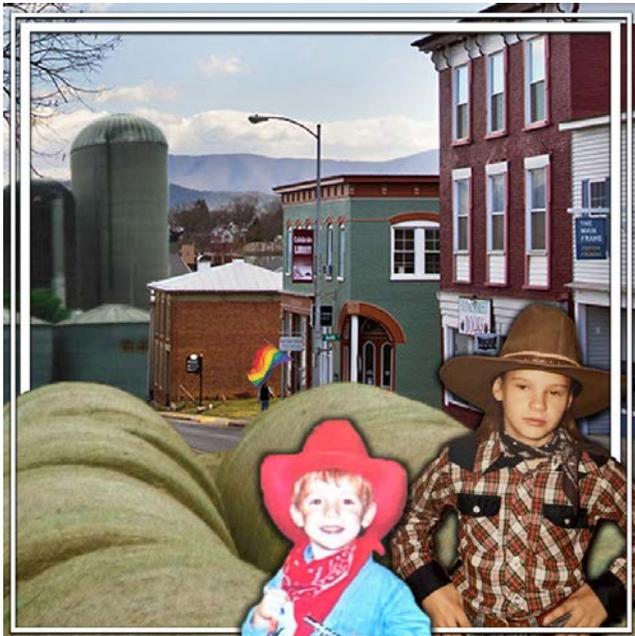
keep fingernail polisher remover nearby  
men don't paint their fingernails at family luncheons  
only pack solid colored tee shirts  
no rainbows, no justice

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.<sup>2</sup>

*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?

<sup>2</sup> 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

*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)*

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.

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 aloud 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

*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.

imaginary (Magnez 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.

*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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