

REGIONAL HISTORY

The Appalachian Mountains of the Eastern United States span from southern New York all the way through to northern Alabama, Georgia, and Kentucky. Most base this boundary on arbitrary cultural markers--political borders and especially the Mason-Dixon Line. However, despite various claims, the cultural region of Appalachia typically refers only to the central and southern portions of the range, from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia downward, and this definite cultural boundary is what I will be referencing from here on out. Every region is characterized by the interactions of global and local human and environmental forces, and boundaries shift along with the perspectives of both subject and object. However, all definitions of Appalachia have the same link between the people and their homeland in common. They are all trying to find some demarcation identifying and defining the place and inhabitants separate from others. This thesis will be no different, except to show how the region is as dynamic and full of change as any other. America, as a whole, holds widely-accepted, negative stereotypes toward this place, generalizing the people and culture as lazy, ignorant, and white, which are embraced as truth by mainstream society and go largely unchallenged. Rural spaces are often thought of as places absent of cosmopolitan things, from people of color to modern amenities to radical politics and Appalachia has long been a source of distortion regarding the isolation, temperament, and behavior of its people. This truth, as usual, is more complicated than that. At a closer glance, the natural unity of the mountain-valley-plateau system is the only thing about the region that is a single unit.

Along with the varying boundary markers, there is still no fundamental agreement about how to even pronounce the word "Appalachia." In northern U.S. dialects, the mountains are

pronounced with a long *a* pronunciation drop: “Appa-lay chia.” Most experts from Washington—well-intentioned but out-of-touch bureaucrats—started coming in to the region in the 1960s to mend the “urban-rural divide,” and adopted this type of pronunciation. Because of this, though, people who used *lay* were perceived as outsiders who didn’t know what they were talking about but were “more than willing to tell people from the mountains what to do and how they should do it” (Williams 40). This is because residents of southern and central Appalachia pronounce it with a short *a* in the stressed third syllable, “Appa-latch-ia.” For the most part now resident experts favor the “core” pronunciation, whose widespread use is credited to the Appalachian Mountain Club and the development of the Appalachian Trail.

As of the 2010 United States Census, the region was home to approximately 25 million people and an estimated 90% of Appalachians have mainly—though by no means exclusively—been settled by the Scotch-Irish, seventeenth and eighteenth-century immigrants from lowland Scotland by way of Ulster in northern Ireland. In America, these people are often grouped under the single name of “Scots-Irish,” referencing their outsider-status within the greater America. Typically, Appalachians refer to themselves as “living on the mountain” and have even coined the term “off-mountain” to describe the other, “less pleasant” locations of the US (Williams 42). This almost willful disregard of diversity in favor of unity is echoed in scholarly and popular literature, where many argue that Appalachia does not exist except in the imaginations of the people who want it to.

Early Appalachian literature typically centered on the observations of people from outside the region, such as Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784), with exceptions including Davy Crockett's *A Narrative of the Life of Davy Crockett* (1834). Traveler

accounts published in 19th-century magazines gave rise to the residents in the mountains, which reached its height with George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood character of the 1860s. His writings went on to influence Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor. Along with those, some of Appalachia's best known writers include James Agee, Wendell Berry, Denise Giardina, Barbara Kingsolver, and David Joy, as well as queer authors like Silas House and Dorothy Allison.

The renewal and resurgence of interest in Appalachia has not abated: rather a literary movement anchored in old-fashioned narrative realism, using literature as a tool for entertainment and understanding, continues--referential to the 'old ways' of Appalachian storytelling: "Most Appalachian fiction depict[s]. . . the specific and concrete world of everyday people and local places. Our best writers are true heroes to the community because they have been able to take the materials of local life and make something universal from this part of the world" (Williams 45-46). Appalachian literature crosses with the larger genre of Southern literature. Writers such as William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy have made notable contributions to the American canon with tales set within Appalachia. McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979) offers an intense vision of the squalor and brutality of life along the Tennessee River, in the heart of Appalachia. Faulkner's hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, is on the borderlands of what is considered Appalachia, and his fictional Yoknapatawpha county would be considered part of the region, though not by everyone.

Appalachia as an academic interest was the product of a critical scholarship that emerged across the disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s. During and after World War II, Appalachian people in unprecedented numbers left for military service or to join the workforce in neighboring

cities, a time that scholars commonly characterize as being a “colonial economy.” It was a time of renewal as well as crisis for Appalachians. With a renewed interest in issues of power, scholars could not dismiss the social inequity, class conflict, and environmental destruction encountered by America's so-called “hillbillies.” Appalachia's emergence in academia is a result of the intersection between social conditions and critical academic interests and has resulted in the development of many Appalachian studies programs in colleges and universities across the region, as well as the Appalachian Studies Association.

Appalachia's differences are often seen as markers of cultural peculiarity, an impression deeply ingrained for most Americans. Self-identified “rednecks” and “mountain people” are chosen to be the spokesperson for the entirety of their region when, in reality, it is a place filled with complex political and economic structures, no matter media's depiction of Appalachia as a conglomerate hillbilly made up of one class, race, religion, and one world-view—leaving all others on the margins. The concept of identity throughout Appalachia is complex, nuanced, and largely unexplored within mainstream outlets. The main narrative focus on Appalachian identity has been constructed around a rugged, blue-collar male identity that excludes, and makes invisible, the queer and female voice and experience. Because of these identifiers, Appalachia is seen as out of step with any contemporary present, much less a progressive future.

Using the pre-existing literature, I plan to contextualize the concepts of mobility, community, rurality, and belonging within the region. The overarching goal of mine is to explore queer identity in Appalachia—where “queer,” in this context, is being used as a counter-cultural shorthand, rather than a specific sexual orientation. The focus, as a whole, will be on analyzing marginalized rural identities (specifically LGBTQ-defined people) intertwined within political,

gender, and feminist movements. I plan to explore the ways in which the Others present in Appalachian are capable, strong, and resilient on their own terms in their own voices. This, however, is not to mistake a “Queer Appalachia” as assuming or reclaiming an already existing identity; it is an unmaking and remaking through presentation and performance: “the underrepresented and misrepresented get to represent themselves. . . to define Queer Appalachia and the Queer South with our own images and truths. . . our desire to claim our own labels, reimagine our childhood myths” (*Queer Appalachia 2*). This project is attempting to showcase the actual, lived experiences of those existing in the margins of their rural community, where they must create their own space.

Scholars work to redefine the term *rural*, as it seems to imply certain qualities, the most prominent being an attachment to traditional gender and sexuality roles, resulting in aggression toward anyone that deviates from the norm. Beyond reductive hillbilly archetypes, sexuality in Appalachia is usually seen from the outside as wild, violent, bestial, and incestuous, among other things. Stereotypes surrounding Appalachia are reductive representations of sexual ignorance and violence that have had problematic implications for rural gay and transgender Appalachian folk. Mainstream gay culture often uses these perceived meanings to uphold the standard of rural queer life as impossible, rendering the rural as monolithically homophobic. I attempt to expand upon this idea by looking at what it means to have two clashing identities—to find the similarities between queer and rural voices as they exist in marginalized communities.

There are no absolutes in terms of the proper place for LGBTQ belonging. Some seek to dismantle the very notion of urban and rural being synonymous to liberated and oppressed. However, before being able to launch into an argument based around rural queerness, scholars

must demonstrate the very legitimacy of this claim to their predominantly urban and coastal audience. This involves depicting the rural as other, as a place that has been “subject to unqueering” but also as a place still full of potential and possibility (Vainker). An example of this being, in recent years, a person of color having a harder time existing as queer in a rural area given the two marginal identities; moreover, even if their queer identity is taken away, rural people of color are still targeted more frequently in rural spaces. Rural states have a dark history of association with prejudice and hatred toward minorities; however, the concept and movement centering around the idea of a queer Appalachia works to craft a new way of presenting this more recent culture.

Appalachians are not helpless victims nor are they violently backward, but rather, they have always been a strong, independent people emphasizing their isolation from the rest of the South. There are certainly many socio-cultural similarities between the South and Appalachia, but there are major factors which distinguish one from the other and show that Appalachian literature is strong and separate enough to be worthy of scholarship on its own. Meanwhile, young people who do reside in rural places struggle to negotiate the parts of their identity that are connected to place to their gender, race, and sexuality, which can often seem at odds with the norms of their community. Geographical differences are one of the major causes for the divide between the two literatures: the flatlands of the South as opposed to the hills and mountains of Appalachia.

The idea of community—“remembering your roots”—permeates rural culture. Having connections to a past is not bad: mountain people have long valued an identity built around a celebration and performance of traditional music (guitar, banjo), food ways (gardening, canning),

and crafts (quilting, sewing). There are also traditions regarding people: growing up with the children of your parents' friends and attending church with them every Sunday leads to a sense of community that is not easily escapable. Families know other families for generations, and so your existence then becomes not just about you, as your life affects your family and family community, as well. To showcase the historical and contemporary existence of queer people, people of color, and women as rural folks is a way to create a more inclusive future in this region through the diversity present in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction.

The main narratives of Appalachia form a dichotomous view of the land and its people: beautiful mountainous views threatened by resource extraction whose people have been wrecked by the symptoms of long term poverty and economic stagnation. While current discourse reduces Appalachia down to being defined as the antithesis of progress, I believe analyzing a connection between marginalized voices within this space crafts greater social change as a whole. A recent emergence of studies and works discussing the intersections of race, class, and gender, specifically the overlap between Queer and Rural studies, has been significantly important in guiding this research, which contributes important information about the struggles and perseverance of young people in marginalized places who have the potential to help create a more just future. This research is both timely and significant. Given the media attention surrounding the region (dubbed "Trump Country") stemming from the 2016 United States presidential election, this research seeks to not only add nuance to the story, but also provide a contextual understanding of the region specifically from the perspective of rural people. Though I chose to focus a large portion of my attention on white queer people, I have no intention of reinforcing notions of the Appalachian region, or, more broadly, of rural structures as

homogeneously white. These voices are both necessary and crucial to the literature, as the region is often defined with a masculine and heteronormative hegemony. Most importantly, the goal of this research is to provide a platform for Appalachian Others to define strength and relationships with the land on their own terms from their own lived experiences and from their own community.

Feminist theorists have developed the concept of “intersectionality” to better understand the multiple and complex layers of identity that people embody, whether through gender, race, sexuality, class, and the ways such identifiers can lead to oppression and inequality. I apply this intersectional approach to the experiences of younger people in rural places to understand if and how they are able to reconcile their identities in order to create a sense of belonging and how this affects their physical and social mobility and participation in their communities in the “Queer Appalachia” section. Sexism, racism, and heterosexism alienate young people from communities but negotiating the intersections of identity creates space for belonging and engagement between young people and the place they are from.

Though there is widespread knowledge of LGBT life and of Appalachian life, there is little literature that discusses the intersection of these identities, with an overwhelming majority of said research on the lives of Appalachian LGBT people emerging only in the last decade. The available literature, however, has little discussion of the implications of identifying this way. The findings reveal the extent to which this identity is even accessible to young people in rural communities. This is doubly important when considering the fact that, regionally, the South has a larger population of LGBT adults—3,868,000—compared to the Northeast’s 2,079,000 (Williams Institute). This statistic comes as a shock to most and, while I do feel that this region is

queerer than assumed at a glance, the numbers can be explained in multiple ways. The Williams Institute includes 14 states within their Southern borders, comprising 35% of the LGBT population in the United States—which shows a 2 percent increase from their 2014 study. However, they do include Maryland and Washington, D.C. within their border, whose LGBT population is higher than most (9.8%) when compared to the average percentage from each state being around 5%. If this is considered an anomaly or outlier, the South's LGBT population is still on par with the rest of the nation's regions: 17% Pacific, 9% Mountains, 20% Midwest, and 19% Northeast. Additionally, those that reside in the South are more likely to lack employment protections, earn less than \$24,000 a year, and report that they cannot afford food or healthcare. There are more new HIV infections among queer men from the South than any other region in the country. Southern LGBT individuals are also less likely to have insurance than anywhere else in the country. This research contributes important information about the struggles and perseverance of young people in marginalized places who have the potential to help create a more just future.

SOUTHERN LITERATURE

Much of the scholarship published on gay writers in the American South and Appalachia has focused on men, excluding the vibrant history of lesbian authorship. While researching this subject, it was difficult for me to find articles and books about a queer Appalachia with at least some focus on women writers. Even still, in *The Lesbian South*, Jamie Harker explores the literature of lesbian-feminist writers in the post-1960s American South, rather than Appalachia. Harker does argue that lesbian presses and bookstores enabled the development of feminist

reading and writing communities and that these communities both challenged and nurtured lesbian writers, while also encouraging feminist-inspired racial activism and individual autonomy. With the freedom that the Women in Print movement inspired, southern lesbian feminists remade Southernness as a site of intersectional radicalism, transgressive sexuality, and liberated space. Including in her study well-known authors—like Dorothy Allison and Alice Walker—as well as overlooked writers, publishers, and editors, Harker reconfigures the southern literary canon and the feminist canon, challenging histories of feminism and queer studies to include the South as a formative player.

Dorothy Allison in her story “A Question of Class” describes her struggle with growing up between the intersections of being in poverty from her working-class background, being queer, and being seen as ‘trash.’ In the beginning of the article, Allison discusses how she constantly felt the need to hide who she was while growing up in South Carolina. She hid her family history and her childhood—experiences that shaped who she was—from her lovers, her friends, and anybody else who tried to get to know her. She felt that if she revealed who she was she would be labeled as Other (“those people over there, those people who are not us.”). She would come to reside only in “the land of they.” Later on in her school career, she becomes part of the “mythical” poor, due to her journey out of poverty, which is the way American society views any person who pulls themselves up by the bootstraps.

Despite continuing poverty and her mother’s worsening health, Allison’s classmates and teachers do not see any of this and recognize her intelligence despite her “white trash” background. She notes, “because they did not see poverty and hopelessness as a foregone conclusion for my life, I could begin to imagine other futures for myself.” Those, like her, in the

same position romanticize and “internalize the myths of society even as we resist them. . . as a kind of morality tale.” Allison seeks to avoid the fate that comes along with openly allying herself with members of her social group. In her situation here, Allison feels isolated: by society as a lesbian, by her extended family as someone who made it out (“it was the way I thought about work, ambition, self-respect”), and by lesbians for behavior “shaped in large part by class.” Allison states that her sexual identity is intimately constructed by and connected to her class and regional background. The hatred directed at her sexual preferences is also class hatred “however much people, feminists in particular, like to pretend this is not a factor.” The fact that Allison grew up as a lesbian in a notoriously homophobic society only intensifies her desire to “avoid examining in any way what I knew about my life.” Even though she lived openly as lesbian, Allison still did not fit in with the lesbian community due to the class and political differences within it, even feeling “as if I straddled cultures and belonged on neither side.” This again, goes back to her feelings of isolation and Otherness: “Entitlement. . . is a matter of feeling like we rather than they. . . I have never been able to make clear the degree of my fear, the extent to which I feel myself denied: not only that I am queer in a world that hates queers, but that I was born poor into a world that despises the poor. The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction.” Understanding that her work comes from a place of explaining and examining something inside of herself that she has never “let [herself] see up close before” lends to greater insight into how she has been fundamentally shaped by her childhood. “The whole process. . . has taken me most of my life to understand. . . to see how and why those of us who are born poor and different are so driven to give ourselves away or lose ourselves, but most of all, simply to disappear as the people we really are.” By the

time that she got older and made a name for herself as an author, Allison decided to “reverse that process: to claim my family, my true history, and to tell the truth not only about who I was but about the temptation to lie.” Growing up poor can easily give way to class stratification, racism, and prejudice in that some people begin to believe that the security of their own families and communities depends on the oppression of others, that for some to have good lives there must be others whose are worse.

This dominant cultural belief is what makes poor whites so determinedly racist and the middle class so contemptuous of them: “Suffering does not ennoble. It destroys. To resist destruction, self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness, we have to throw off the conditioning of being despised, the fear of becoming the *they* that is talked about so dismissively, to refuse lying myths and easy moralities, to see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary.” Recognizing where this ideology surrounding her life stemmed from led to Allison reclaiming her home, family, and childhood and enabled her to feel a better sense of belonging. The power of such hegemonic thought is made even more apparent when examining how, within liberal communities where considerable attention is paid to the politics of marginalization, there is still so much to be done in regard to exclusion and fear, as there are so many who still do not feel safe or comfortable in a space seemingly made for them.

APPALACHIA AS A PLACE

Young people who are from rural places struggle to come to terms with the parts of their identity that are connected to their culture with their identity related to their gender, race, sexuality, etc. as these can often seem at odds with each other. Sociologists have shown that

these societal patterns help create and reinforce economic, educational, and class-based inequalities among rural and urban places.

Anna Rachel Terman is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Ohio University and studies the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality issues in rural Appalachia. Rural communities in the U.S. are struggling to survive and thrive as deindustrialization and globalization work to push youth toward more urban areas. Terman's understandings of education, mobility, and community--with her feminist understandings of identity and power--ask these same sorts of questions focused on the intersectionality of young adults from rural backgrounds. The analysis shows that young people who do reside in rural places struggle to negotiate the parts of their identity that are connected to place, to their gender, race, and sexuality, which can often seem at odds with the norms of their community.

Coming from Appalachia means acknowledging the realities of the region as a culture rooted in tradition and understanding who you come from. But what does it mean to *really* be Appalachian? Is it birthplace, lineage, language, ethnicity, religion, race, culture, or education? Do you have to be born into it or can you decide to become it? Can you decide you no longer want to be Appalachian? These questions show how deeply rooted, yet dynamic, this society is. In the Introduction to *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, William Schumann writes, "Appalachia's boundaries can be defined in numerous ways, and these ways reflect the research objectives, worldviews, and/or power positions of the individuals, groups, and institutions making claims about what constitutes the region" (3).

Appalachian studies work to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the markers of an Appalachian identity. Appalachian scholars have discussed what it means to think about,

represent or be silenced, and act in such a region, like most other regional studies conversations about “place and displacement, identities, voices. . . histories and imagined futures.” They clearly make a distinction between the cultural stereotypes and scholarly understandings of the region where “regional identity” is recognized to be a “dialogic process rather than a fixed conclusion.” In the preface to the book *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, Stephen Fisher and Barbara Smith discuss “the importance of place as a source for personal identity and motivating force in local and regional struggles.” Places that shape a person’s identity can help shape them to act, struggle for change and agency, and to plant roots for action, but only when it is understood by those around them.

The collective American consciousness has a fascination with Appalachia that is quick to demonize or romanticize the people as representations of self-sufficiency borne of poverty and necessity rather than choice or a ‘quaint’ celebration of the good old days long gone by. A subconscious version of Appalachian identity often persists in our global thinking without us noticing it. The reality of the place is something that these conceptions miss completely—less simplistic and more contradictory, at once isolated and constantly “responding to the shifting national and international” impacts of the times (Engelhardt). This means that practical understandings of Appalachia as “heterogeneous, complex, and socially aware” is still needed in research.

As previously stated, intersectionality is the most revealing lens to look through as it shows not just the barriers present for those at the intersection of marginalized gender and racial identities, but also the potential for “alternative forms of belonging” in marginal populations that exist within the culture (Schumann 75). Although it has become something of an academic

buzzword, it is widely and usefully used here to better understand gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identities together. Intersectional analysis has been a part of Appalachian studies for some time, but, according to Terman, it can reveal new perspectives and forge new paths for Appalachia in a twenty-first-century context.

bell hooks states that it is when we move beyond silly, sentimental notions of identifying with a place that we uncover what is most profound about what we mean when we say “place matters.” It matters because, when we have no place to identify with, “no roots to drink from, no tree trunks to guide us in clear directions,” then we cannot know who we really are, “what our values are, and what we mean” (179). Our home is a safe place from where we come to understand the world around us. hooks likens this idea to going back to Kentucky at the age of 59 when she thought she would only be back “in a little box, shipped back to mom and dad” (180). She realized, however, that she felt a desire and a need to belong in a place that mattered, which deeply informed her decision to return home. She describes her return as the result of her individual struggle to reconcile various aspects of her identity, including her sense of belonging.

hooks had established her place in adulthood, independent of her parents, by talking about and reclaiming Kentucky, firstly by going to grad school in California. She knew that her “elders were. . . maintaining the legacies of [our] lives in Kentucky: the hills, the backwoods, the small town.” It was only as they began to pass away that she saw her relationship with Kentucky as shifting: “if I wanted to have that intimate relationship with Kentucky—its landscape, my people—I would have to come home and make it, because my dad and the other elders would not be there to make it for me” (181). Place, then, becomes about the connections crafted through a

reclamation of identity. Her goal is less about a quantitative measure of diversity and more about the qualitative accessibility of belonging.

There are multiple layers of ways we create and reclaim place that we make home. Barbara Kingsolver hinted at that in her book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. We reclaim identities through “genealogies of desire,” like food, people, place, and smell. Elizabeth Engelhardt, a Professor of Southern Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discusses this idea in her scholarship, as well. *Trying to Get Appalachia Less Wrong* depicts her life as connected to “the quiet presence of the mountains” and “the soft worn rocks” as it tells the “stories of Appalachian people, places, and cultures” (6). Her home still holds a “roundness and gentleness. . . a massive depth. . . well outside any media's news cycle” (7). She notices the world around her and feels connected to it as a daughter visiting home:

the bears that come down from the high mountains. . . My mother and aunt debate whether the woolly worm's stripes suggest a cold February this year or a mild January next year. I often took my grandmother or my godmother on a drive up to the family cemetery to learn again the stories of the people buried there. Fire sweeps the mountain one year, but new life is there the next. Whatever we call them, the mountains themselves preside up in the clouds, regardless of who is elected to today's state legislatures. (7)

Looking at Appalachia through personal, rather than global lens, shows the intimacy of the worlds of fiction and art, and in so doing leads to discovering a widened view of Appalachia's complicated connectedness.

Despite attempts to understand both internal and external conceptions of a “new Appalachia” and what and who are a part of Appalachian identity, the region does still cling

tightly to its traditional past (music, crafts, agricultural practices, and ideas of community).

While these constructions of traditionality act as a form of comfort in the midst of a present that is unrecognizable with a future that is uncertain, they also narrowly craft the region for years to come; this is why the very people on the margins of the community must subvert the presented notions to make room for a more positive and welcoming change for future generations.

Appalachia's constructions of traditionality are inseparable from the history of the region. The rural mountain folk (along with African Americans and Native Americans in the rural South) were seen as bearers of traditional values, knowledge, and practices. Established folk schools were where children were encouraged to hold on to what was considered the most valuable aspects of their surviving culture to be expressed in the ballads, dances, and handicrafts of impoverished rural mountain communities.

Mountain people have long valued an identity built around a celebration and performance of traditional music (guitar, banjo), food ways (gardening, canning), and crafts (quilting, sewing). There are also traditions regarding people, as you grow up with the children of your parents' friends and attend church with them every Sunday. While it may be more difficult in rural areas, the idea of community is a tie that binds LGBT/Appalachia together. The representation of Appalachian folklore as exclusive leaves out the contemporary presence and historical existence of people of color and rural LGBTQ+ people.

The poets, artists, and scholars of the region offer up small moments of reflection that expand outward on their own situatedness within Appalachian culture: "A man drives around his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, and takes snapshots of his vibrant black 1950s community he witnesses over the dashboard of his pickup. In a conversation in a queer-friendly

Kentucky room, a word is created and its joy starts to spread as soon as ‘fabulachian’ is said out loud” (Garringer 79). William Schumann explains, “Whether defined by. . . poverty. . . or the persistence of unorthodox lifestyles. . . Appalachian stories” exist on the idea of marking regional differences from the larger US (Schumann 2). Looking to actual literature from the regions’ people, Appalachia becomes characterized by a cultural diversity and interconnectedness that challenge the lazy stereotypes invented by the rest of America. The region finds itself facing an urgent need for transition in the growing face of economic and political turmoil, yet there is much disagreement about what that transition looks like: transition to what and who gets to decide what comes next?

The erasure of rural queer existence happens not only within rural communities’ constructions of traditionality and identity, but also within “liberated” queer metropolitan spaces. Queer urban communities are equally as responsible for the erasure of rural queer presence as the small towns in which many country queers survive and thrive are. The editors of *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* state that:

Metro- and rural-normativity become dependent on one another to signal a form of modern sexual achievement--or a distinct, notable lack of it. Modern urban sexual achievement becomes an azimuth of queer visibility upon which the homophobia clinometric slides increasingly toward the rural. Metrosexuality knows who and what it is based on: its temporal, social, and geographic distance from the heteronormative. . . The rural queer lacks visibility not only because of local hostility, but also because the absence of visibility is required as a structural component of metronormativity. (Gray 13)

This collection confronts the assumption that queer desires depend upon a sprawling urban life for meaning. Their conceptions of queer anti-urbanism and queer rurality come into clear focus in this same vein, as, when writing of tradition, Raymond Williams argues: “‘Tradition’ has been commonly understood as a relatively inert segment of a social structure: tradition as the surviving past. But this version of tradition is weak at the very point where the incorporating sense of tradition is strong: where it is seen, in fact, as an actively shaping force” (Gray 18). Tradition, in practice, is the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits. It is always more than an inert historicized segment: it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation. What we see now is not just ‘a tradition’ but, rather, a selective tradition: an intentional version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and subversion.

Silas House, a professor at Berea College, suggests in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* that scholars and reporters have the “audacity to assume” they know the culture and tradition of the land with a little bit of research, but says they cannot know something without “loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between.” One cannot understand the complexity of the people by only looking at data — “something inside you has to crack to let in the light so your eyes and brain and heart can adjust properly.” House’s poetry has been described as a humble sort of storytelling, when the focus is on the land he is committed to through a journey of living in the present while remembering the past to which “we are holding on with white knuckles”:

We mourn it and preserve it and make it into poems and songs and books and jars of pickled corn we can set on the window sill to catch the light. You cannot put back a mountain but you can carry its stories strapped to your back like medicine bundles, you

can make a tattoo of them on the underside of your arm. You can sew them onto the unseen parts of your mouth This is my hand for you, outstretched, unfolded, unclenched— everything but uncertain. (106)

House knows the power of words and believes in his ideology that the past and present can coexist in the mountains:

Sort, rinse, soak overnight, season with onion, hog jowl, bacon grease. . . Hillfolk head for beans and cornbread when the world turns surly—pinto, yellow-eye, October. . . Nanny, what would you think of me now, twenty years after your death, with my bushy grizzly-bear beard, my myriad tattoos, my lust for chest hair, the man I live with?

There is imagined acceptance in this poem, but he knows that that acceptance must come with a grain of never uttering the unspoken truth, and he never did, as he is now only speaking “twenty years after.” Yet there is healing, too, because this relationship—if it had ever been able to happen—would have been one that would not have revolved around discussions of sexuality but would have been bound by the culture, heritage, food, and family, as seen later in the poem: “My guess would be, after a short lecture on the Bible, a book I never much cared about to begin with, you’d settle down to table with us, admiring how handsome this home is John’s made for me. . . I promise you’d be proud of how well the beans and cornbread came out (and if you like this meal, y’ought to taste my buttermilk biscuits).” Here, his sexual identity takes a backseat to his cultural one. This is not necessarily a bad thing—there is not an erasure of his ‘true’ self—but a mingling of who he is and who he once was.

His broad and inclusive dialogue is to “help build a new Appalachia. . . made up of folk who are outsiders, nomads, immigrants” where everyone has a role and place: “the urban, the

white and the black, the Cherokee and the Hispanic, the straight and the gay and the transgendered, the queer, the Other” (House 104). hooks describes this speech as an admirable affirmation of the spirit and representation of difference and diversity in Appalachia, yet that has always been present. What is new, however, is “our visibility [and] solidarity” (hooks 122). This newly visible subset of Appalachia—queer and otherwise—has always existed through the time-honored connections to a past where difference, however relative, survived and was celebrated.

While traditions connect to a cultured past, it is essential for unity and diversity to coexist within to make way for progressive change. House says “in Appalachia, we have always been about remembering,” but declares: “I hate the fact that so many of us within this region believe that we must cling to the past without ever going forward” (107). A fundamental aspect of that balance has to be that those who *are* progressive, who are more critically conscious and aware, cannot construct hierarchies and barriers of separation from those who are still held by hegemonic, backwards thinking; change will not happen without the extension of forgiveness and compassion—from everyone.

House discusses broaching the idea of an open discussion within academic spaces with academics of his field and region, who said that they rarely talked about the topic of sexuality in Appalachian studies classes because of their students being divided on the issue and it bringing up furtherly-divisive religious issues. These issues presented to him are the very reason the discussion should happen more openly and more often, not to force personal beliefs on students, but to foster a dialogue that might not otherwise get discussed without a formal, structured setting. As members of the scholarly community, House believes the responsibility falls squarely

on their shoulders: to articulate that encompassing whole of their identities—not just one of them—to make the Other visible.

To be visible in Appalachia is to be heard and understood in a way queer people have never been able to do before. This, I believe, enables a younger generation to feel less alienated from their own homes. House reiterates this thought by saying many young people feel like “they’re camping awhile here in the wilderness before their exodus” before leaving for place “where the homophobia and racism are not so collectively a part of the culture.” There’s number of economic and environmental factors which contribute to this drain, as well, because corporations are “out of control” and legislators “refuse to represent [us] properly” (120). However, the one most personal to this cause, and to House himself, is when they leave because they “feel invisible or they feel accepted only with suspicion.” It is evident that over the last century, Appalachian people have been at the forefront of the major movements for change in this country--on the front lines of the labor and union movement--and it must be the same way in this fight for equality and fairness (120). The fight can first and foremost come through discussing, singing, and writing about it--through education, research, and conversation: “playing a banjo can be an act of defiance, singing a song can be a call to action” (121). bell hooks says that the “function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible.” There are many ways through this fight for equality ending in change, but it all starts with understanding hope as a revolutionary foundation, which is what the New Appalachia must be.

AFFRILACHIA

Frank X. Walker is the former Kentucky Poet Laureate and a professor of African American and Africana Studies and English at the University of Kentucky who gets credit for coining the term “Affrilachian.” While attending a Southern Writers conference in Lexington, KY., where only one African-American was sitting among the invited authors, Walker looked up the definition of *Appalachian* in his dictionary and read that Appalachians are white residents of the mountainous regions of Appalachia. He then asked himself what the face of Appalachia was, among their commonalities and differences, before he created the word *Affrilachia* that he feels is more relevant to the Appalachian experience today. Walker’s own poetry depicts his experiences within Appalachia. In 1992, Walker wrote a poem with the title, “Affrilachia.” In 1999, his first poetry collection, *Affrilachia*, made its debut at the Kentucky Book Fair. Within three months the first printing of 2,000 sold out, and a second printing had to be ordered (Spriggs 22). Now, what began as a word has become a literary movement filled with powerful voices, through personal and political writing.

The term signifies the presence of African-Americans within the region of Appalachia. The word rhetorically both references and reclaims the racial and cultural diversity within the region, acknowledging a history of invisibility experienced by African Americans in Appalachia (Spriggs 24). The word opens up a discussion of the region being more racially diverse than mainstream conceptions would posit. This then leads to the understanding that is also a wider range of identities across political affiliation, sexual orientation, race, nationality, gender identity, class, and many more layers than is commonly represented in rural communities. Appalachia is made up of embedded cultural traditions, only a few of which are amplified, distorted, and circulated in the popular media. It is also a region of cross-cultural

interconnections that transcend specific locales, making it rife for academic exploration. The 13-state expanse reaching as far north as New York and as far South as Mississippi means that the Appalachian region is so much more than one ethnicity can define. According to the *Appalachian Regional Commission* and 2010 Census data, the African-American population in Appalachia totals to about 2,516,675, around 1 million more than reported just 10 years earlier.

Clearly, though, the power dynamics and problematic histories of white researchers, scientists, or sociologists working in rural black communities mean something entirely different than shared Appalachian-ness and queerness. The word Affrilachian stands as a reminder of the diversity of the region. *Appalachia Revisited* states that while Appalachia may not be a robust racial and ethnically diverse cultural hub, the region is more diverse than it is usually presented in books and media. Only two Appalachian states, Kentucky and West Virginia, were identified among the ten “whitest” parts of the US, falling behind Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Iowa, Idaho, and Wyoming (Catté 12). The people of Appalachia may be white, but the region is adding African American and Hispanic individuals at a rate faster than most of the nation (15). It is the stereotype of an all-white and poor Appalachia that the word “Affrilachia” subverts.

One stereotypical depiction of the ‘poor, white, and trashy’ comes from J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (which I won’t go into); however, a subversion of such a stereotype comes from William Turner, an African-American scholar and activist who grew up in Harlan County, Kentucky, in a US Steel-built coal town and mining complex that employed hundreds of black “Affrilachians” that don’t exist in Vance’s portrait of Appalachia as a haven of “down and out Scots-Irish” who would shake your hand just to stab you in the back.

Turner's essay, "Black Hillbillies Have No Time for Elegies," recounts the days of attendants of segregated schools of his hometown and, unlike the unmotivated and lazy portrayal described by Vance, overcame racism and poverty to graduate college and rise to fame in a score of professions. His description of these students is actually inspiring, even more so than Vance's path out of the trailer park to graduate from Yale Law School. Turner's quote is all one needs to know to conclude that Vance does not know how truly strong a mountaineer's bootstraps are compared to his descriptors:

In Harlan County in 1960, we were, to be sure, isolated from the rest of the world, but we had

homefolks who came back regularly whose lives were marked by unusually high achievements and accomplishments, living legends (one who became a player for the Harlem Globetrotters) who let us young ones know that we too could 'be somebody.'

Fact is, every one of the eleven Thomas children—their dad an Alabama-born and raised Methodist preacher and US Steel-employed coal miner—graduated from college.

Turner and many others in *Appalachia Revisited* make clear that there is some perverse thinking to both US neo-conservative and neo-liberal philosophy that needs to have an Other category: who does not share their highly motivated righteous indignation about freeloaders and ne'er-do-wells and what it means for Appalachia to be seen as remarkably, homogeneously Scots-Irish, passing on a dysfunctional culture to their dirty-faced young ones in dark hollows and dilapidated coal camps.

QUEER APPALACHIA

Mainstream queer narratives have long assumed that cities are the only place queer people are able to be “out” in their community: “It is only by depicting the rural as inescapably, unquestionably a certain way that the urban can become the liberatory space that LGBTQ people at coastal gay prides claim it to be” (Vainker). Assuming every queer person has a shared desire to escape from the country to more liberal, metropolitan areas is damaging, and, for some, this narrative of queer “success”—leaving the farm and never looking back—isn't all that appealing. However, before being able to launch into an argument based around rural queerness, scholars must demonstrate the very legitimacy of this claim to their predominantly urban and coastal audience. And, for those raised in the country, following this normative migration rips away the heritage and culture stemming from their communities and traditions. The LGBTQ community *does* mean belonging to a community, and bigger cities do provide space and opportunity for those who wish to exist exclusively within queer space, and it is true that rural spaces simply cannot achieve the same sense of queer exclusivity in smaller towns; however, that does not mean that Appalachia cannot foster a sense of queer community not wholly separate from rural life or only exclusively within metropolitan areas.

In her essay “Queer,” Jennifer Purvis posits that women, gender, and sexuality studies are “always already queer,” which she defines as “twisting” and “making strange” (190). Once a derogatory term hurled at lesbians and gay men, “queer” has been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ communities as a term of self-identification. It is an umbrella term used to bring people together who have been marginalized in US society because of their sexuality and gender expression and whose descriptions and feelings do not fit easily within and may resist such categorical binaries as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, etc. Queer can then be its own sexual identity, and it can signify

someone's politics. For scholars, practitioners, artists, and activists who fight for the political and legal protections, rights, and freedoms of all queer people, the phrase "queer nation" can represent the need for a continued national political voice. It is also important to note that when "queer" is deployed in the struggle for social justice, it assumes solidarity, which does not always exist between the various groups of people under it as an umbrella term. An example of this variation being when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in July of 2015, as this milestone is limited to those wanting to participate in the traditionally heteronormative institution of marriage. So, the example of gay marriage shows the unity and division present in the queer community.

This division between a once seemingly unified group evokes modern discussion similar to the ideals of the Queer Appalachia Project and *Electric Dirt* zine. This involves depicting the rural as a place that needs to be "subject to unqueering" but also as a place still full of potential and possibility (Vainker). As both a burgeoning social movement and community, it proposes that the similarities between queerness and the country allow both cultures to coexist explicitly as two marginalized groups, because when you're gay and in the country, you're a marginalized group within a marginalized group. Far from being only the "natural state" of rugged, heteronormative masculinity, Queer Appalachia (QA) shines a light onto the queerness not previously depicted in rural areas, and through a medium easily accessible to the everyday person. Young people who reside in rural places struggle to negotiate the parts of their identity that are connected to place with their thoughts on gender, race, and sexuality, which can often seem at odds with the norms of their community: "With under-documented cultures and communities, there is often a gatekeeper. . . Someone with access to higher education and

resources that many folks, especially in our impoverished region, do not have” (4). Becoming aware of such a cultural cornerstone as this means diving deeper into rural culture, specifically its people and history.

Narratives within the zine focus on growing up with an Appalachian cultural background and the resulting feelings of alienation, but, conversely, not wanting those deemed outsiders to criticize it. This works to see how QA has been shaped today as a new community and space free from judgement without leaving your culture behind—resulting in a new facet of storytelling as a means of survival. In *Electric Dirt*, the underrepresented and misrepresented get to represent themselves: “Through sharing tales of wildcrafting our queerness, foraging for pieces of ourselves within the intersections of coal mines and class, race and religion” (4).

QA’s Instagram account was originally created to gather submissions for their *Electric Dirt* zine where followers were asked to tag their own photos of Queer Appalachian ephemera and memories with #ruralresistance and #electricdirt. Soon, the hashtag and Instagram handle took on a life of their own. Both projects morphed very quickly into a living, grassroots movement and punk history lesson, one that serves Southern and Appalachian rural communities while documenting subversive queer culture. Now, the collective is publishing the zine’s second volume while the readership steadily grows, and the Instagram continues to grow its following while celebrating queer and activist voices across the social media platform.

The origin of the zine started with the late Bryn Kelly, a transgender woman, writer, and musician originally from West Virginia, who wanted to explore what exactly it meant to be a queer Appalachian. This project was co-founded by Mamone (who goes only by their last name and uses they/them pronouns) who is now the at the forefront of the Queer Appalachia

collective/Electric Dirt Zine after Kelly's passing. Mamone first met Kelly at the LGBTQ Center at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia after Kelly ran away from home at the age of 16. Almost 20 years later, Mamone knows that sharing queer voices through media outlets can be a vital connection for those who might not have access to a *physical* queer resource center. Queer Appalachia helps to build a solid, stable community, whether you are in the region or not. While many queer Appalachians find support systems through this, actual queer community is much harder to find in person. The idea of traveling two or more hours just to have some semblance of a queer community can be daunting: People often don't want to leave their community, even if it is rurally isolated: "More often than not, Appalachian identity outweighed queer identity." That third space between the real and virtual world has become a home for young people within the South and Appalachia and QA hopes to diversify the voice of Southern Appalachia through "a good story," not by speaking for every person, but by letting them use their own voice.

Many anonymous contributions to the zine share the same history—growing up belonging to a generation that has been raised to leave—and face the same unique challenges concerning family life and religion. "Many of us were brought up in religious homes, a staple in much of Appalachia. We were told that religion was essential, yet we did not fit into it. Our rejection and condemnation of religion shows a nuance within all of our relationships growing up" (44). This is just one example of their discovery of more than one kind of nettles: the plants and the "social nettles," which are just as painful. Their circumstances beg outsiders to question why anyone queer would visit a land of such conservative and devout backwardness, much less build a home. The answer is: "None of us is simple" (44). Not all LGBTQ people are miserable

and eager to leave for the city, but rarely are images of queer people in rural areas depicted as anything other than the only one there, sticking out like a sore thumb. Some queer individuals do prefer life in the country for the same reasons others do: connection to the land, family roots, or the allure of pastoral life.

However, when a queer individual does feel the sting of rejection in a rural setting, the repercussions can be amplified in ways not seen in big cities, like if a person is excluded from their faith community for being gay, they could subsequently face difficulty finding work in a tightly-woven town if a church member is a potential employer. However, the zine hopes to rebuke the assumption that discrimination runs rampant in rural areas compared to metropolitan areas: “Everything is not bias and awful.” The ripple effects that occur in a rural, interconnected community can have positive results, too, as one person standing up and taking a stance for an LGBTQ person and embracing them sets the tone for how they should be treated.

One man, simply referred to as Evan, knows the bumps along the road to equality in his community firsthand, as he identifies as transgender and genderqueer and grew up in a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ household, all while attending a church that was less than welcoming, saying that he “felt like [he] was leading a double life” in his early childhood. He returned to the town as a 35 year old when “all of his before still beat like another heart” and “the family land stretched out into folded hills and overgrown pasture.” The ragged beauty was still familiar and close to him, even as he changed, “getting older and queerer,” along with his politics.

His blue-collar, working class father is the very definition of Trump country and his mother, the contemporary, Bible belt wife, which is to say that “the Trump/Pence sign wasn’t surprising” even if he never imagined anyone in the family to “broadcast their political leanings

with lawn signs or bumper stickers, as [his] family tended to talk only about their own problems.” He remembers as a kid, when his father’s sister would use the n-word freely, making his mother, “who believed in decorum more than racial justice,” purse her lips and scurry her kids out the door (121). Evan came out to his parents 5 years ago while his mother sobbed that it wasn’t true, and his father blinked away tears. They didn’t believe him, “even after chest surgery, after hormones, [or] after the name change,” making him stop trying to talk to them after a few years, until the few moments when things come up and there will be an attempt to understand. Still, his mother is very quick to say there is nothing that can be done and that she can’t be in the middle anymore. He also has no idea what the others in his extended family think of him, except that he, probably ashamed of his hillbilly roots, had cut them off. Except “it wasn’t that simple” as he didn’t know how to see his family after his parents refused to recognize his transitioning: “My father sees me as a genderqueer freak. I’m giving him credit, though, that he knows the term genderqueer.” Everyone in the family still lives close by, never straying beyond a two county range. Evan remembers growing up with them, but “as a daughter, a granddaughter, a niece, a sister” in the woods overgrown with clover and milkweed and ironweed (123). He wonders what would it be like to live in the same small town all his life, on the same land and in the same house. What would it be like to come back and be rooted here once again, now that he ‘stands out’ in the open like a hunted deer crossing the same field. He feels seen and still here--at once negative and positive--as a boy, a man, a nephew, a son, and a brother who has come back home.

Jeff Mann reckons that others suspect him mad not to leave the mountains, but he says a beard and cowboy boots get a guy far in town, “especially if you can slop the sugar of Southern

charm . . . You should see how the sour woman at the city office country-smiles when I show up to pay my water bill wearing a cowboy hat” (44). He describes himself as queer, Southern, and Christian, all-in-one: “Some things seem ingrained. They were faithful in my life. They were constant. They were comfortable. I didn’t grow up in a church that hates other races or gay people.” He walks one morning to the farmer’s market, “past an arch of morning glories as blue as my nanny’s trellis three decades back,” where he bought green beans and squash for next to nothing and “hankered for the fried pies and the homemade bread.” He did not feel out of place here:

Everyone was friendly and I belonged . . . I was just another local in a tattered wife-beater, camouflage shorts, silver-streaked beard stubble, old baseball cap. I belong here as much as any of them, among what sprouts and leafs, among black walnuts edging my walk home, the virgin’s bower, its feathery whirls of seeds that spread like midlife after perfume and the flower, and the mallards floating down the creek, natives balanced between our mountain water and mountain sky. (45)

He recognizes some of the issues stemming around visibility and acceptance in his town, but says he can’t give up on the people here as they are his home and family and his blood runs through the mountains, just as everyone else.

Shoog McDaniel feels that same connection to the land, although they used to be ashamed of their Southern identity. Getting older made them realized that there was no positive that could come from denouncing their identity, but they could “instead create space for myself and my beliefs within it” (167). Shoog first remembers missing their Southern identity most when living away from it in Philadelphia for two years:

I remember missing sweet tea. I remember missing the slower pace of life, the friendlier faces. I missed witnessing the resistance to stereotypical “good ole southern boy” politics that queers, black folks, and other people of color had created. . . I was in a place where I had an accent and there [were] not enough trees or mason jars of moonshine or mennonite sweet corn or mountains. (168)

They dwell on the paths forged in their own life: “At one time, I thought moving would change my life, maybe life would be better in a bigger mecca. But I just like the small-town feel.”

Moving back made Shoog realize they would never leave again. After returning to do a tree portrait study and mingle with the familial and familiar, they confidently say, now more than ever, that home is where the heart is: “This is where I belong, showcasing the beauty of southerners who aren’t represented in . . . portrayals of the South. I can make beautiful images with a fat queer body surrounded by a million cypress knees.” Shoog states that their goal is to realign what being a Southerner means because they “now know that [their] identity is inherently Southern” (171). They are incredibly optimistic about the South transforming in a diaspora of ideas, places, and people: “It’s happening all over in Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina” (176). They aim to “create a home” for LGBTQ people in Southern and Appalachian communities where they can thrive and where people will look at someone as a person – besides their LGBTQ status.

COMING HOME

Solidarity between Appalachian and Southern communities is especially important when “brain drain”—the cycle of young people moving away from their home

communities—threatens to destabilize the places Queer Appalachia works to unify. Young people in queer communities everywhere often leave small towns for big cities as soon as they can; Mamone recalls teachers who encouraged Appalachian-born students to leave the region once they graduated as calling it the “Road to Roanoke” or “Hillbilly Highway” (*Queer Appalachia* 178). Rural places are facing countless questions about the economy, about identity, and about the environment. With their best and brightest leaving for the big city, it is hard to know who and what will persist to create a strong future in a small community.

Wendell Berry, Kentucky writer and farmer, uses that word “homecomer” to describe people who have spent time away, to pursue better opportunities in the city, before choosing to return to their rural roots. In his commencement address at Northern Kentucky University, Berry encouraged students to consider if being a more responsible citizen includes the embracement of homecoming rather than the desire for upward mobility, which lures them to places to which they have no connection, only to participate in a destructive and extractive economy “in servitude to corporations” (5:58). He states that our destructive economy has given us a moral duty to do better, asking: “What has happened here? What should have happened here? What is here now? What is left of the original natural endowment of this place?” Berry offered a vision of urban prosperity at the expense and impoverishment of the rural (9:15) where, if more were concerned and committed to questions of place, the most important work could be accomplished by homecomers, who Berry hopes have the ability to act as translators across ideological divisions.

Homecomers, and stayers, are needed if Appalachia is ever going to see the change that is wanted and needed here. House says that “too many [of our] young people feel as if they are

camping here in the wilderness,” leaving to find places where homophobia and racism are not so strong. And for House, the most painful part in the stories of students who leave the region is the invisibility that they feel. Violence based on race, sexual orientation, or gender identity is real, stark, and brutal, and the threat of it is as alive as it has ever been. But the act of invisibility is no brutal beating; instead, it is far worse. It marks the lives of those who are different with a thousand paper cuts; it fundamentally shapes who they will be. House addresses the attempt by well-meaning folk claiming that they ‘love the person, but not the act,’ the same sentiment a short step away from ‘love the sinner, hate the sin,’ which have been echoed a thousand times to kids deemed ‘outsiders.’ Both of these phrases leave queer people locked in an embrace while being punched in the stomach. Fostering change here is to make it more loving and welcoming. Appalachia as a region has been faulted for sitting by and allowing discrimination, whether blatantly or—even more troubling—subtly to happen. The understanding of acceptance and love as the same thing is implicit here, one does not exist without the other.

CONCLUSION

This essay intersects three critical traditions: southern studies, feminist theory, and queer theory, hoping to shed a more complicated and nuanced light on racial and sexual minorities within rural spaces. The kinds of injustices faced by POC and LGBTQ exist everywhere, and by claiming that it’s worse in Appalachia, we let the rest of the country off the hook. Hatred, inequality, and unfairness exist everywhere. I don’t believe that they occur any more often than they do in other parts of the country, but when they do happen here, they hurt me more because they affect me and the people—and the place—that I love. As someone who has been profoundly shaped and

moved by Appalachia, I wanted to look at the place and people that I call home and think about the ways the rest of the world has come to view them.

I believe that the scholarly community must lead the way on talking more about these issues, openly and lovingly, with the understanding that lots of anti-gay rhetoric, while troubling, is backed by generations of deep-seated religious belief that is not going to be unseated by yelling and arguing, but only through education and exposure. We must never negate those who are opposed to gay rights as mere simpletons; we must accept that often these people hold deep-seated beliefs that do not totally erase their compassion. We have to talk to each other about these issues with each other and not at each other. And it has to happen within classrooms, conferences, research communities, and through activism.

Appalachian culture goes beyond the reductive representations, and I have attempted to destabilize this perspective and critique the impulse for mainstream culture (gay or straight) to further renounce the idea of rural queerness. The Queer Appalachia Project reveals the possibility for rural queer life to exist in Appalachia by showing not only its presence, but also its varying forms of visibility. By showing an active, participatory audience on various social media networks and in other online platforms, the possibility that queerness exists in Appalachian in ways that surpass popular representations emerge in a way to force us to renegotiate our understandings of belonging and intimacy within rural queer populations, and, as bell hooks puts it, how 'place' is made through that. I hope to have presented this research in a way that neither dismisses nor emphasizes homophobic violence, but rather argues the imperative for strong political advocacy that recognizes both the struggles and accomplishments of what it means to reside in a culture that you must reclaim space in. The idea of otherness and exclusion always

comes back to issues like race and sexuality, but it also simply involves a collective narrow-mindedness to which a majority of those cannot relate to. To create change within LGBTQ movements, a recognition of queerness being in spaces where poverty, race, or disability are present must begin. Additionally, there needs to be an understanding of its own internal discriminations and limitations within this same framework of privilege, exceptionalism, nationalism, and a general ignorance of the Other.

Gender, race, sexual orientation, and class are important categories of analysis for understanding how individuals negotiate their orientation within their communities and navigate the decision to leave or stay in a community. Understanding that from an intersectional perspective is essential because it helps to conceptualize the simultaneous constraints and freedoms experienced by young educated people in the context of rural communities. Clearly, a sense of belonging in a community is influenced by social structures, which the framework of intersectionality is used to better understand how people might create a sense of belonging, despite certain obstacles, within their community—whether that be through cultural signifiers, community volunteerism, or social settings. The intersectional forces of belonging to a certain place highlight the terse struggles of those regarding their race, class, and sexuality, leading to forces of mobility; however, a sense of belonging to, and reconciliation with, community shows that family and ‘a place that matters’ can alleviate this internal and external struggle for queer Appalachians.

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