PRIDE IN THE MOUNTAINS: A QUEER APPALACHIAN ANTHOLOGY, 1970s-2020s

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I recognize this is already long for a graduate thesis, but please indulge me for just a few more pages. Writing nearly 160 pages about communities and community building seems antithetical without thanking my own community that made this possible.

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ABSTRACT

PRIDE IN THE MOUNTAINS: A QUEER APPALACHIAN ANTHOLOGY, 1970s-2020s

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"Pride in the Mountains" seeks to disrupt the fixity of regional-based Appalachian and LGBTQ+ identities through the evaluation of sociocultural place-making and change over time for queer individuals and communities in Appalachia. As this thesis centers marginal voices to uplift the self-determinist efforts of queer Appalachians in creating belonging, negotiating identity expression, and ongoing community development, this scholarship will focus on bottom-up narratives of queer individuals who have grown up, lived, or have chosen to live in the region from the 1970s through the present. As such, this work offers crucial interventions in understanding the processes of developing communities of memory and place, the complexity of identity assemblages, and the negotiation of belonging through lenses of class, gender, sexuality, region, and environment. Thus, "Pride in the Mountains" establishes a historical precedent of national historical processes and sociocultural evolutions that have gradually led to the developing of inclusive spaces and communities within the Appalachian region. In bridging the fields of rural queer and Appalachian studies through interdisciplinary analyses rooted in historical perspectives, this thesis will answer the following questions: How do queer Appalachians describe and create communities of belonging within the region? How does this coincide with identity construction through regional and community belonging, and what barriers have they encountered with these negotiations? What social and cultural conditions allowed for

the emergence of visible queer communities in Appalachia, and how has this growth evolved? How fluid are identity expressions and negotiations in the Appalachian region, and how can these definitions extend beyond binary terms? Finally, how does the narrative of queer Appalachian communities and individuals challenge characterizations of Appalachia in historical and media-driven narratives?

INTRODUCTION

There was "no sense" in making her mother live through this "gay shit" twice.[1] In an oral history conducted by Zachary Clark Pence in 2011, the late Timothea Branham vividly recalled the day she came out to her mother. In the 1990s,[2] she and her family had fled to Cave Run Lake in Daniel Boone National Forest, camping there to escape the reporters who came to their Pikeville, Kentucky home seeking comments on the arrest and indictment of her father on sodomy charges. Despite recalling the pastimes of swimming and fishing, there was unspoken tension between her mother, father, sister, and herself as they sought to redefine their family dynamics in the light of this tremendous event. Branham looks back on this time with empathy for her father, a closeted gay man who lived a life he may not have wanted to keep up appearances within their Appalachian community. However, even at such a young age, trying to reconcile her identity within the Appalachian community and being a lesbian was enough to fill her with anxiety and unease. Branham recalls this lakeside exchange with her mother:

> "I like girls, and my mom is my best friend… I thought no matter how my mom took it, he's going to be worse off than me. This was the time [to come out to mom]. We were standing by the lake, and I told my mom, 'Mom,' and I'm crying, 'I think I like girls.' And growing up Southern Baptist, or regular Baptist, I knew what the response would be. But being a mom, she handled it as best she could. She said, 'I know that homosexuality is a sin, but what a bigger sin is living a lie and dragging innocent people into it with you.' And then she started naming names… she started naming names from probably third grade on of [girls] she had known were crushes of mine. … That's when it dawned on me that she knew I was gay long before I did, and [that] she paid attention to it was important to me. She couldn't have handled it any better."[3]

[1] Timothea Branham, interview by Zachary Clark Pence, Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, April 14, 2011, https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7d513tw528.

[2] Branham's oral history is vague in terms of dates. The only date provided in the interview is "1990," the demarcation from when she moved to Lexington, Kentucky, after graduating from Morehead State University and returning to Pike County for a while.

[3] Branham, interview by Pence, April 14, 2011.

Stories like Branham's are not uncommon for LGBTQ+ people. Still, they take on added meaning when negotiating facets of identity, community, and belonging in a complex region, such as Appalachia, that struggles with its own identity crisis. While not all tales possess Branham's heartwarming conclusion, Appalachia has often existed as a "queer space."[4] as a "strange land" with "peculiar people."[5] For decades, scholars have pushed back against the widely popular and historiographical image of a destitute area with a well-meaning but morally and economically impoverished population stuck in time. However, these historical focuses rarely extend to include LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in the region. Quite often, regional norms depict LGBTQ+ people as "other," not fitting with ideas of Appalachian people and places. Just as frequently, it is assumed that the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel for rural queers appears in the form of urban migration, furthering misunderstandings that there are no LGBTQ+ communities in rural areas. As a result, a growing group of scholars seeks to upend these narrow perspectives of identity, region, and belonging in Appalachia. By bridging the fields of Appalachian, rural, and queer studies in historical contexts, scholars can begin conversations about how marginal communities in Appalachia shape, define, and claim narratives of place, identity, and belonging.

Historical narratives of LGBTQ+ history also have a poor track record of including rural spaces in historical inquiries, especially within the Appalachian region. Though many historians, such as John Howard or James T. Sears, began efforts to document and uplift these histories of

[4] A note about the use of language: following practices from historians such as Samantha Rosenthal, I intend to remain close to the self-identified or identity-affirming language and names used in sources. While many individuals interviewed in this project have trauma associated with the term "queer" as a slur, current generations are also reclaiming it as an umbrella term for identity, often more concise than saying "LGBTQ+." I will endeavor to use the self-identified and self-determined language indicated by my subjects and source materials but will use "queer" and "LGBTQ+" interchangeably to streamline information.

[5] William Wallace Harney, "A Strange Land and a Peculiar People," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Scienc*e. XII, no. 31 (October 1873): 430, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13964/13964-h/13964-h.htm#strange.

identity, place, experience, and memory throughout the rural US South, these conversations remain urban-focused. With these barriers to the study, documentation of LGBTQ+ history, and the stereotypes of the Appalachian region, queer Appalachian voices and narratives are largely absent from the field. With predominant urban narratives of resistance and upheaval, how can scholars weave a profound story of resilience, belonging, and place-claiming among Appalachian or other rural LGBTQ+ communities? This thesis project attempts to follow the lead of the queer populations that have lived and remained in the Appalachian region: by carving out a small space in the field to provoke conversations about how LGBTQ+ folks claim space, create cultures of place, and belong in contested spaces.

Over the last fifty years, LGBTQ+ Appalachians have evolved in methods of finding and connecting with both queer and local communities, ranging from dissimulative navigations of place and culture to overt claims of space and identity. Their voices become marginal due to heteronormative constructs of place, gender, sexuality, community politics, coupled with fears of discrimination and violence. However, by shifting focus to those margins, scholars can elucidate rich histories of resilience and the development of complex communities. Many scholars are working towards queering Appalachian spaces through various methods, but only some examine them through historical lenses to chart their growth and change over time. In reviewing the history of queer Appalachia, scholars will find networks of supportive queer communities, negotiations of identity and cultures of place, and illuminate how LGBTQ+ Appalachians are shaped by and have shaped the region. In his memoir *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, scholar, and poet Jeff Mann referred to the region as "a beautiful prison" that he felt conflicted about claiming.[6] Although many have shared similar experiences, this thesis aims to amend that

[6] Jeff Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 42.

statement: the region is a beautiful *home*, and LGBTQ+ communities have operated and always belonged in Appalachia.

This thesis seeks to disrupt heteronormative, fixed narratives of place, LGBTQ+ identity, and cultures of belonging within the region. This research will explore how LGBTQ+ people negotiated and claimed their identity and place within regional contexts. This thesis draws on bottom-up narratives of queer individuals in oral histories, memoirs, and media to broaden the archival presence of marginalized queer and regional populations. Additionally, it strives to offer crucial interventions in understanding the developments of complex communities of place, upending paradigms of identity, and extending cultures of belonging through lenses of class, gender, sexuality, and region. The research will encompass narratives of individuals who have grown up, lived, or have chosen to live within the various subregions of Appalachia from the 1970s through the present.

Despite efforts to make BIPOC LGBTQ+ communities in Appalachia a central part of this complex regional culture, this thesis fell short of painting the full picture. Although some Black LGBTQ+ Appalachian experiences are discussed, most of the oral histories and sources consulted are from white narrators and participants.[7] As such, race remains an underdeveloped lens of understanding the diverse sociocultural experiences or region, place, and identity in this thesis. However, while this area allows Appalachian studies to grow, work is already underway to expand the field. Neema Avashia's incredible memoir *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in A Mountain Place* strives to open doors for studies of race, immigration, and queer

[7] A portion of William H. Turner's memoir, *The Harlan Renaissance*, is discussed to understand the treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals in Black coal camp communities. While Turner does not identify as a member of the queer community, his memoir helps unpack some experiences and reception to Black queer identity and gender performance in Appalachia during the mid-twentieth century. Additionally, Gary Clark Patton's oral history addressed his interracial relationship with Andre, a Black man, in the 1970s-1980s, but this is limited as it is an interpretation of Black LGBTQ+ Appalachian experiences through a white perspective.

studies in the region with her candid recollections of finding place and identity in Appalachian spaces. Additionally, *Blacks in Appalachia*, edited by William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, has become a central work in the field in uplifting narratives of Black experiences in Appalachia, inspiring current works such as William Isom's Black in Appalachia project, which is both a podcast and PBS-sponsored project. These developments have also paved the way for works such as memoirs like *Gone Home: Race and Roots Through Appalachia* by Karinda L. Brown, case studies like *African American and Cherokee Nurses in Appalachia: A History, 1900-1965* by Phoebe Ann Pollitt, and theses and dissertations such as "'Not Just Whites in Appalachia': The Black Appalachian Commission, Regional Black Power Politics, and the War on Poverty, 1965-1975'" by Jillean McCommons, and "Raging Mountains: Southern Appalachian Race Rebellions From The 1960s-1970" by Jubilee Padilla provide crucial interventions in the field. Additionally, intersectional histories of Indigenous experiences in Appalachia are equally crucial to expanding the field. Scholarly works such as *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* by Sarah H. Hill, *Monacans and Miners: Native American and Coal Mining Communities in Appalachia* by Samuel Cook, and *Monuments to Absence: Cherokee Removal and the Contest Over Southern Memory* by Andrew Denson, are essential works for highlighting indigenous histories and experiences in Appalachia, but it remains a niche area of study. These scholars and their research are instrumental in disrupting narratives of a racially homogenous Appalachia.

However, it is also important to denote the need for diverse narratives within these areas of study as well. While oral history projects such as the Blue Ridge Pride Oral History Project, Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, and Rae Garringer's Country Queers podcast seek to uplift BIPOC LGBTQ+ narratives of place and identity in Appalachian studies, there are few

scholarly works on the topic. As stated, Avashia's *Another Appalachia* and *Black in Appalachia* podcast's episode "Appalachian Drag" begin expanding this area of study, but bridging racial, regional, and queer studies can provide fascinating opportunities to further center this marginal narrative. While this work is limited in its discussions of queer identity and community building, I hope this thesis will spark questions about how scholars can further uplift diverse and essential racial and queer histories in the Appalachian region.

Additionally, this thesis highlights national historical processes and the sociocultural evolution that have gradually led to the development of inclusive spaces and communities within the region. While the Appalachia Regional Commission (ARC) tends to define Appalachia in broader geographic terms and scholars like John Alexander Williams focus on the "core of Appalachia," this thesis favors a more comprehensive examination of the region. Though it may often favor the geographical convenience of information from western North Carolina it also includes narratives from eastern Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, and central western Pennsylvania. In short, rather than trying to fall within the discourse of defining the region, the thesis aims to uplift the narratives of many Appalachians and the complexities of place-based cultures among LGBTQ+ communities in the area.

Moreover, this thesis addresses the following central questions: How do queer Appalachians describe and create communities of belonging within the region? How does this coincide with identity construction through regional and community belonging, and what barriers have they encountered with these negotiations? What social and cultural conditions allowed for the emergence of visible queer communities in Appalachia, and how has this growth evolved? How fluid are identity expressions and negotiations in the Appalachian region, and how can these definitions extend beyond binary terms? Finally, how does the narrative of queer

Appalachian communities and individuals challenge characterizations of Appalachia in historical and media-driven narratives?

Framing Methodology and Processes

As this work primarily engages with intellectual and cultural constructions, it is best to approach understanding identity, belonging, and place from a place of shared knowledge. With these baseline definitions, it will become easier to disentangle the narrative strands to weave a comprehensive, conducive understanding of the topic.

First, it is crucial to understand the parameters when defining a community. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* establishes that nationalism, or national identity, is "the spontaneous distillation of a complex crossing of discrete historical forces" that create a shared experience and identity among a group of people, but also that this identity is transferable and adaptable as "they became modular, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social trains." These processes reinforce the definition of regional and social identities as markers of identification (whether self-determined or contested impositions) in political, social, and cultural arenas. Anderson examines the overt development of communities surrounding national identities. These dominant aspects of identities can be transferred to other communities, further influencing developments and conceptions of identity formation. His work is primarily a top-down examination that obscures the dissimulative and overt ways small-scale populations develop communities and networks of identity. However, Anderson's framing of communities and identities as fluid sociocultural constructions helps to identify how Appalachian and LGBTQ+ communities have evolved with historical processes, events, and developments.[8]

[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 4th ed. (1983; repr., London: Verso, 2016), 4.

As Henry D. Shapiro and David E. Whisnant established, Appalachia has experienced an ongoing identity crisis for generations, often labeled a regional "other" that America utilizes as a foil for self-identification. Americans have long sought to incorporate Appalachia by "improving" the region's status through cultural and economic "interventions" under the guise of benevolence, leading to the imposition of cultural practices and the exploitation of regional resources.[9] As such, Appalachian identity has often been an imposed structure, one defined externally rather than internally. However, within the past fifty years, Appalachian communities have sought to refine and determine Appalachian identity on their terms, leading to diverse expressions of belonging and development across lines of race, class, and identity. For instance, works such as *Appalachia in Regional Context: Place Matters*, edited by Dwight Billings and Ann E. Kingsolver, *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other*, edited by Hillery Glasby, Sherrie Gradin, and Rachel Ryerson, and *To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* by Jessica Wilkerson are crucial in the field. These works utilize perspectives from interdisciplinary social sciences in cooperation with historical analyses to illuminate the roles of class, region, and identity. As these scholars and their works surmise with bottom-up analyses, Appalachians have not only been *shaped* by regionally external forces but also became active *shapers* of national and international processes.

Moreover, queer identity has also been contested as an imposed categorization of human behavior or "deviance," as Margot Canaday argues in *The Straight State*. Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, the United States, through interventions and observations centered on

[9] Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920.* (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina Press, 1978), 38, 40, 4, 52, 57; David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1983), 14–15, 129–130, 254, 257.

immigration, welfare, and the military, sought to define homosexual activities, gender performance, and identities. Following World War II, the federal government endeavored to obscure and control "deviant" behaviors and queer identity expression through codified exclusionary policies and practices. For example, this method entailed the distribution of blue discharges for armed forces members, which restricted their benefits, and subsequent vice patrols targeting urban recreational public spaces for LGBTQ+ people.[10] John Howard also explores the gay men's contestation heteronormativity in rural Mississippi between 1945 and 1985 as the state's sociocultural patterns allowed for communities of men who "liked that" to pursue that type of gendered expression or sexual activity. At the same time, some men were just "like that," embodying and carrying this sense of identity.[11] With these developments of complex identity negotiation, queer individuals could navigate sociocultural spaces and took advantage of cultures of silence in the US South, which did not outright condone nor condemn gay men's actions in private or out-of-sight public spaces. These places where the lines between public and private became blurred included "tearooms" (public bathrooms), empty churches, and other government and public spaces.[12] In doing so, they developed and defined their LGBTQ+ identities in opposition to heteronormative conceptualizations of gender and identity. Therefore, these queer identities have evolved to encompass spectrums of gender identity, romantic attraction, and sexual attraction by using self-determined language claim queer identities.

In many ways, the Appalachia region has also wrestled with the imposition of role and identity. Historians such as Ronald D. Eller and John Inscoe have argued, Appalachia's complex history has been romanticized, oversimplified, and dismissed by early regional scholars,

[10] Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4, 11-13, 60, 145-147.
[11] John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), xviii.
[12] Howard, *Men Like That,* 28, 63, xv, 68, 131, 52.

capitalists, and travel literature authors. These prominent voices spoke over Appalachian voices, shaping regional perceptions with the imagery of a "peculiar people" or hillbillies along the mountainous frontier. These conceptions of Appalachia also engaged with the politics of white supremacy by prioritizing white poverty as a cause for national intervention, which shaped calls for aid and obscured the role of race in the region following the Civil War.[13] However, as Drew A. Swanson demonstrates in his seminal environmental history of Appalachia and the economic commodification of the region, Appalachia proved central to national and international markets from the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Whether it was the Cherokee who relied on the trade of deerskins in the eighteenth century to the salt mining production of Central Appalachia in the nineteenth century, venture capitalists who transformed natural resources and areas of the region into hubs of transportation, trade, and tourism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By outlining these environmental and economic histories, it demonstrates how Appalachia has always been a core component of national and international economics.[14]

Moreover, stef m. shuster's article "Quaring the Queer in Appalachia" offers crucial insights into upending narrow definitions of identity and place within the context of race, class, and gender experiences. shuster's contribution expounds upon E. Patrick Johnson's Quare methods, arguing that identity "assemblages" break past binary dichotomies' of defining identity and place. shuster focused these ideas through the concept of "assemblages," pioneered by Jasbir K. Puar in 2005, that diverged from "the shortcomings of intersectionality in assuming fixed, stable, and coherent categories of difference that can be disassembled and analyzed as discrete

[13] Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University Of Tennessee Press, 1995), xv, xxv, 10–11, 42–44, 48; John C. Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 65, 67–68.
[14] Drew A. Swanson, *Beyond the Mountains: Commodifying Appalachian Environments*, (Athens: The University Of Georgia Press, 2018), 93–97, 75, 81, x, 8, 53, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt22nmcfb.

categories."[15] In short, it accounts for the fluidity and growth of identity, allowing some facets to be predominant in specific spaces and accounting for how one's experiences can influence the expression of multifaceted identities.[16] shuster establishes that quare theory suffers from "this paradigm [of intersectionality]" as many scholars "assume components - (race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion) are separate analytics and can be thus disassembled." Instead, examining how these facets work together illuminates how cultures of belonging develop over time. To understand lived experiences and conceptions of power, one must consider regional influences of place on race, class, gender, and sexuality as non-dichotomous and connected.[17] Doing so creates opportunities for Appalachian scholars to "prioritize ways of thinking about bodies, places and the Other, as they are located within particular spaces and places; much in the same way that … scholars approach what constitutes 'Appalachia' by problematizing identity categories."[18]

Heteronormativity informs many sociocultural constructs of place and belonging over time, frequently placing queer individuals at odds with their definitions and expressions of identity. Throughout the research process for this project, many contributors, and sources detail conflicted expressions of belonging within Appalachian spaces. To sustain those connections and their needs around the 1970s and 1980s, many queer Appalachians emphasized or favored one aspect of their identity to facilitate belonging within their local communities. However, this access and reputation also allowed for these LGBTQ+ Appalachians to facilitate and create queer communities in dissimulative ways. These connections would take place in private homes and

[15] stef m. shuster, "Quaring the Queer in Appalachia," Appalachian Journal 41, no. 1/2 (Fall 2018 / Winter 2019) (2018): 74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45219233.
[16] Jasbir K. Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," Social Text 23(3-4) 2005, 127,128, quoted in stef m. shuster, "Quaring the Queer in Appalachia," 80.
[17] shuster, "Quaring the Queer in Appalachia," 80.
[18] shuster, "Quaring the Queer in Appalachia," 81.

spaces, but also what sociologist Mary Gray calls "boundary publics," which are public or semi-public spaces that are accessible to all members of the public for various reasons. This indicates that not only that Appalachian LGBTQ+ communities created social networks behind the closed doors of their homes but also in bars, restaurants, local businesses, college campuses, campgrounds, and parkways. In many ways, this "beautiful prison" offered liminal spaces between the private and public domains in the lives of queer individuals to connect, express, and claim their identities.[19] Through these carefully navigated and dissimulative negotiations of identity and space, Appalachian LGBTQ+ communities actively shaped cultures of place and belonging in the region.

As this thesis explores how LGBTQ+ Appalachians claimed space and identity in the region, many of these navigations invoke "privacy" as an evolving, sometimes contradictory, mix of social, cultural, and political circumstances. Stephen Vider's *The Queerness of Home* establishes the concept of privacy as "a right to be left alone but a right to be recognized and protected," which solidifies the concept as political and cultural.[20] This project embraces Vider's ideas of privacy, but expands on it as a multi-faceted concept, ranging from a social survival tactic, a cultural commodity, and political right. For LGBTQ+ Appalachians, privacy is an evolving concept that explains why they want to be left alone, how they access social spaces, and prevent unwanted interference. First, privacy had social dimensions for many older queer generations as a tactic for surviving and navigating heteronormative spaces, allowing them to preserve personal and family reputations and find spaces to connect with other LGBTQ+

[19] This interview was conducted as part of a course related oral history project in 2023. While it is not available digitally yet, it can be found in the following repository and in possession of the author. Mark Bryant, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 22, 2023.
[20] Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 220.

Appalachians. Second, privacy was culturally spatial as rural areas allowed space away from the public eye to foster relationships and intimacies, but it could be challenging to navigate socially. Privacy was not always equitably accessible; many LGBTQ+ Appalachians native to the region found privacy more challenging to navigate due to small-town panopticons, but others who moved into the region sought it as a commodity of living in rural spaces. Third, privacy emerges as a cultural and political right with differing generational interpretations. Some older LGBTQ+ Appalachians continue to embrace the sociocultural facets, allowing them to maintain queer relationships and forms of expression with minimal public display. However, younger generations of LGBTQ+ Appalachians assert privacy not only as a right of cultural citizenship but also as a political right to be protected and fight for.

Due to heteronormative social and cultural standards within the region, many Appalachians felt prohibited from exploring LGBTQ+ identities. Whether these prohibitions were rooted in shame, fear, or denial, many queer people limited identity expressions within fixed notions of gender, sexuality, or sociocultural norms. In *Carryin' On in the Gay and Lesbian South*, Donna Jo Smith's essay tackled this complex issue of "the closet" and how many narratives of self-discovery have relied on this metaphor. As scholars and many queer individuals have begun to acknowledge, there is no single narrative that features a flying leap out of the closet that prevents individuals from having to come out again. Rather, living openly as a queer person involves a series of identity disclosures dependent on the environment one finds and integrates themselves in.[21] In their essay featured in *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia*, Travis Rountree and Caleb Pendygraft address this, positing that using the rhetorical concept of mêtis can "offer a strategy for queers who work in areas where their queerness sometimes conflicts

[21] John Howard, *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 8, 373, 382, 384.

with the communities they find themselves in."[22] Using mêtis as a lens for understanding experiences of overt belonging through nondisclosure of identity, allowing queer Appalachians to identify where and how they belong digs into the intricacies of sociocultural processes and regional space within Appalachia.

For instance, Daisy Anderson knew she would live in Appalachia from a young age. She fell in love with the Appalachian mountains during her summers at a YMCA Camp in Tryon, North Carolina, and opened a full-service gas station in 1976 after moving to Dillsboro, North Carolina. In choosing to begin her business here, Anderson engaged in mêtis to find where she felt accepted into the community. Though Anderson was confident in her lesbian identity, she did not openly express it to maintain her reputation as a business owner and community member. However, she still upended the fixity of gendered Appalachian norms as her business became an integral community institution. Anderson's recollections emphasize how unusual it was for her to become a full-service gas station owner-operator, as "women [did not do] the type of work of 'pumping gas.'" In one instance, when questioned by a mistrustful male customer, "whose woman are you," as she seemed out of place due to her shirking regional gender norms. Anderson confidently proclaimed, "I'm my own woman." It may have taken a few years, but she navigated her role in the Appalachian community through hard work and persistence. When she eventually closed the business and sold the property, locals sought her out at her new job and asked her to reopen the gas station. Thus, she used that role as a trusted community member to navigate her gradual open expression of her own lesbian identity and the life she built with her partner, Helen Tugwell.[23]

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[22] Rachael Ryerson, Sherrie L. Gradin, and Hillery Glasby, *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 141.
[23] Daisy Anderson and Helen Tugwell, interview by Rachel Shaw, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, July 7, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63266.

Moreover, the ways that LGBTQ+ communities in the Appalachian made connections, socialized, actively shaped cultures of place, and found belonging in the region are equally important to unpacking the complex bonds of community. *Belonging: A Culture of Place* by bell hooks makes crucial interventions and outlines the study's parameters. hooks's meditations on finding community in contested spaces, creating inclusive networks, and finding belonging drive this project. *Belonging* ruminates on hooks's experiences of finding solace and comfort in her home in Kentucky, a place influenced by Appalachia and the South that often conflicted with her identity as a Black woman. However, reflecting on these contestations, she reveals long traditions in place-claiming and space-making that inform her conceptualizations of "home" and community. Although regional sociocultural, political, and environmental barriers buttress heteronormative standards, marginalized communities created spaces and claimed belonging in these spaces. Moreover, they actively refuted exclusion and reshape power dynamics by overtly claiming place, community, and identity.[24] Though hooks focuses on racial analyses, these studies lend themselves to disrupting fixed regional composition and identity paradigms. Appalachia as a region disrupts fixed paradigms in both rural and urban areas, with abundant and scarce resources, and is both connected and insular. In many cases, the predominant characteristic not only depends on where one finds themselves physically but also on the invisible sociocultural barriers of accessibility, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. Oversimplifying, narrowing, and cherry-picking interpretations of Appalachia result in homogenous perceptions of place. To disrupt these dichotomies, it is vital to embrace the complexity of regional places and populations. In doing so, Appalachia opens as a space of belonging and community. Therefore, these methodologies also inform how queer communities

[24] bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3-4, 11, 14, 20-22.

have claimed space in the Appalachian region and how Appalachia has claimed space within broader regional and national identities.

These frameworks must inspire scholars to focus on identity development as informed by sociocultural, political, environmental, and regional historical processes. By uplifting narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals who currently or have lived in Appalachian spaces, this thesis seeks to establish a new chapter in the history of Appalachian resiliency through the perspective of a too-often marginal population. LGBTQ+ Appalachians have always played an active role in shaping their histories, communities, and regional places. It is time to understand how and why they have done this crucial work.

Historiography of Appalachian and Rural Queer Studies

The literature of Appalachia and rural queer studies elucidate the complexities of regional and queer identities, though these fields have rarely intersected until recently. Beginning in 2001 with Kate Brown and Marc A. Rhorer's chapter "Out in the Mountains" as part of *Out in the South*, historians and scholars began to bridge these divides. However, by examining contributions from interdisciplinary studies focusing on navigating identity and claiming a place in Appalachia and rural queer studies, historians charted these evolutions in shaping regional spaces from the 1970s to the present.

Henry David Shapiro remains among the earliest scholars to examine the contested roles of regional identity in Appalachian history. In the 1978 *Appalachia on Our Mind*, Shapiro explores the earliest iterations of Appalachian consciousness, or rather the "discovery" of Appalachia. By examining the benevolence work and industrialization of the mountain regions between 1870 and 1920, he posits that "only in the context of other new notions about the nature of America and American civilization that Appalachia in our own time will ever cease to seem

an 'other' America."[25] Shapiro sees the development of Appalachian identity as an imposition from the United States, which utilizes the region as a microcosm for comparison to gauge national progress and romanticize a false frontier past. In short, the development of Appalachian regional identity through remedial philanthropic and industrial efforts to "Americanize" them labeled the place and its people as "other." As Shapiro wrestles with the conflict of what is self-determined and what externally constructed regional Appalachian regional identity, he raises questions of power, the limits of placemaking, and regional identity. Thus, this early crystallization of Appalachian identity illuminates the enduring complexities of place and identity from social, political, and intellectual analyses.[26]

Moreover, David E. Whisnant contributes to the development of Appalachian identity by focusing on the "politics of culture." This takes the form of American benevolence workers seeking to preserve (and instill) aspects of Appalachian culture and identity. *All That is Native and Fine*, published in 1983, scrutinized the region's "cultural assumptions and cultural images, [and] the purposeful translation and willful transformation of a culture."[27] Whisnant examines the control and commodification of Appalachian identity through its culture, as academics sought to preserve folk music (only those with Scotch-Irish and Anglo-Saxon roots) and establish folk schools to develop cultural traditions and skills not initially found in the region to secure economic prosperity. Whisnant questions external constructions of regional identity by illuminating how race, class, and identity shaped Appalachian identity's selective preservation and promotion between 1890 and 1940. For example, settlement schools relied on marketing towards dichotomous gender roles in the region, portraying Appalachian men as adept

[25] Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind,* ix.
[26] Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind,* 68, 87, 97-99.
[27] Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine,* xiii.

woodsmen, carpenters, and smiths. In contrast, Appalachian women were portrayed as demure homemakers and weavers. In truth, Appalachian men and women possessed a vast range of skills during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which blurred perceptions of what was considered men's or women's work. However, these schools marketed and indoctrinated limited gender roles and cultures of place to profit off the growing intrigue in folk arts and crafting classes. By defining what was considered Appalachian, these processes narrowed and excluded broad claims of belonging and expressions of Appalachian identity.[28]

Published in 2018 and edited by Dwight Billings and Ann Kingsolver, *Appalachia in Regional Context: Place Matters* features an interdisciplinary series of essays that upend outdated perspectives of Appalachia. These essays emphasize the importance of place in inter- and intra-regional developments, global connections, and as an active agent in shaping Appalachian identity. *Appalachia in Regional Context* centers on the significant concept of place as the driving factor that develops and supports diverse populations and histories, as "we live in a world of many Appalachia's." These essays establish that scholars often embrace the complexity of Appalachia through this concept of place, region, and identity. By doing so, scholars uplift Appalachia's legacy as a site of discursive resistance. Appalachia significantly influences its connections with the United States through activism or power shaping. It is also impacted by broader cultures, which challenge declension narratives and pervading characterizations of Appalachia.[29]

Moving beyond the Appalachian region, James T. Sears published his seminal sociological and quantitative work *Growing up Gay in the South* in 1991 to establish how race,

[28] Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine*, 19, 54, 68, 118, 155, 173, 261.
[29] Dwight B. Billings and Ann E. Kingsolver, *Appalachia in Regional Context*: Place Matters, (University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 5.

religion, family dynamics, adolescent behaviors, and gender influenced the social construction of queer identities. Sear's work functions as a case study, focusing on thirteen of thirty-six subjects across rural, urban, and suburban locales in South Carolina. The work addresses questions about the influences and development of queer identity within social and cultural environments by examining the subject's formative years between the 1960s - 1970s. Sears posits that these influences occur in family homes, churches, and schools. He makes crucial interventions by arguing that queer identities are socially constructed and in retrospect. Defining these identities places queer identity construction and expression in the language of self-determinism, which emphasizes an array of complex experiences in being gay, lesbian, or bisexual in Southern environments. As subjects recall how they discovered and named their LGB identities, they revealed how their memory reflects social norms or divergences, their connections to queer artifacts, knowledge of experiences, and their internalized shaping of spaces, ideas, and relationships.[30] Moreover, subjects reflecting on the experiences and environments that shaped them highlighted the importance of communities of memory and understanding identity as a process of "interpretation and reinterpretation." As these processes can affect perceptions of self, place, and region over time, these realizations can be just as "oppressive as they are liberating."[31]

Following these inquiries in developing regional identities, John Howard furthered rural queer studies in the US South with *Carryin' On in the Gay and Lesbian South* in 1997 and *Men Like That* in 1999. *Carryin' On* features essays that center on case studies of political events, social customs, and cultural practices among LGBTQ+ communities in the South during the nineteenth through the twentieth century. Not only does this extend the historical chronology of

[30] James T. Sears, *Growing Up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit, (*New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991), 18–20, 406–408.
[31] Sears, *Growing Up Gay in the South,* 17, 431, 18–19.

queer identity and community in the United States, but also posits a shared cultural bridge of race, religion, rurality, and resiliency (the four R's) that centers developments of regional identity and queerness.[32] Moreover, historians and scholars reflected on the joys and struggles of their research, detailing archival biases and divisive cultural constructs of respectability that affected their scholarly pursuits. One poignant example is Martin Duberman's essay, which analyzed his experience researching letters exchanged between Thomas Jefferson Withers and James H. Hammond. “Jim” and “Jeff” were both vocal supporters of institutional enslavement in nineteenth century South Carolina and were also “writhing bedfellows” in their young adulthood. Duberman's research and interest in publishing these letters led to commentary on censoring information about same-sex partnerships or open attitudes about sexual “dalliances,” as Duberman clashed with the South Carolinian Library's archival director. He reveals in his essay that the director rejected his request to publish the letters due to clauses “that none of the manuscripts be used in a way that may 'result in embarrassment to descendants',” which led to questions of what was considered “embarrassing”.[33] Additionally, William Armstrong Percy III’s essay seeks to “shine light into many dark corners” to tell the story of his “Uncle Will,” a closeted gay bachelor among the fading “Delta planter class” in early twentieth-century Louisiana.[34] Percy's compassionate readings of his ancestor's poetry, memoirs, and oral histories of those who remembered Will pave the way for revitalizing a queer past beyond the veil of respectability. This collection of essays intends not only to illuminate an LGBTQ+ South but also to petition archives to preserve documents of early queer history. Moreover, by embracing

[32] Howard, *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 9, 93, 75, 15.
[33] Howard, *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 27.
[34] Howard, *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South*. 78.

the complexity of place, experience, and memory, *Carryin' On* exhumed the contentious nature of defining individual and regional identities in social and academic spaces.

Men Like That focuses on gay culture, specifically "men *like* that" or "men who *like* that" in rural, post-World War II Mississippi between 1945 and 1985.[35] Again, Howard delivers another seminal work by utilizing oral histories, court documents, newspapers, and cultural artifacts such as gay pulp novels and music to highlight Southern queer experiences. Arguing that Mississippi's culture allowed men to pursue queer desires without impacting identity, *Men Like That* explores religious, social, and physical formations of gender identity and sexual practices in rural settings as men used heteronormative spaces, such as the privacy of home, social gatherings like church retreats, or connections made at school or work. These persistent cultural silences that "purposefully or unwittingly enabled homosexual practices" allowed queer culture to thrive in rural Mississippi. In doing so, this counters the absence of rural queer narratives and biases in regional historiography.[36] By contextualizing rural spaces and the sociocultural constructs of the regional US South, Howard uplifts narratives of dissimulative queer identities over time through his focus on the cultural and physical margins to explore and develop queer identity.

The 2001 monograph *Out in the South* depicts the US South as a "complex region full of the most remarkable paradoxes,"[37] Kate Brown and Marc A. Rhorer's "Out in the Mountains" bring these ideas into Appalachian studies. The essay focuses on information gathered from interviewing nine individuals from eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, West Virginia, and western North Carolina. In doing so, Rhorer and Brown identified "common themes" such as

[35] Howard, *Men Like That*, xiv, 6, xviii.
[36] Howard, *Men Like That*, 32, 29, 175.
[37] Carlos Lee and Carolyn Leste Law, *Out in the South* (Temple University Press, 2001), 2.

"feelings of isolation, the importance of community, fears from inside and outside the closet, various forms of oppression and discrimination, and multiple, fluid identities based on place and sexuality, in a dynamic relationship with one another."[38] These explorations of Appalachian LGBTQ+ experiences are informative for understanding negotiations between queer and Appalachian identities before the rise of the digital age. For example, one narrator describes the contradictory behaviors of the community, stating, "the few [gay men and lesbian women] that do live there are usually not totally rejected by the family but rejected by the community. They'll be real kind [to your face] but still, say stuff behind your back."[39] Additionally, despite the advent of technology in creating virtual spaces to communicate with other queer folks, it was also inaccessible in many regions due to socioeconomic conditions. For this generation of queer Appalachians, many sought to migrate to urban centers within the area, privileging one aspect of their identity over others to find belonging. Those who return home, whether to be closer to family or to live in a familiar place, often experience the rejection of the community due to the close social ties and the lack of anonymity. However, those who left rural spaces also sought anonymity in urban living as a means of connecting with queer communities, feeling more at ease with less social pressure from small-town respectability. While "Out in the Mountains" in some ways contributes to dichotomies of urban versus rural understandings of LGBTQ+ identity and community, it was the first scholarly work to examine the foundation and development of LGBTQ+ Appalachian communities.

Bradley Milam's 2010 thesis "Gay West Virginia: Community Formation and the Forging of Gay Appalachian Identity, 1963-1979" seeks to bridge understandings of how state and

[38] Kate Black and Marc A. Rhorer, "Out in the Mountains: Exploring Gay and Lesbian Lives," in *Out in the South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 17, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt1n0.17.
[39] Black and Rhorer, "Out in the Mountains," 18.

regional sociocultural structures influenced gay life in rural and urban settings. Arguing that "West Virginia and Appalachian culture greatly influenced the lives of gay people in these regions," Milam's microhistory offers crucial insights into areas where queer identity became central in discussion or expression. He accomplishes this with examinations of bar culture, churches, and the violence experienced by gay populations in the state. However, Milam's dissertation highlights physical violence's role in straining community relations, such as the rash of homophobic murders and kidnappings in Charleston, West Virginia. It is also important to note that violence was also psychological, as many endured the anti-gay rhetoric of churches and deep-seated prejudices within the region.[40] Despite the challenges of navigating these sociocultural and political difficulties, social spaces emerged in the state for members of the LGBTQ+ community, such as St. John's Episcopal Church in Charleston, West Virginia, and bars such as The Closet in Fairmont and The Shamrock Diner in Bluefield.[41] This thesis offers crucial interventions into the growing awareness and public expressions of and claims to queer identity in the Appalachian region. While certain situations were often unsafe, the nascent identification of places where the LGBTQ+ communities were safe and found cultures of belonging complicate the narratives of Appalachian intolerance.

Silas House, current Kentucky Poet Laureate, and gay Appalachian author has also emerged as a crucial voice in writing about and discussing queer Appalachian experiences. During the Appalachian Studies Association conference in 2014, his keynote address, "Our Secret Places in the Waiting World: Or a Conscious Heart, Continued," examined the crucial need for intersections of Appalachian and rural queer studies to expand beyond the predominant

[40] Bradley Milam, "Gay West Virginia: Community Formation and the Forging of Gay Appalachian Identity, 1963-1979" (MA Dissertation, 2010), 10-12, http://clgbthistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/NestlePrize2011_Milam_GayWestVirginia.pdf.
[41] Milam, "Gay West Virginia," 21, 28, 37.

urban focus of LGBTQ+ history. House defined Appalachian cultural remembrance as selective, stating, "as much as we honor remembering, we seem to have a limited memory about those of us who are different."[42] A culture of silence around queer individuals in Appalachia extended into the regional South, making queerness a proverbial elephant in the room. However, House's work makes compelling arguments for these intersections and places the onus on scholars to begin these conversations of cultural change, stating, "We have to talk *to* each other about these issues, not *at* each other. And we have to do this within the classroom, within conferences, within research communities, and grassroots activism."[43] While this is important for disseminating information and opening discussions of intersectional queer identity, it also raises issues of accessibility and self-determinism. Academic spaces, conferences, and classrooms are often limited spaces, which does not account for the depth and breadth of LGBTQ+ Appalachian experiences and identity. Instead, Appalachian historians must not only "make The Other visible"[44] but to elevate narratives of queer Appalachians beyond academic spaces as they testify on their conceptualizations of identity and ties to place.

In 2017, Rae Garringer published "'Well, We're Fabulous, and We're Appalachians, so We're Fabulachians': Country Queers in Central Appalachia" and defended their master's thesis "The Republic of Fabulachia: Queer Visions for a Post-Coal Appalachian Future," to center queer narratives in connections between regional and LGBTQ+ identity.[45] While previous works have focused on sexuality, primarily among gays and lesbians, rather than bisexual, pansexual, or asexual individuals, Garringer's works offer crucial interventions. By extending opportunities

[42] Silas House, "Our Secret Places in the Waiting World: Or, a Conscious Heart, Continued," Journal of Appalachian Studies 20, no. 2 (2014): 107, https://doi.org/10.5406/jappastud.20.2.0103.
[43] House, "Our Secret Places in the Waiting World," 118.
[44] House, "Our Secret Places in the Waiting World," 119.
[45] Garringer's thesis was published under their dead name. However, the text of this paper uses their chosen name, Rae, and uses they/them pronouns to avoid a misgendered representation of their identity. Please consult the bibliography for more information regarding this source.

for transgender, gender non-conforming, and asexual folks to define themselves within the context of queerness and region, Garringer further complicates experiences of queerness in Appalachia. The article and thesis rely on oral histories collected by Garringer, revealing the region's complexities and LGBTQ+ communities. These discussions strayed from previous works that discuss isolation and fear of violence. However, there was room to discuss how LGBTQ+ people seek out and cement communal connections. While community connections were often more dissimulative, contemporary generations of LGBTQ+ individuals have formed overt organizations to facilitate community development while addressing regional and national issues. While the focus remains on queer youth, these projects also focused on regional and national issues such as poverty, racial violence, and community care. In their thesis, Garringer emphasizes the importance of organizations like the Stay Together Appalachian Youth Project (STAY Project) in creating safe spaces where queer youths and young adults between seventeen and thirty can organize and participate in community-sponsored events.[46]

Moreover, Garringer acknowledges the power of naming and placemaking among queer Appalachian communities in finding spaces of belonging. Garringer argues in their dissertation that self-determinism is crucial in creating a visible community, placemaking, and claiming space. Specifically, "inherent in the process of creating traditions, then, is an exclusion of voices, memories, and perspectives that would destabilize its foundation, or disrupt its apparent 'truth.'"[47] In this case, Garringer posited that the absence of LGBTQ+ voices in the early historiography of Appalachia is intentional to uphold heteronormative ideas of place and

[46] R. Garringer, "'Well, We're Fabulous and We're Appalachians, so We're Fabulachians': Country Queers in Central Appalachia," *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2017): 80, 90, https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2017.0006; R. Garringer, "The Republic of Fabulachia: Queer Visions for a Post-Coal Appalachian Future," (MA Thesis, 2017), 18, 19, 21, https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/c534fp36b.
[47] Garringer, "The Republic of Fabulachia," 16.

belonging. By centering and uplifting the voices of queer Appalachians, scholars can upend limited perspectives of LGBTQ+ and Appalachian histories to highlight the diverse place. Therefore, centering queer Appalachian voices opens conversations for community development and expansion, allowing inquiries into how rural queer identities and regional identities converge and diverge.

Jeffery Cawood Jr.'s 2018 master's thesis from Morehead State University, "Out in Appalachia: Leaving the Closet in the Mountains," focuses on the reasons behind how and why LGBTQ+ individuals come out (or do not come out) to friends and family in public and private spheres. His sample population included nine LGBTQ+ individuals under thirty in the central Appalachian region. Cawood asserts that religion is a primary barrier to these disclosures, suggesting that "traditions and norms that prevent nurturing environments for LGBT Appalachians are perpetuated by the notion of surveillance and the inability to begin the conversation about sexual orientation."[48] In this instance, he addressed some negative aspects that local communities contribute to this process. Especially in rural areas, local communities developed social panopticons, a realm of surveillance that affects the reputation of not just the queer individual coming out but also their family. Moreover, as gender and sexuality are fluid and constantly evolving social concepts, queer individuals in Appalachia must also reconcile that the coming out process is never ending. To live authentically and affirm oneself, it is necessary to make public declarations of identity that also assert the need for privacy.[49] Cawood's thesis prompts considerations of the long and short-term effects of regional residency and the

[48] Jeffery Cawood, Jr., "OUT in APPALACHIA LEAVING the CLOSET in the MOUNTAINS" (master's Thesis, 2018), 20, 6, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/217270151.pdf
[49] Cawood, "Out in Appalachia," 22, 43, 54.

intersectionality of identity by blurring the spheres of public and private, community culture and social reputation, and the negotiation of identity.

Many scholars continued to create bridges between Appalachian and LGBTQ studies to argue, as Amanda Hayes asserts the importance of this field, stating "my fellow Appalachians, the reality is this: we're here, we're all a little queer, and we most of us ain't a-goin' nowhere."[50] The 2020 interdisciplinary anthology *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other* contains multiple essays where scholars engage with the multiplicity of Appalachia as a queer space. Appalachia is not only home to multitudes of queer people, but it is also a place that problematizes heteronormativity and dominant sociocultural constructs through unique proclamations of belonging and identity. By identifying queer identity definitions within the context of place, region, and population, this work questions perceptions of Appalachia as a heteronormative monolith. By broadening the conceptualizations of regionalism through various lenses of gender, race, sexuality, and class, *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia* offers informative frameworks for unpacking the narrative of place and identity in a regional context.[51]

These growths and developments in the field are vital for unpacking regional queer Appalachian experience from a host of interdisciplinary fields but are lacking a historical framing. This thesis aims to bind this narrative thread together cohesively, adding another chapter to the history of Appalachian resilience. This thesis seeks to establish a queer history within the Appalachian region that broadens historical understandings of Appalachian and queer history and furthers the field of rural queer studies. Through examining the area in an intergenerational study to chart change over time of self-determined Appalachia and LGBTQ+

[50] Hillery Glasby, Sherry Gradin, and Rachael Ryerson, eds., *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other*. (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 35.
[51] Glasby, Gradin, and Ryerson, eds., *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia*, 5, 8-9.

identities and the influences of sociocultural change in place, community, and belonging, this work will elevate LGBTQ+ populations as active shapers of place and identity.

This thesis chronologically begins in the 1970s and will connect rural and urban LGBTQ+ populations into the canon of Appalachian and LGBTQ+ history. While there is a plethora of scholarship on the connections of Gay Liberation to the Civil Rights Movement or how the War on Poverty brought significant social change to Appalachia, there is little that connects how these historical events and movements impacted LGBTQ+ Appalachians. Though this thesis does not claim to identify any stark turning points of discovering an Appalachian Stonewall or uplifting the next Harvey Milk, it does center the voices and places marginalized even within a marginal history. These voices identify how LGBTQ+ identities and regional places connect them within these broader historical processes, creating a narrative of queer and regional growth and connectivity.

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis seeks to make historiographical interventions in bridging Appalachian history, queer history, and rural studies to embrace the region's complexity and highlight the historical presence of queer community within the area. Next, it will focus on generational progressions of experiences throughout various regional, national, and queer history periods, beginning in the 1970s and extending into the recent twenty-first century. By understanding these negotiations of identity and the broader historical events, processes, and significance that contributed to these developments of identities and sense of place identifies a specific community of memories and experiences that play influential roles in shaping and being shaped by the region.

Chapter One will chronologically cover the 1970s-1980s but reaches back to earlier decades to provide regional historical context. This chapter will focus on older LGBTQ+ individuals who experienced various regional and national growing pains during these decades.

These experiences range from socioeconomic decline within the region, internal and external migrations within Appalachia, gendered experiences and expressions within regional cultural contexts, the use of mêtis and boundary publics in connecting communities, and "Appalachia as a middle ground" during the HIV/AIDS crisis. This chapter uses oral histories, memoirs, newspapers, and media to analyze how these generations negotiated identity and place. By placing these inquiries into the conversation, this thesis asserts that LGBTQ+ populations utilized dissimulative negotiations of space and identity to create spaces of belonging and forge their lives in the Appalachian region.

Chapter Two focuses on the 1990s-2000s when creating space and belonging methodologies diverged. During these decades, many LGBTQ+ Appalachians left the region, but many queer individuals also migrated into the region, seeking a more private, rural environment. This chapter argues that young queer Appalachians forged new expressions of identity, resiliency, and place-making by drawing inspiration from the growing national visibility of the LGBTQ+ population in media and the radical politics emerging from the AIDS crisis. Meanwhile, older generations continued upholding sentiments of mid-twentieth-century homophile movements in valuing their privacy while maintaining social standing in their local communities. By examining narratives in memoirs, oral histories, and newspapers, these divergences lead to various expressions of identity and communal belonging in Appalachian spaces.

Chapter Three focuses on the contemporary period of the 2010s-present, charting the transition from private to public identities through developments in establishing public spaces for queer community building. While overtly claiming both LGBTQ+ and Appalachian identities, queer Appalachians uplift their historical and current presence in the region, extending

communities of belonging to other marginal populations. Whether it takes the form of pursuing innovative legal action against LGBTQ+ discrimination, taking to public forums to claim space, or engaging in community organizing to address communal issues such as harm reduction and food scarcity, LGBTQ+ people claim Appalachia as home. With a shift to more positive public perceptions of queer identity, though negative and conservative outcry against queer identity and expressions persist, LGBTQ+ Appalachians seek to express and define their identity assemblages beyond binary dichotomies. These elements of progress and acting as agents of change inspire hope for future generations of queer Appalachians as they negotiate place and identity and unearth their histories in the region.

The conclusion evaluates the evidence presented in the previous chapters. It identifies areas where the field can expand to assess further the connections of region and identity to broader historical processes. This conclusion emphasizes the need for archival expansions to document the shift, development, and negotiation of place and identity among marginalized communities within marginalized histories. Moreover, it will restate the ongoing argument of this thesis that negotiations of queer and Appalachian identity simultaneously informed and were informed by region, place, gender, sexuality, and class.

CHAPTER ONE: LOOKING FOR SPACE: DEVELOPING QUEER COMMUNITIES IN APPALACHIA, 1970-1989

In 1976, Matty McEire had only been living in her grandmother's home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for a month before she longed for the Blue Ridge Mountains in Asheville, North Carolina. McEire recalls the desperation that spurred her recent return to Philadelphia, feeling at odds with her place in the burgeoning lesbian and feminist communities in the small Appalachian city after her latest breakup. In Asheville, she had felt as if "it was okay to be a feminist in public, but not a dyke,"[1] yet she still found close friends, support systems, favored haunts, and dedicated community projects in the small city. She missed the close-knit structure of her "North Carolina 'family,'" though it had become momentarily irritable. McEire also did not see a way forward to create the life she wanted in Philadelphia. As she recalled in her memoir, *Looking for Sheville,* "I came to the realization that I missed Asheville and my community there more than I had been letting on to myself. … If I came out in Philly, it would kill my mother, and if I didn't come out there, it would kill me. I had to leave."[2] Though it had only been a few months since Lance, her one-time boyfriend whom she shared the realization that they were both gay, had helped her move to Philadelphia, he would soon return to help move her back to Asheville.[3]

While seemingly unorthodox for McEire to exchange the urban experiences of Philadelphia for a smaller city in Southern Appalachia, she wanted to re-establish her sense of place and belonging within lesbian-feminist communities in Asheville. While Philadelphia had its own culturally queer presence with gay bars, bookstores, and LGBTQ+ populations, including

[1] Matty McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, (Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Publishing, 2010), 131.
[2] McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 128.
[3] McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 2, 124, 129.

her best friend Alice and cousin Christopher, McEire found her self-expression confined in the larger urban environment.[4] As eloquently stated by Samantha Rosenthal in *Living Queer History*, "urban properties have attracted queer and trans people and provided them with spaces of community formation and queer belonging."[5] However, McEire's preference for a small city in an area commonly understood to be very rural, conservative, stagnant, and homogenous remains curious and contradictory to this narrative. Asheville, while still an urban space for the western North Carolina region, had "actually lost population in the 1970s," with a population of 57,681, but was still a crucial space that fostered LGBTQ+ community in the area.[6] Though urban experiences are predominant in these accounts of LGBTQ+ history, it overshadows crucial narratives of place-making and belonging among queer communities in rural spaces. Too frequently, narratives of queer urban migration obscure the presence, resiliency, and migrations of LGBTQ+ populations in rural areas for similar motivations of privacy and belonging. Therefore, in choosing to focus on what queer historian and activist Michael Bronski calls "snapshots of history," the breadth of LGBTQ+ history falls victim to dichotomous perceptions of existence and belonging.[7]

In McEire's case, the proximity to her parents and extended family in Philadelphia, paired with growing Gay Liberation activism and her difficulties in finding employment, limited her self-expression in this urban scene. McEire had not disclosed her lesbian identity to her

[4] McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 127-128.
[5] Gregory Samantha Rosenthal, *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City*, (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina Press, 2021), 57.
[6] According to the Log In North Carolina (LINC) program's population and housing breakdown, the population of Asheville during the 1970s is listed as 57,571 (uncorrected) from their interpretation of the dataset. I am using the number provided in the decennial as there is a small margin of error (-/+110) between these numbers. Dale Neal, "Asheville Sees Moderate Population Growth," *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 22, 2014, https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2014/05/22/asheville-sees-moderate-population-growth/9429117/; US Bureau of the Census, "Census of Population: 1970 Vol. 1, CHARACTERISTICS of the POPULATION Part 35, North Carolina," *Census.Gov* (Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census, March 1973), https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1970/population-volume-1/1970a_nc-01.pdf.
[7] Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xiii.

family, which possibly led to internalized conflicts in connecting with queer communities or individuals due to fear of ostracization and rejection.[8] In this circumstance, living openly as a lesbian proved more challenging in larger urban spaces where family members could recognize her, instigating a fear of rejection from her family. However, the smaller Appalachian city of Asheville offered McEire the privacy and connections she desired. Like other spaces throughout the rural American South, LGBTQ+ communities and people were seemingly more private and personal in the Appalachian region.[9] McEire's experience exemplified an often obscure experience of negotiating identity to conform to certain places to locate spaces of belonging, pushing back against accepted paradigms of place and identity to reveal resilient histories. In taking these steps to engage with stories like McEire's and unpack regional cultures of place, historians can elucidate the dissimulative ways LGBTQ+ individuals create spaces of belonging and forge their lives in the Appalachian region.

Uplifting Queer Appalachian Histories

Though Appalachia is often described in clinical terminologies and generalizations of population, place, and "otherness," the region possesses a rich culture of place and complex history. In his short essay series *Appalachian Values*, regional scholar and folklorist Loyal Jones argues that Appalachian communities possess strong communal ethics that have con- and diverged from mainstream conceptions of success and belonging. With influences from "England, Scotland, Germany, … Wales, France, Holland, Africa, … and the Cherokees,"[10] Appalachia echoes multicultural and multiracial constructs of place and being. Small, local Appalachian communities, villages, and towns have organized close-knit social structures around

[8] McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 41-43, 125-127, 129.
[9] John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), xiii, xvii, 4.
[10] Loyal Jones and Warren E. Brunner, *Appalachian Values*, (Ashland, Ky.: Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1994), 14.

families and communal institutions, such as churches, farming, or industries such as coal mining and timber logging.[11] Many values associated with Appalachia, such as "independence, self-reliance, and pride," "personalism," "neighborliness," and "love of place," that exist within these spaces lie at the center of developing a regional culture of place.[12] While these core ideas may seem insular, they are essential in maintaining community relationships and cementing opportunities to develop intraregional connections. Despite its unique culture of place, the Appalachian region has always been intrinsically linked with broader American shifts and trends. In staying abreast with national economic, cultural, and political connections throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Appalachia has simultaneously been shaped by and overtly contributed to the national history.[13]

However, heteronormativity has been a driving influence in forming national and regional sociocultural interpretations of identity and space in Appalachia. Though there was undoubtedly a historical presence of LGBTQ+ people and communities in the Appalachian region, those histories have faced censure and remain obscured. This results from the careful discretion of past queer individuals who protected themselves from violence and ostracization, and the heteronormative standards that prevented critical documentation of these queer histories. Looking at individuals or communities through these lenses of Appalachian values may evoke understandings of supportive, straightforward community relations. However, there were still communal conflicts and restrictive sociocultural norms. In short, Appalachia has rarely embodied a “live and let live” attitude as prejudices imposed barriers to individual expression.

[11] Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 18, 28-30, 236.
[12] Jones and Brunner, *Appalachian Values*, 9, 63, 69, 81–82, 99.
[13] Swanson, *Beyond the Mountains*, xi, 4, 6-7, 187; David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University Of North Carolina Press, 1983), 3, 6, 14, 126; Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University Of North Carolina Press, 1978), ix, xi, 159, 186.

However, these conflicts and enforcements are not specific to the region, as there were similar struggles nationally across rural, suburban, and urban environments. As such, historians must carefully read against the archival grain to sort out potentially queer histories in the Appalachian region.

The social and cultural norms of place render Appalachia's history as innately complex. For LGBTQ+ people in the region during this period of deindustrialization, place-making identity claiming proved increasingly difficult. For example, Jeff Mann, a poet, and current professor of Appalachian Studies at Virginia Tech, recalls his childhood in Hinton, West Virginia as a primarily miserable experience. Mann recounts that being openly queer in Appalachia could be dangerous during the 1970s. Specifically, during Mann's youth, he often targeted due to his academic inclinations and not quite fitting regional definitions of masculinity. Though he self-fashioned into becoming a leather-clad, burly man or a "bear" during college, Mann did not fit this ideal mold of masculinity in his adolescence.[14] In his memoir, Mann recalled one evening during high school when he was sucker punched for passively dismissing an adult man shouting slurs at him from his truck. Although Mann was in downtown Hinton and performing the common courtesy of a gentleman walking his friend Sally home from the Summers County Public Library, he was still targeted. Although Mann was not publicly out as gay, heteronormative community members identified him as "queer" or different from the heteronormative standard.[15] Mann attempted to uphold the appearance of heteronormative standards in his community, but still drew suspicion regarding expressions of masculinity and his possibly "deviant" sexuality.

[14] Jeff Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 91–92, 100–101, 125.
[15] Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, 47, 125.

Mark Bryant, a gay man from the southeastern region of West Virginia, echoed this sentiment as he recalled the restrictive social climate of his home state in the 1970s. As soon as he graduated high school, Bryant and his two friends packed down his car, towing a U-Haul, and headed to California, determined to put the "Godforsaken state" in the rearview mirror. While all three viewed this as an escape from the collapsing economy of the region, Bryant also expressed that he felt unable to live in Appalachia due to his sexual identity. During childhood, Bryant remembered being criticized for expressing "effeminate" behaviors, like wearing pom-poms on his shoes to a local high school football game that drew scrutiny to his family and "embarrassed" his parents. Therefore, Bryant found ways to assimilate to protect himself and his family's reputation, presenting himself as "a catch" in his teenage and young adult years, which obscured his sexuality and subsequently had drastic effects on his health.[16]

Amid multiple experiences of isolation in the 1970s, LGBTQ+ people residing in Appalachia found ways to forge connections with other LGBTQ+ individuals and to create a life and home through negotiations of belonging and identity expression. McEire, for instance, had an overwhelming desire to return to Appalachia to reconnect with her small community of lesbian-feminists and to live in a place where she felt most like herself. Daisy Anderson, a business owner, and lesbian who moved to Dillsboro, North Carolina and opened a full-service gas station there, expressed in her oral history a similar desire to reside in a place that felt most like home and find belonging within their local region.[17] However, this validation and creation of belonging was a complete, authentic expression of self and relied on circumnavigating these

[16] This interview was conducted as part of a course related oral history project in 2023. While it is not available digitally yet, it can be found in the following repository and in possession of the author. Mark Bryant, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 22, 2023.
[17] Daisy Anderson and Helen Tugwell, interview by Rachel Shaw, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, July 7, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63266.

cultures of silence. McEire relied on the language and growing consciousness of second-wave feminism to find spaces in her local community that were not designated as queer to immerse herself in political activism and social causes. Anderson integrated herself into the community by fulfilling a need within the community that offered financial support and privacy away from traditional workplace environments. Thus, exercising mêtis to parse the social and cultural norms of place, where they could align or safely deviate from those constructs, allows LGBTQ+ people to create spaces of belonging. This chapter seeks to illuminate how, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, LGBTQ+ folks in Appalachia created and engaged with broader national culture and specific queer culture in dissimulative ways to preserve social and economic standing in local communities.

The Quiet Closet: Navigating Queer Discrimination and Building Queer Community in Appalachia

Z. Zane McNeill argues in *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* that "Appalachia is a diverse, multifaceted, and often contradictory space in which queer not *only* survives but thrives."[18] While queer populations within Appalachia currently thrive and lay claim to space in the region, it has not always been an easy road. Finding spaces of belonging in the region was difficult for generations coming of age or finding themselves in the area during the 1970s and 1980s. For LGBTQ+ individuals in Appalachia to thrive and survive in the region involved navigations of regional constructs and their place-based, sexuality, and gendered identities.

Open expressions of gay desire in Appalachia raised concerns about physical safety and the lasting impact on personal and family reputations. Jeffery Cawood Jr.'s "Out in Appalachia" examines twenty-first-century social conditions and identity expression of LGBTQ+ individuals

[18] Z. Zane McNeill, *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* (Oakland: PM Press, 2022), 5.

in rural Central Appalachia. However, his discussions of negotiating identity formation and expression also apply to twentieth-century queer Appalachians. Cawood's study unpacks the sociocultural influences that play a part in navigating identity expression. Notably, he emphasizes the lack of anonymity associated with small towns and rural areas, as unsympathetic friends or family may recognize them as queer. Due to predominant heteronormative sociocultural ideals, many LGBTQ+ people find it difficult to openly express queer sexuality or gender identity fully as they may be particularly vulnerable to danger in discriminatory climates. Using Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon, Cawood argues that "the fear of surveillance is a significant modifier in the social performance of LGBT individuals, specifically Appalachian LGBT persons."[19] With this, Cawood suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals consciously maintain an accepted social identity or, at the least, are conscious of where their expression may deviate from localized social norms. In applying these experiences to LGBTQ+ individuals of Appalachia, the levels of scrutiny of small-town residents and heteronormative standards stifle the behaviors, expressions, and identity performances of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Appalachians.

Moreover, various experiences play formative roles in negotiating and expressing identity, whether adverse or favorable. As individuals become more aware of their social, cultural, and physical surroundings, these experiences inform LGBTQ+ peoples where and when they can authentically express or carry out queer desire or gender performance. In *Carryin' On in the Gay and Lesbian South*, Donna Jo Smith's essay tackles this issue by referring to the complexity of "the closet" and how reliant narratives of self-discovery lean into this metaphor.[20]

[19] Jeffery Cawood, Jr., "OUT in APPALACHIA LEAVING the CLOSET in the MOUNTAINS" (master's Thesis, 2018), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/217270151.pdf, 13.
[20] John Howard, *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997)., 282

The closet exists as a metaphor for how one chooses to express or display in private or public settings, emphasizing the moment that an LGBTQ+ person "comes out" rather than the process of being or becoming. However, as scholars and many queer individuals have begun to acknowledge, no single narrative features a flying leap out of the closet, and they never have to come out again. Instead, the act of coming out occurs in stages and over time. Living openly as a queer person involves a series of shifting identity disclosures dependent on the environment one finds themselves in and within which they integrate.[21]

Due to these experiences and learning the dependent cues to reserve or engage in expressions of queer identity, LGBTQ+ Appalachians discover ways to create connection in what historian John Howard dubs "cultures of silence."[22] Alternatively, it is the various ways that LGBTQ+ individuals engage in the rhetorical concept of mêtis to understand how their personal experiences may shape the present moment. In their essay from *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia,* Travis Rountree and Caleb Pendygraft employ this rhetorical concept of mêtis as "a strategy for queers who work in areas where their queerness sometimes conflicts with the communities, they find themselves in."[23] With quick thinking, cunning, and relying on lessons derived from lived experiences, queer folks can navigate uncertain or potentially dangerous circumstances. Their interactions preserve their safety and appeal to shared commonalities to diffuse tense situations. Essentially, mêtis can offer a middle ground in preserving the safety of LGBTQ+ individuals while maintaining an accepted role in the community. Scrutinizing mêtis within cultures of silence in Appalachia becomes crucial in understanding how LGBTQ+

[21] John Howard, *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 8, 373, 382, 384.
[22] Howard, *Men Like That,* 28, 63.
[23] Travis Rountree and Caleb Pendygraft, "Are Y'all Homos?': Mêtis as Method for and in Queer Appalachia," in *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other*, ed. Rachel Ryerson, Sherrie L. Gradin, and Hillery Glasby, (Morganton, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 141.

individuals maintain social and economic standing by upholding or gently sidestepping cultural norms. Through this engagement in mêtis, LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia finding places of belonging in local and queer communities enhances the complexity of rooted narratives of place.

"Boundary Publics" and Cultures of Silence: Mêtis and Negotiating Identity

When recalling their adolescence and youth in the Appalachian region in the mid-twentieth century, many gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals were hesitant to openly express their sexuality or gender identity. For many, these coming-of-age experiences in recognizing their differences in sexuality, romantic interest, and gender performance became isolating due to the prevalence of heteronormative sociocultural norms. With few adults that young LGBTQ+ people could ask questions, minimal positive LGBTQ+ representation in local communities or media, and sparse availability of queer spaces, young Appalachians had to adapt to heteronormative ideas of sexuality and gender. In rural spaces, LGBTQ+ young adults often borrowed prescriptive sex ed literature, library resources, or engaged in cautious sexual experimentation to answer questions about their sexual desire and gender.[24] However, with popular emphasis that homosexuality was deviant and persistent discrimination behaviors or ideas within churches, schools, or familial structures, young LGBTQ+ Appalachians adapted quickly to preserve their safety and status. Nationwide, LGBTQ+ youth and young adults

[24] Several oral histories narrators identified that borrowing their parents or siblings' sex ed books during puberty as an eye-opening to them in discovering their gay and lesbian sexualities. Moreover, a few other respondents recall looking up information in their local library to make sense of their sexual desires and questions of gender. Additionally, sexual experimentation plays a crucial role and, especially in urban areas, often encompasses risk-taking behavior or legally dubious actions. For sources about the role of literature and libraries, see Gary Clark Patton, interview by Zachary Clark Pence. March 16, 2011, Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries; Mark Bryant, interview by Cope, April 22, 2023; Betsy Swift, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 23, 2023. For risk-taking and sexual experimentation, see Burley Brent Thomas, an interview by Zachary Clark Pence. May 12, 2011, Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries; John Howard, "Digital Oral History and the Limits of Gay Sex," in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, ed. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, (New York City, New York: NYU Press, 2016), 311, 323-325.

adopted behaviors to obscure their queer sexualities and gender identities. However, while contending rurality and the inaccessibility of designated LGBTQ+ spaces, queer Appalachians negotiated space and sociocultural norms in dissimulative ways to express and explore their identities.

Gary Clark Patton, who grew up in Pikeville, Kentucky, recalls knowing he was gay as a young teenager but felt compelled to remain closeted. This recognition of discrimination occurred to Patton when reading his sister's hidden copy of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)*, which discusses homosexuality as "trying the impossible: solving the problem with only half the pieces."[25] Moreover, with the negative depiction of effeminate behavior, promiscuity, and "aberrant behaviors," Patton understood broad discrimination against queer identity. Patton recalls investing much of his energies in high school to maintain a carefully presented persona of popularity to fit in with many of his heteronormative peers. While he never felt bullied throughout his high school experience in the mid-1970s, other "effeminate students" had become targets of adolescent bullying. Recounting that period, Patton stated, "I was keeping the big secret, and I honestly feel like all of my high school was [with] a pause button on. You know, I've got to wait and get out of here."[26] Though he achieved popularity and academic accomplishment, maintaining this image required putting distance between himself and his experiences to prioritize his safety.

Mark Bryant's adolescent high school experiences also exemplified the physical toll that obscuring his identity and constant vigilance of his behavior could have on a young person. Like Patton, Bryant similarly read a hidden sex manual from his parent's room that had information

[25] David R. Reuben, MD, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (*but Were Afraid to Ask)* (1969; repr., New York City, NY: Bantam Books, 1971), https://archive.org/details/isbn_9780553143263, 142.
[26] Patton, interview by Pence, March 16, 2011.

about gay and lesbian sexualities. This discovery eased his feelings that he was not the only gay person in rural southeastern West Virginia. However, his previous childhood experiences of scrutiny of his mannerisms and expressions enforced a nearly militant control of his demeanor and behavior as a young adult. Bryant, who also carefully maintained his status linked with popularity, achievement, and had a girlfriend throughout high school, felt the strain of this secrecy so much that it affected his physical health. By ninth grade, Bryant developed a "bleeding ulcer" that was a mystery to his parents and physician, and "no one can understand why someone like me could be worried about anything. And I was not able to tell anyone."[27]

While Bryant's and Patton's experiences indicated the experiences of cultural isolation that discouraged expressions of gay identity in public social settings, they adapted some heteronormative standards to explore and express gay desire. According to their accounts, both men engaged in academics and extracurricular activities to maintain their social standing as upstanding young men. As they excelled in their studies and were deemed what Bryant called "a catch," these avenues created a less scrutinized path to explore, engage, and express their gay identities.

Though Patton did not date in high school, he was an intellectual and seemingly well-mannered teen, which granted him respect and trust in his local community. Teachers and adults liked him due to his cheerful, friendly attitude, and he hailed from a well-liked family in the county. Patton used this trust to appeal to his peers for acceptance, such as using the school's mimeograph machine to issue forged medical excuses for them. However, this trust and respect allowed Patton to have the closest experience to dating other gay or questioning young men without drawing suspicion. Specifically, Patton recalled having a summer fling as a high school

[27] Bryant, interview by Cope, April 22, 2023.

senior with a lifeguard who was a college student at Berea at the Jenny Wiley State Park Swimming Pool, where they both worked. Though Patton and his partner were discrete, they capitalized on Patton's trusted reputation. They navigated heteronormative expectations to find ways to be together, culminating with his first sexual experience in a Berea dorm room on a solo college visit.[28]

Bryant, however, used the heteronormative standards of his hometown to circumvent the scrutiny a young man may receive in going on dates in public spaces. As Bryant stated, his academic achievement and popularity made him popular and promised a prosperous future among adults and peers. While he and another young man from high school often went on double dates with girls, their dates capitalized on this community trust and respect in unconventional ways that allowed them to express queer desire. Their dates, on the surface, appeared heteronormative but allowed them to spend time together as Bryant and the other young man would go on a date, "take the girls [out], drop them off, go park the car somewhere, and be intimate."[29] In viewing these experiences through the lens of mêtis and considering their previous life experiences, Bryant and Patton found liminal accommodating areas where they could explore their sexualities while upholding social status through engaging in heteronormative sociocultural standards.

As rural adolescents and adults in Appalachia during the 1970s and 1980s understood, ideas of queer community were not physically rooted in designated space and more spontaneous adaptations of place. As John Howard states in his study of gay men in Mississippi, "Gay community, thus, is not simply a phenomenon lacking at this place and time. Rather, it is a concept lacking explanatory power, a notion that incompletely and inadequately gets at the shape

[28] Patton, interview by Pence. March 16, 2011.
[29] Bryant, interview by Cope, April 22, 2023.

and scope of queer life."[30] Despite feelings of isolation or repression of identity, many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals sought out others who shared similar interests and experiences. However, they were creative in finding spaces to make these connections and communicating interest, desire, or expressions of sexuality or gender. Therefore, the challenge that LGBTQ+ folks in rural Appalachia faced was navigating the challenges of place-based culture and small-town behaviors.

Rural Appalachian communities are often described as insular or isolated, though contemporary historiographical trends in the fieldwork tend to upend these understandings. Appalachia has a rich economic, political, and social history of shaping and being shaped by national and global influences. However, over time, there has been a strong emphasis on the importance of family and place within Appalachian culture. Ronald D. Eller argues in *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers* that kinship and family dynamics shaped social and political structures during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century rural Appalachian communities. This familialism endures even after the deindustrialization period.[31] Kinship systems were central to this place-based culture and often extended to neighbors and community members. These close community bonds (or, at times, rivalries) resulted from proximity and cultural constructions of intercommunal support. In short, Appalachians have been apt to seek help from their family or community rather than seek assistance from external agencies or forces.[32] Though

[30] Howard, *Men Like That*, 15.
[31] Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 28-29.
[32] Though there is a history of Appalachian welfare offered through benevolent women and VISTA programs throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local reception to these programs has been complex. In some cases, these administrations were welcome but rejected in others. Jessie Wilkerson argues, especially in the mid-twentieth century, that VISTA and Appalachian volunteers were crucial in bringing social welfare programs to the region. However, as Wilkerson demonstrates, these programs only succeeded when Appalachian women became involved in networking and administering these programs as they best understood the conditions of their local communities. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 61-62, 161-162; Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (Champaign, Illinois: University Of Illinois Press, 2019), 5-6, 140, 198-199.

this reliance on the family unit would adapt over time with population fluctuation and migration, rural communities throughout the region are still considered close-knit as residents are, at least, familiar with the needs and people of their community.

As Cawood establishes with his contemporary study of Appalachia, the familiarity and awareness of rural small towns can be described as a panopticon where LGBTQ+ individuals adapt their behaviors to maintain an accepted social status. While these sociocultural structures of surveillance are often not practiced with malice and possess historical precedent, when influenced by other aspects of culture, such as religious beliefs, political affiliation, or even misunderstanding and fear, this practice can contribute to the adverse experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the region.

However, not everyone felt the need to remain closeted or hide their identity from their community. Dr. William H. Turner recalls in his memoir, *The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Towns,* that gay and lesbian individuals were often accepted as community members and were rarely treated poorly in his hometown of Lynch, Kentucky. As a Black coal mining community, Turner recalls Lynch (locally pronounced as “Lanch”) exemplifying the personalism, love of place, and neighborliness Loyal Jones attributes to Appalachia. Following Turner's recollection of being chided for questioning the effeminate behaviors of a neighborhood friend, whom Turner's grandmother reasoned was just "a girly boy,"[33] he asserts that:

> "The people who later came to be called gay and lesbian were received, generally, in a community-wide climate of social equality and impartiality. We all sat together at church and at school, and their 'alternative lifestyles' were no big deal in Black communities of our coal camps. Of course, there were the trash-talking, mean-spirited folks in the community who could be heard, occasionally, referring to some men and women using

[33] William Hobart Turner, *The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Towns* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2021), 198.

> homophobic slurs. ironically enough, it was those who bad-mouthed and disparaged those in what we now call the LGBTQ community who were disliked and cold-shouldered."[34]

It is unlikely that many places in Appalachia were like Turner's memories of Lynch as a representation of acceptance in the region. However, this supports negotiations of space-making where LGBTQ+ individuals identified certain places where it was safe to express themselves. In this case, Lynch's reception of gay and lesbian residents may stem from their understanding and experience of racially based discrimination that had profound effects on the Black coal mining families. Turner's memoir establishes that supportive community relationships were central in their day-to-day lives due to the proximity of working-class families and that "thin walls made good neighbors."[35] In this case, being discriminatory toward gay and lesbian members of an already marginalized community could upset those close-knit communities they relied on, so a positive community experience was paramount for communities like Lynch. While currently understood as being more socially conservative, Black communities in the 1960s and 1970s may have offered opportunities for compromise based on the importance of communal and family dynamics.

Though open expressions of queer identity and gender performance were considered socially unacceptable in Appalachia in the mid-twentieth century, LGBTQ+ folks in the region were resilient in discovering ways and spaces to facilitate connections. In her studies of contemporary queer Appalachian youth, sociologist Mary Gray argues that semi-private public spaces called "boundary publics" function as a way for LGBTQ+ youth to create spaces of belonging when there is no dedicated public space.[36] This ties in with John Howard's study of

[34] Turner, *The Harlan Renaissance,* 199.
[35] Turner, *The Harlan Renaissance,* 175.
[36] Mary L. Gray, "'There Are No Gay People Here': Expanding the Boundaries of Queer Youth Visibility in the Rural United States." In *Appalachia in Regional Context: Place Matters*, edited by Dwight B. Billings and Ann E. Kingsolver, 113–114, 127, (Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2018,) https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1z27j0k.11.

spatial theory in how rural gay men negotiated heteronormative behaviors and cultures of silence to identify spaces where they could engage in or express queer desire.[37] While these places, such as tea rooms and cruising areas in public parks, no doubt existed within the Appalachian region, many were in more suburban or urban areas around college campuses or in areas such as Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Asheville.[38]

However, the most accessible "boundary public" available to LGBTQ+ Appalachians happened to be the mountainous region itself. Throughout the Appalachian region, the beauty of nature and the preservation of wilderness have been celebrated and actively encouraged to be explored and enjoyed. Recreational activities such as camping, hiking, and fishing are popular leisure and recreational activities for many in the region.

As Matty McEire expresses in her memoir *Looking for Sheville*, the semi-private overlooks of the Blue Ridge Parkway afforded her and her partners spaces to have intimate conversations and dates. Notably, it was not only a space for her and her friend Lance to come out to each other after an awkward first kiss but also became a unique, semi-private place where she could bring her partners for dates or to clear her head when her relationships fell apart.[39] Additionally, Jeff Mann built connections with other lesbian and gay high school students in Hinton High School's ecology and forestry club, which offered a semi-private space to openly discuss sexuality while on hikes and to share their experiences with queer culture. He credited the club for fostering a crucial turning point in forming his identity. As Mann formed connections with other queer peers, he also connected with broader LGBTQ+ communities under the mentorship of the club's faculty sponsor, high school science teacher Jo Davison, who

[37] Howard, *Men Like That*, xi, 15, 33.
[38] Thomas, interview by Zachary Clark Pence. May 12, 2011; *Mapping the Gay Guides*, Amanda Regan, and Eric Gonzaba, (2019-): http:// www.mappingthegayguides.org.
[39] McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 1-2, 33-35, 115.

mentored and supported her gay and lesbian students and gifted Mann a copy of *The Front Runner*.[40] Mark Bryant also commented that, especially for young LGBTQ+ individuals, this was not only the most accessible but possibly the safest way to explore one's queer desire as "you're not going to be able to be intimate just anywhere. So, it's usually out of a tent in the woods."[41]

However, while these natural boundary publics offered accessible ways for adolescents and adults to explore and create spaces of belonging, businesses also provided a place to maintain one's economic and social standing in the community. Specifically, bars became spaces in urban Appalachia that offer safer social spaces like their metropolitan counterparts. Moreover, these spaces allow LGBTQ+ individuals to celebrate queer joy, connect with the gay community, and participate in fuller expressions of self.[42]

For instance, in Bluefield, West Virginia, despite the plethora of working-class bars in the town, "Miss Helen" Louise Gibson Compton felt compelled to begin her enterprise after witnessing four gay men being barred from entering a private club in 1963. Contrary to Turner's experiences in Kentucky, Compton was aware of the homophobia and discrimination directed towards queer individuals in the West Virginia coal fields. In an oral history, Miss Helen recalls a childhood turning point in a conversation with her father, telling him she had seen two men "a'kissin' in the coal fields" and discovered later that these men had "crosses burned in their yards."[43] While there has been speculation on the reasons why this event affected Compton so

[40] Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, 8-11.
[41] Bryant, interview by Cope, April 22, 2023.
[42] John Wermuth, interview by MJ Cope, April 13, 2023, Sylva, NC; Bryant, interview by Cope, April 22, 2023; Bradley Milam, "Gay West Virginia: Community Formation and the Forging of Gay Appalachian Identity, 1963-1979" (MA Thesis, 2010), http://clgbthistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/NestlePrize2011_Milam_GayWestVirginia.pdf, 4, 16-17, 25.
[43] Carol Burch-Brown, "Its Reigning Queens in Appalachia," Vimeo, November 17, 2011, https://vimeo.com/32294930.

profoundly, what is certain is that the ostracization of the two coal miners in her childhood community evoked a lifelong empathy for members of the LGBTQ+ community.[44] Determined to do what she could to offer the local LGBTQ+ community a safe, recreational space, Compton used her savings and paid ten thousand dollars cash for the building in downtown Bluefield to open The Shamrock, which was a diner by day and working-class gay bar by night. Despite the steep investment of purchasing and funding the business, being its sole proprietor, and a woman who owned a business in the mid-1960s, Compton garnered a positive reputation among the heteronormative and gay local populations and recouped her investments in one year.[45]

Compton opened The Shamrock Diner in 1964, a haven for the local LGBTQ+ community in Bluefield, West Virginia, and remained open for thirty-seven years until her death in 2001. Bluefield's primary economic draw was its involvement in the coal industry and reputation as a railroad hub. With the diner's downtown location, many local working-class men patronized the diner for its lunch service, and the few LGBTQ+ regulars who came during the day would return for The Shamrock's evening fare.[46] As early as 1972, The Shamrock began to host drag performances, with a sheet hung between the kitchen and adjoining wall as a backdrop for performances.[47] The working class status of the patrons did not hinder their participation or presentation in drag performances, as “Miss Helen’s girls” creatively choreographed numbers to jukebox hits and dressed with borrowed finery from mothers and sisters, flea market bargains,

[44] Bradley Milam states that Compton may have also been a member of the LGBTQ+ community. However, I have yet to see any primary sources confirming this as a fact, and it seems to be specifically not mentioned by Carol Burch-Brown. Rather than contribute to potential misinformation when Miss Helen cannot clarify this question, it seems wiser to interpret the emotion this event evoked rather than to determine its source.
[45] Joyce M. Barry, “Remembering the Past, Working for the Future,” in *Women of the Mountain South: Identity, Work, and Activism Book*, ed. Connie Park Rice and Marie Tedesco (Athens, Ohio: Ohio State University, 2015), 318.
[46] Milam, “Gay West Virginia,” 16-21.
[47] Burch-Brown, "Its Reigning Queens in Appalachia"; Milam, “Gay West Virginia,” 27-28, 30-32.

and affordable K-Mart wigs.[48] As such, patrons from Bluefield or as far away as Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and rural West Virginia, flocked to the space to socialize with individuals who shared similar experiences, engage in gay community networks, and forge connections with other queer Appalachians.

Matty McEire credits the local After Dark Lounge nightclub (later destroyed by the proprietor in an arson case,) for connecting her with a local lesbian and feminist community in Asheville, North Carolina, during her coming out process.[49] Though locals knew of the nightclub, often discussed amid hushed whispers, the After Dark also appeared in cruising literature, such as Bob Damron's Address Book, which highlighted safer spaces for LGBTQ+ people to congregate and meet.[50] Other bars and nightclubs emerged throughout the 1970s in Asheville, such as the Tree Tops and The Skylight Room, renamed O. Henry's in 1976, and is the oldest surviving gay bar in North Carolina. However, the After Dark was a crucial space for connection as patrons traveled from surrounding towns and states in search of queer communities.[51] Gay bars and nightclubs offered social spaces specifically for LGBTQ+ communities where they may have felt less inhibited to remain closeted or inclined to negotiate their identity. Moreover, for those who felt isolated or at odds with their gay identity, it provided a place to connect and to explore and understand one's identity.

Media such as gay-centered presses also offered LGBTQ+ individuals in Appalachia ways to connect with regional and national news and help locate local queer communities. Social

[48] Barry, "Remembering the Past, Working for the Future," 319.
[49] John Campbell Jr., "Berger Sentenced in Burning Case," *The Asheville Times*, March 12, 1979; McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 7, 10, 197-199.
[50] *Mapping the Gay Guides*, Amanda Regan, and Eric Gonzaba, (2019-): http:// www.mappingthegayguides.org.
[51] McEire, *Looking for Sheville*, 26, 63-64, 77, 198, 220, 241; Anne Smith, "October 13, 1976 – O'Henry's Opens in Asheville | Asheville Museum of History," *Western North Carolina Historical Association*, October 13, 2021, https://wnchistory.org/october-13-1976-ohenrys-opens-in-asheville/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=october-13-1976-ohenrys-opens-in-asheville.

gatherings and clubs, including women's dances, listening parties of womyn's music, recreational sports leagues, and book clubs, provided opportunities for immediate local connections in semi-private or private spaces. However, those developments usually come from meeting and knowing other queer individuals in the area. For people who were unable to venture into these avenues to find other LGBTQ+ people in their area or rely heavily on heteronormative self-presentation, isolation contributes to difficulties in self-expression and place-making.

Regional gay press outlets like *The Barb*, which ran from 1974-1977 out of Atlanta, Georgia, provided opportunities for LGBTQ+ individuals to locate inter- and intra-regional connections. Though *The Barb* originated outside of the region, the paper reported queer nightlife in Appalachian cities in northwestern Georgia, eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and occasionally other Appalachian states. *The Barb* reported on developments of the Gay Liberation Movement outside the southern region. However, it also contained columns from the Metropolitan Community Church, updates of local drag pageants and nightlife commentary throughout the US South, and queer reviews of popular cinema and literature. A vibrant classified section allowed individuals to advertise goods and services or search for personal connections via lonely hearts listings. While *The Barb* was very overt as gay press, often featuring models or celebrities as their "man of the month," the paper also offered clandestine services for its readership, such as plain envelope mail service where the paper was confidentially sent to the reader. Moreover, *The Barb* also had other "confidential mailing services," which would forward responses to classified or personal ads to the private addresses of discrete individuals.[52]

[52] Ray Green, “Be Groovy!! Keep up with the Happenings!!” advertisement, *The Barb,* Volume 1, No 7, 1974, page 4, The Atlanta History Center; Bill Smith, “Contact Confidential Services” advertisement, *The Barb,* Volume 3, No 1, March 1976, page 10, *The Atlanta History Center*.

While it is impossible to determine the breadth of Appalachian readership of gay press outlets like *The Barb*, the qualitative nature of its advertisements offers intriguing insights into the nature of inter- and intra-regional community connection among LGBTQ+ people. First, though the paper often capitalized on gay male imagery and content, its readership consisted of a diverse array of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. Like many queer men and women across the country, though there was a clear desire for connection to culture and community, readers exercised caution and mêtis to ensure their safety and privacy. For instance, "Jane" of southwest Virginia, who sought a "mature gay woman … for warm friendship," and a "45 [year-old], virile, professional [white male]" from Lexington, Kentucky, both emphasized one key detail for their prospective partners - discretion.[53] Reviewing the contact information included with the listing, "Jane" utilized the confidential mail service provided through the paper. However, there were other opportunities to protect one's identity, such as the unnamed Lexington professional using a post office box to ensure anonymity. Considering the careful control of information and the emphasis on a discrete partner from both ads, these examples indicate a sociocultural construct of a culture of silence that privileges the privacy and safety of LGBTQ+ people in conflicting places of belonging.

However, other readers in Appalachia also deployed these cultures of silence in their favor to fit their open expression of personal needs, using *The Barb*'s classified section as a steppingstone to be more open in facilitating connections. At times, specific reputations of spaces created queer connections. One explicit example came from Asheville, North Carolina in 1976, where John Edwards proclaimed his sexual desires as he "will serve studs," especially

[53] Bill Smith, "Southwest Virginia Female - Jane" personal advertisement, *The Barb* volume 2, no. 2, 1975, page 14, The Atlanta History Center; Bill Smith, "White Male, 45, virile, professional" personal advertisement, *The Barb* volume 3, no. 3, March 1976, page 15, *The Atlanta History Center*.

truck drivers, listing a downtown hotel address.[54] John Howard's study of gay men and men who engage in “homosexual,” or sexual relations with other men, establishes that hotels serve as a boundary public where gay men could have sexual liaisons in a semi-private space.[55] However, the multi-story complex that Edwards calls the "Hotel Vanderbilt" became known as the Vanderbilt Apartments in the mid-1960s. War on Poverty initiatives spurred the renovation of the George Vanderbilt Hotel to become a senior citizen apartment complex.[56] Though specific information does not confirm Edwards's residency and age, the personal ad indicated a complex history of con- and diverging from a subversive queer cruising culture in this Appalachian city. Edwards's ad may have capitalized on the reputation of hotels as a semi-private space for gay men to get "[their] nuts cracked"[57] in casual sexual cruising to meet their immediate sexual needs, as this ad appears in a regional gay press. Additionally, it indicated possibilities of local place-based knowledge where queer individuals could subvert surveillance to create temporary or enduring connections with other LGBTQ+ populations.

Moreover, *The Barb’s* classified section not only offered opportunities to build connections within LGBTQ+ communities but also provided a liminal space for identity expression. In June 1977, Timothy P., out of Huntington, West Virginia, was a "May graduate" of Marshall University and eager to relocate for work. Though Timothy, an education major, had strongly emphasized his ability to ensure "discretion [in] presence and dress" while seeking

[54] Bill Smith, “Will serve studs - John Edwards” personal advertisement, *The Barb* volume 3, no. 6, August 1976, page 15, *The Atlanta History Center*.
[55] Howard, *Men Like That*, xv-xvi; 86, 100-103.
[56] There is a discrepancy concerning the precise renovation date as several sources state it was in 1969, but others claim it was in the mid-1960s. "George Vanderbilt Hotel Approved," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 10, 2016, https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/george-vanderbilt-hotel-approved/docview/1755665094/se-2; Carole Terrell, "REVAMPED VANDERBILT IS STILL HOME," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 25, 2008, https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/revamped-vanderbilt-is-still-home/docview/438755141/se-2; Rachel Bliss, “Vanderbilt Apartments Has a Story to Tell, Too,” *Mountain Xpress (Asheville, NC)*, 2016, https://mountainx.com/opinion/letter-writer-vanderbilt-apartments-has-a-story-to-tell-too.
[57] Smith, “Will serve studs - John Edwards” personals advertisement, *The Barb* volume 3, no. 6, August 1976, page 15, *The Atlanta History Center*.

employment in a "firm, organization, or private concern," this was not his first foray into addressing cultures of silence and discrimination directed toward gay men.[58] In an April edition of Marshall University's *The Parthenon* that same year, Timothy P. submitted a letter to the editor pushing back against another letter's assertion that "the gay minority in America is sorry to embarrass all persons with the name Gay or Gaye by the mere association with any 'queer' group who happen to choose the name."[59] While Timothy P. did not disclose his sexual orientation in this response, he harnesses ideas of Gay Liberation to demonstrate the inundation of discrimination as "the Gay group [is] continually [denied] basic human rights."[60] Timothy P. may be concerned for his economic stability and safety in *The Barb* classified ad to establish connections with LGBTQ+ outside the region. However, paired with his letter to the editor, this evidence showed that Timothy P. not only had access to some LGBTQ+ community connections and information about the Gay Liberation Movement through Marshall University but also felt compelled to use this liminal space as an opportunity to share that information with the public. This information opens the possibility that though LGBTQ+ individuals often adapted to heteronormative ideas of respectability to preserve their social and economic security, navigating these ideas and norms led to creative engagements and defenses of local LGBTQ+ communities.

Given the evidence of which LGBTQ+ individuals have navigated expressions of identity and social standing in local communities, LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia faced both similar and unique challenges in place-making. There were numerous obstacles of heteronormativity,

[58] The ad lists the individual's full name at the listing's closing. Though this is technically a public record, I have chosen only to list his first name as I was unable to find additional information about him and am unsure if he lived openly as gay later in his life. While it is in my purview to uncover LGBTQ+ histories in the region, it is not in my ethics to out others when I cannot confirm their sexual orientation or gender identity. Bill Smith, "May Graduate desires position with firm - Timothy P." personal advertisement, *The Barb* volume 4, no. 5, June 1977, page 22, The Atlanta History Center.
[59] Timothy B. P, "More on Gays," *The Parthenon (*Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia*)*, April 28, 1977, https://mds.marshall.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6033&context=parthenon.
[60] Timothy P, "More on Gays," *The Parthenon*, April 28, 1977.

regional cultures of place, and social connections that influenced queer Appalachian's decisions to negotiate expressions of identity. However, LGBTQ+ Appalachians employed creative ways to facilitate LGBTQ+ communal connections by integrating and circumventing heteronormative sociocultural practices.

Gendered Experiences: Barriers of Violence and Discrimination

For young gay and bisexual men in the Appalachian region during the 1970s and 1980s, their discovery and exploration of homosexuality was fraught with feelings of isolation and fear. Fearing social repercussions if they were too open or discovered, they also faced looming concerns of legal ramifications. For many states during the early and mid-twentieth century, open expressions of gay desire or queer identity could be criminalized. Under sodomy laws, as Jordan Blair Woods argues, "there was little space to view LGBT people in the criminal justice system other than as *deviant* sexual offenders."[61] Sodomy convictions often "reflected the increased hostility of mid-twentieth-century jurors toward homosexual men—also evident in the increasing use of sodomy laws to prosecute consensual acts,"[62] which resulted in expansions of criminalizing queer desire since the 1950s. The decriminalization of sodomy laws in several states, including West Virginia, throughout the 1960s and 1970s allowed LGBTQ+ individuals to challenge the constitutionality of sodomy laws by citing the right to privacy and anti-discrimination principles.[63]

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[61] Jordan Blair Woods, "LGBT Identity and Crime," *California Law Review* 105, no. 3 (2017): 674, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44630758.

[62] Stephen Robertson, "Shifting the Scene of the Crime: Sodomy and the American History of Sexual Violence," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 2 (2010): 240, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40663407.

[63] Woods describes anti-discrimination principles as an extension of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, which does not include protections for LGBTQ+ folks from sexuality or gender identity-based discrimination. However, Woods argues it provides the groundwork in numerous state and federal cases to justify the shift from viewing LGBTQ+ people as deviant offenders to victims of state prosecution. Paired with Robertson's article, this legal shift should be further explored by historians to further link the Black Freedom Struggle and Civil Rights Activism to Gay Liberation activism. Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 219, 222-223; Woods, "LGBT Identity and Crime," 675-676; Robertson, "Shifting the Scene of the Crime," 240-242.

Individuals prosecuted for sodomy in the Appalachian region, like others prosecuted for similar charges nationwide, faced scrutiny and persecution from local communities. Bill Richards, a gay cisgender man and florist who lived in Charleston, West Virginia, was arrested for sodomy in the mid-1960s after separating from his ex-wife, Ann. The court offered Richards the choice be prosecuted under a felony sodomy charge or to serve time at Weston State Mental Hospital. Richards chose to admit himself into Weston. Though recalling that during the almost three months under the facility's maximum security protocols, he was being treated well by the staff, Richards admits he would not have gotten out had he not made connections with VISTA volunteers and Dr. Cornelia Wilbur, the superintendent of Weston Hospital.[64] Notably, Dr. Wilbur was supportive of gay men accused of sodomy, having previously conducted a psychoanalytic study on homosexuality as a natural identity rather than a deviant behavior. She proved immensely helpful in advocating for Richards' release and even in helping his mother come to terms with his homosexuality. Richards considered himself lucky with his release because others had little support. Those charged with sodomy throughout various states in the Appalachian region had to serve lengthy sentences, pay hefty fines, and were outed through newspapers under published charges of "crimes against nature" or "solicitation."

While shared recollections of individual experiences do not account for all experiences of discrimination against lesbian, bisexual, or transgender women, they confirm that gender performance and gender roles played a crucial role in negotiating identity and belonging in Appalachia. Some lesbian and transgender women, such as Mary Margaret "Marty" Ravoria and Aleshia Brevard, described their firsthand experiences of physical violence directly as victims of

[64] Trey Kay, "Us & Them," Podcast, (Trey Kay Productions, West Virginia Public Broadcasting, October 15, 2015), https://www.wvpublic.org/podcast/us-them/2015-10-15/us-them-locked-up-for-sodomy.; Pivot Funeral Home, "Obituary for William Robert Richards," www.pivontfuneralhome.com (*Pivot Funeral Home*, October 2018), https://www.pivontfuneralhome.com/obituary/william-richards.

gendered discriminatory violence. However, many queer Appalachian women may have contextualized their experiences of discrimination as from the role of witnesses rather than victims.[65] Oral historians frequently encounter this issue when interviewing individuals, as narrators may downplay their importance or involvement in events or projects.[66] This is crucial to keep in mind as some women may feel uncomfortable with categorizing themselves within those experiences of violence and harassment or may classify it as either gendered *or* discriminatory violence. In the case of Ravoria and Brevard, they identified themselves as targets of an intersection of violence because their gender performance and sexual orientation placed them at odds with heteronormative standards. However, in other interviews and oral histories, queer women may not recall themselves as victims but are more than likely able to recall other queer women who were targeted by discriminatory violence.

For some LGBTQ+ women, their gender identity (and sexuality) contributes to their experiences of gendered *and* homophobic violence. Dawn Neatherly, a bisexual cisgender woman at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, during the 1980s, recalls fears of sexual violence used to "convert" bisexual and lesbian women to heteronormative

[65] While these oral history excerpts are critical in understanding the clashes of heteronormative and queer social and cultural standards in Appalachia, they do not entirely fit this project's scope. In the case of Marty Ravoria, a lesbian who was violently beaten, sustaining a "busted lip, broken nose, and black eye" when her sister tried to intervene to deter a bully. This incident occurred during the 1950s just outside the Appalachian region. Aleshia Brevard, a transwoman, also experienced gendered violence during her childhood in Erwin, Tennessee. Brevard recalls these experiences differently in her oral history than in her memoir *The Woman I Was Not Born to Be*, by elaborating, "They would want to play cowboys, and I would say 'I won't play unless I'm the cowgirl,' … and they showed me what cowboys do to cowgirls." Again, while this is in the Appalachian region, it is also an incident around the 1940s. The Brooks Fund History Project, "The Brooks Fund History Project - a Secret Only God Knows Documentary," *YouTube*, April 4, 2017, https://youtu.be/vj-KSfY-yw4.

[66] Melissa Walker expertly encapsulated this issue in her seminal collection *Country Women Cope With Hard Times*, showing how various factors caused women to categorize their experiences with farm work and raising families as secondary in comparison to men. Oral historians also encounter this issue with individuals involved in organizations, as many will downplay their role and responsibilities in the efforts. I suggest that this is a crucial component for scholars to keep in mind when researching gendered and LGBTQ+ discrimination in the Appalachian region. It is important to keep in mind that LGBTQ+ people, especially women, may downplay their own brushes with violence or say they had never experienced those situations. Melissa Walker, ed., *Country Women Cope with Hard Times: A Collection of Oral Histories*, JSTOR (University of South Carolina Press, 2004), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv6sj934, xxvi-xxvii.

standards. During Neatherly's sophomore year, while walking, she was harassed by a group of men in a passing pick-up truck who not only hurled insults of "damn dyke" and "f'ing queer," but also physically threatened her by throwing glass beer bottles at her before turning around to pursue her. While Neatherly was wearing shorts and a t-shirt during this encounter, she cited the fear of similar incidents leading LGBTQ+ women to be careful with their gender presentation. Neatherly stated:

> "If people knew that you were a gay woman and you were any resemblance of attractive, you would deal with guys that thought they were either trying to convince you they were going to convert you. … I wasn't sure they weren't going to just drag me in the truck and rape me to convert me. That didn't happen if you were... I use this phrase because it's the easiest description - If you were the really classic diesel dyke that didn't even hardly look like you were female, you wouldn't get bothered with that kind of behavior. You might get called names, but there wouldn't be somebody threatening to cure you. That was kind of weird. I noticed that we all migrated to a real androgynous look. It was like as much as you could get to that point, it felt safer."[67]

With these homophobic discriminatory experiences overlapping with harassment and violence based on heteronormative understandings of gender, existing as a queer woman in the Appalachian region came with challenges. While queer women navigated these heteronormative paradigms of how they should behave and act as women, they also wrestled with challenges posed to their sexuality as deviations from regional gender norms.

Timothea Branham, a cisgender lesbian woman who grew up Pikeville, Kentucky during the 1970s, also reflected that presentations and performance of gender may have contributed to or alleviated discriminatory experiences. Branham posited in her oral history that it may have been "easier for [LGBTQ+] women" to live in Appalachia as their behaviors and expressions of intimacy were seen as appropriate for their gender. She explained that socially, women were

[67] Dawn Neatherly, interview by Sarah Steiner, January 25, 2021, Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63048.

considered more expressive, and allowing a sense of plausible deniability as feminine expressions of greeting and friendship are more "touchy" than men.[68] As many LGBTQ+ women in the Appalachian region had exposure to heteronormative sociocultural standards and other's experiences of violence or discrimination, they may have used this knowledge to express aspects of their LGBTQ+ identity dissimulatively. Branham believes that because of these gender dynamics, community suspicions of a woman behaving in masculine ways or openly expressing sapphic desire may have chalked it up to being a "funny little woman" who went her own way, or a tomboy who would "grow out" of the behavior. By striking a balance between heteronormative understandings of femininity and queer identity expression, many LGBTQ+ women may have found it easier to live quietly queer lives within the Appalachian region.[69]

Branham also acknowledged that cultural understandings of masculinity in Appalachia may have contributed to the excessive scrutiny and private expressions of sexuality and gender performance by LGBTQ+ men in the region. Particularly in Central Appalachia, where physical prowess and strength are characteristics linked with masculine identity in the region's industrial and rural history, young boys and men were subject to negotiations of identity expression. Speaking of men involved with the coal industry, Branham stated, "it's not just a community: it's an industry, but it's an industry that absorbs entire communities. When you have that going on, that if you're someone they perceive as 'less' [or] feminine, they're threatened by it. It's unnerving to them. It's something that's targeted."[70] Compared to Turner's recollections of the acceptance in the Black coal camps of Lynch, Kentucky, these diverging accounts emphasize the

[68] Heteronormative understandings of gender account for brief displays of affection or desire between women, such as "holding hands" or "kisses on the cheek."
[69] Timothea Branham, interview by Zachary Clark Pence, *Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries*, April 14, 2011, https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7d513tw528.
[70] Branham, interview by Pence, April 14, 2011.

varying ranges of accepting LGBTQ+ individuals within the Appalachian region through the lenses of race and gender. Within the coal industry, miners worked closely with one another and maintained strong bonds of camaraderie. Especially for LGBTQ+ men who worked in this industry and lived within that regional culture, they would not only need to remain closeted for their safety but to maintain their livelihoods in a dwindling industry.

"Appalachia as a Middle Ground": The AIDS Epidemic in the Appalachian Region

Mark Bryant estimates that he had "attended fifty funerals in three years of friends who died from AIDS," as friends began to "drop like flies" when he was living in Atlanta at the height of the AIDS epidemic.[71] During the late 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to stir up political and social activism within LGBTQ+ communities and captured the public's attention. This harrowing time in LGBTQ+ history was rife with rampant misinformation about the virus and growing stigma, which created difficulties for individuals seeking treatment for HIV/AIDS diagnoses. While the AIDS epidemic brought out homophobic prejudices within the United States to shame and ostracize LGBTQ+ populations, efforts of supportive communities who combatted the spread of misinformation and the virus itself emerged as crucial narratives. Many LGBTQ+ folks, allies, and businesses were at the forefront of the public health crisis to rally support HIV/AIDS patients through quality-of-life care, fundraising, politically advocacy, and prevention education.[72]

Though there may have been misgivings about LGBTQ+ Appalachians who contracted HIV/AIDS in the region, families across axes of race, religion, and class stepped up to support those in need. Roy Dean Sexton recalled his interactions with his ex-partner Andre and Andre's

[71] Bryant, interview by Cope, April 22, 2023.
[72] Abigail Stephens, "HIV in Appalachia," (BA Senior Thesis, 2018), https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/f/A_Stephens_While_2018.pdf, 4-6, 10-11, 19-21.

mother in an interview with Zachary Clark Pence, which offered regional insight into this subject. Sexton, a white gay man, recalled that his first love and gay relationship was with Andre, a Black gay man, in the region. They were roommates in the 1970s who had an on-off relationship as undergrads and this relationship was intensely significant and private for them both. However, they separated due to growing rumors across campus about Andre's promiscuity and sexuality rather than the "racial dynamics" of the time. Additionally, Sexton's girlfriend, whom he had begun dating to quell rumors that he was gay, became pregnant. Sexton married the girlfriend because "that was the [responsible] thing" to do at this time, fulfilling an unspoken heteronormative expectation among Appalachian and Southern communities. However, Andre and Sexton still considered one another friends despite having lost touch after the breakup. They ultimately reconnected in the late 1980s, but Andre had contracted HIV/AIDS earlier in the decade and he never disclosed this until his condition had significantly deteriorated by the mid-1990s. By this time, Andre was most likely living with his mother as Sexton had reached out to him during divorcing his wife. In the interview, Sexton described that Andre's unnamed mother cared for her son and facilitated communication between the two ex-lovers. Sexton recalled her confessing during a phone call that she had wished that, "y'all would have been together because y'all have been living somewhere happy and healthy."[73] Though it is unclear if Andre's mother approved of her son's sexual orientation and behaviors, this statement made it crystal clear that she accepted her son and wanted the best for him.

Unpacking experiences like Sexton's, Andre's, and Andre's mother with seminal work on the AIDS epidemic regional contexts can support understandings of LGBTQ+ Appalachian identity expression and place-making. For example, Andre's mother's wishes that Sexton and

[73] Roy Dean Sexton, interview by Zachary Clark Pence, September 27, 2011, *Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries*.

Andre could "[live] somewhere happy and healthy," indicated a complex culture of silence in the region. Sexton ended his relationship with Andre to adapt to the heteronormative sociocultural influences of his upbringing, which was a common occurrence for many LGBTQ+ individuals.[74] However, many queer individuals living in Appalachia during the 1970s and 1980s had stable relationships and connected with the LGBTQ+ community. Many LGBTQ+ folks navigated these heteronormative constructs to maintain a local community presence, but maintaining this respectability also afforded LGBTQ+ people the privacy they needed to engage in subversive acts of queer expression and community building. Though many like Sexton adopted these behaviors to obscure their queer expressions and connections, LGBTQ+ folks could mold their engagement in these sociocultural norms to fit their desires.

Analyses of the AIDS epidemic in Appalachia also shifts the story of a crucial juncture in LGBTQ+ histories beyond the heavily urban-centered narratives. Mary Anglin argued in her research of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Appalachia that grassroots organizations and familial networks provided crucial support to AIDS patients in the region. Andre's mother was still willing to provide care for him as his health declined whether she approved of his identity or not and provided vital mediation by informing Sexton about his condition and his death. However, "there is no one story of AIDS in Appalachia" as there were various modes and sites of transmission and innumerable responses to HIV/AIDS patients.[75] Andre's final years were likely made as comfortable as possible by the love and attention of a caring and devoted mother. However, others who relied on their families when returning to the region or contracting HIV/AIDS in Appalachia may have experienced shame, discrimination, or rejection.

[74] Sexton, interview by Pence, September 27, 2011.
[75] Mary Anglin, "Aids in Appalachia: Medical Pathologies and the Problem of Identity," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1997): 183, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41446280.

Anglin's argues that Appalachia became a "middle ground" in these analyses as "Appalachia might be viewed as a place where people with disparate gender identities and ways of life have co-existed amidst countervailing forces of sexism, homophobia, and tolerance."[76] In some Appalachian spaces, LGBTQ+ individuals with HIV/AIDS may have had accessible healthcare because of their proximity services and grassroots organizations. Organizations like the Western North Carolina AIDS Project (WNCAP) or AIDS Volunteers of Lexington (AVOL) that emerged in the mid-1980s shared similar goals of education, patient support, and prevention with national organizations. Moreover, Barbara Bell, a nurse who worked with HIV/AIDS patients in the western North Carolina VA Hospitals, indicated that several LGBTQ+ people who had left the region came back because when diagnosed with HIV/AIDS because "the services [available] were better than [those] they all had to compete for in the big cities."[77] Thus, these accounts emphasized not only that the spread and treatment of HIV/AIDS extended well beyond urban epicenters, but there was an availability of resources in the region for healthcare, quality of life support, and preventive educational outreach.

However, not all resources may have been equally accessible within the region, dependent of whether one resided in an urban or rural space. In a study of HIV+ men living in south Central Appalachia in the early 2010s, Roger Blackwell Jr. asserted that for rural HIV/AIDS patients, "health care services were not located in an easily accessible area for them."[78] If HIV/AIDs patients currently living in rural areas are struggling to access resources, it

[76] Mary K Anglin, "Stories of AIDS in Appalachia," in *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 276, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcp5m.23.
[77] Barbara Bell, interview by Horace Vanderbilt, November 2, 2019, *Special Collections at UNC Asheville*, https://www6.unca.edu/ohms/viewer.php?cachefile=APOH12.xml.
[78] Roger L. Blackwell, Jr., "Health Service Utilization and Stigma among HIV-Positive Men-Who-Have-Sex-with Men (MSM) in Rural Appalachia" (PhD Dissertation, 2013), https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3374&context=etd, 103.

is not a stretch to say that they experienced similar difficulties at the height of the epidemic. When considering the logistics and availability of support for LGBTQ+ people with HIV/AIDS in rural areas, support systems would most likely consist of friends and family in local communities. In those cases, family and friends would have provided support, care, and facilitated transportation to medical appointments. During the height of the epidemic, as the mortality rates increased, LGBTQ+ HIV/AIDS patients may have felt it was vital, or even at least preferable, to die in the care of their family and friends.[79]

However, when family and friends in Appalachia became the primary caretakers of loved ones with HIV/AIDS, there were efforts to shield the individual or maintain their reputation in the community. John Wermuth, a business owner, and gay man previously lived in Philadelphia and Atlanta before moving to western North Carolina, recalled the difficulties for families to accept the diagnosis of a loved one with AIDS. One of the first friends Wermuth lost in the AIDS epidemic was a friend from Philadelphia who had enlisted in the Navy. When his friend left the Navy and his health declined following his AIDS diagnosis, his "mom and dad didn't know how to handle it. This was new to them, [and they] didn't even know their son was gay. … [they were] much older [and] didn't understand this whole thing. [They] denied it was AIDS. They would never use that word. He was just sick."[80] As the subsequent misinformation and stigma of HIV/AIDS spread throughout the nation, similar stories may also factor into the depth and breadth of regional community dynamics.

[79] Stephens, "HIV in Appalachia," 11; Blackwell, "Health Service Utilization and Stigma among HIV-Positive Men-Who-Have-Sex-with Men (MSM) in Rural Appalachia," 103-106.

[80] During the interview, the nature of how and why Wermuth's friend leaves naval service is not clarified. However, this could present an opportunity to extend historical inquiries pioneered by Margot Canaday in *The Straight State* to examine the scope and impacts of "blue" discharges during the 1980s. John Wermuth, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 13, 2023.

Migration and Residency: Regional Urban and Rural Queer Connections

Considering these social, cultural, and economic obstacles encountered by LGBTQ+ people in rural Appalachia during the 1970s and 1980s, many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people often migrated to urban spaces within or outside the Appalachian region. While the qualitative data could offer definitive insights into these migration patterns, the qualitative experiences of inter- and intraregional LGBTQ+ migrants illuminate the regional complexity. Throughout memoirs and oral histories, many LGBTQ+ Appalachians thought of urban spaces as a refuge from their small-town upbringing. However, many LGBTQ+ Appalachians did not venture far from their hometowns, expressing complex desires of where they wanted to live and how they connected with and created queer communities. One important reason queer Appalachians chose to remain close to home was to stay connected to their families and friends. During this period, many interviews and memoirs indicated that young LGBTQ+ people stayed within 150-200 miles of their hometowns. Many young queer Appalachians may have made these decisions due to connections with family and friends, educational costs, and personal ambition.[81]

To enroll and live on a college or university campus became an ideal way to connect with other queer peers, work towards future success, and stay close to home for young LGBBTQ+ Appalachians inn the 1970s and 1980s. As Branham reflected how enlightening her time at Morehead University was in the late 1980s, being able to attend a nearby college was "far enough away that mom and dad don't know everything, but they're close enough that if I get myself in trouble, they can come there and rescue me."[82] Places like Morehead and Berea,

[81] The lack of LGBTQ documentation in census records during this era makes studying the issue complex. LGBTQ individuals often faced challenges living openly in their hometowns, leading some to move away while others stayed due to family ties or connections to rural areas. Further research is needed to understand the socio-cultural norms in Appalachia, but sourcing this information may be difficult for historians.
[82] Branham, interview by Pence, April 14, 2011.

Kentucky; Blacksburg, Virginia; Charleston and Morganton, West Virginia; Johnson City, Tennessee; and Cullowhee and Boone, North Carolina emerged as crucial locations for young LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia. For them, college campuses offered various activities and programs for skill-building, specialized studies, and recreation. Additionally, LGBTQ+ adults also sought employment opportunities on college campuses as these institutions offered a stable career path, opportunities to meet other LGBTQ+ adults, and mentor queer young adults. There were few overt social LGBTQ+ groups formed on college campuses to facilitate connection and empower LGBTQ+ students during the 1970s and 1980s. However, queer Appalachian students and faculty members claimed space in dining halls, gyms, and reserved classroom or library spaces to form queer communal connections.

However, following college experiences, the roads could lead to home and create internal conflicts as LGBTQ+ Appalachians assimilated or adopted heteronormative expectations to fit into their communities. Ties to place are usually indicative of support and familial ties, but they could also pose a hindrance or potential dangers to LGBTQ+ individuals. For Bruce Allen Bechdel, a closeted gay man, high school English teacher, mortician, and local historian, his connection to Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, may have been his undoing. His daughter, Alison Bechdel, addressed this conflict and the memories of her father in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic.* While the memoir is often left out of Appalachian literary studies, the location of Beech Creek in western-central Pennsylvania's Allegheny Plateau places it in the northern Appalachian region. Moreover, it emphasizes how a place can influence, inform, and hinder an individual when having to reconcile their identity and cultures of place.

Alison stated that Bruce Bechdel never fit in among his army buddies, his family, the community in Beech Creek, or even among the gay men with whom he sought companionship.

Though Bechdel spent his life in Beech Creek, he made forays to find spaces of belonging as far away as France and Germany during his military service, in Greenwich Village, New York on business trips, or local hunting and camping sites just outside town. Alison never classified her father as stuck in Beech Creek when she reflected on his life as he seemed more worldly with his discussions Marcel Proust and having dressed in the finest men's fashion. However, upon hearing her father's recording of a guided tour for a local landmark, was struck by his drawl, and reflected on the mile-and-a-half radius where Bruce was born, lived, and died.[83] As a college-educated, well-traveled, closeted gay man and military veteran, Bruce Bechdel may have experienced irreconcilable identity crises when faced with the complex cultures of place. After he dropped out of graduate school, finished his military service, and suddenly lost his father, Bruce Bechdel returned to Beech Creek to run the family funeral home, support his widowed mother, and raise his young family.[84] While Bechdel's efforts to reacclimate to Beech Creek's heteronormative culture paired with his internal conflicts eventually caused irreparable damage to himself, his reputation, and community members. Alison was shocked by a conversation with her mother to discover Bruce had inappropriate relationships with some of his male high school students. He was also abusive toward his family, often having violent outbursts directed at his wife, where he would destroy books, paintings, or furniture.[85] However, examining his travels outside the region reveals the consequences of forcing himself into heteronormative standards, emphasizing Bechdel's internal conflict of regional influence and identity expression.

[83] Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 144, 30-32, 71.
[84] Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 62, 31,
[85] To be clear, this is not to condone or excuse Bruce's physical and emotional abuse. Instead, it serves as an example of the psychic damage and harmful patterns that constantly living in fear or feeling withdrawn from communities of belonging can do to a person. He was an adult and bears full responsibility for his actions, but it is crucial to identify what events and circumstances contributed to these actions. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 79, 94, 161, 211, 70, 81.

When traveling to queer spaces in urban areas on "family vacations" and "business trips," Bruce potentially met further challenges to his identity through the cultural constructions he carried with him. Although these urban spaces were more visibly queer, he may have felt alienated by these areas despite his desire to fit in. Notably, Bechdel and his children's trip to Greenwich Village during the US Bicentennial elucidated this complexity of internal conflict. During this time, Allison Bechdel remembered being in awe of the openness of gay and lesbian couples who traveled Christopher Street, meeting her parent's friends, and even when seeing *A Chorus Line*.[86] While this was a crucial turning point for Alison, she remembered her father as reserved and cold in this atmosphere. Though he still snuck out to go to gay bars and sought out connections, Bechdel may have evaluated the stereotypes of living as a closeted gay man in a rural area. Specifically, his drawl, erudite yet stoically masculine persona, values, and experiences may have made him appear strange to Greenwich Village gays. Although Bruce Bechdel sought out belonging in these spaces, his discretion and self-destructive tendencies may have created barriers to those connections. He was still a stranger in both spaces, never able to fully enmesh himself in overt queer culture or the sociocultural norms in rural northern Appalachia. In struggling to belong in these spaces, Bruce continually returned to his closeted life out of fears of rejection and losing his already tenuous ties to family and place. Though this is much of Alison Bechdel's speculation, Bruce Bechdel may have died by suicide because he found himself overwhelmed by his crises of identity and place. Bechdel's death given came suddenly, just four months after she came out as a lesbian and when he faced an upcoming trial of his inappropriate relationship with a student.[87]

[86] Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 189-193.

[87] Bechdel acknowledges that her father may not have committed suicide and it may have been an accident, but strongly infers it was suicide. Bechdel died when he was struck by a truck crossing the road from a farmhouse he

Much of this inter-regional migration, like intra-regional migrations, stemmed from a desire to connect with LGBTQ+ communities and cultures. Like urban migrations outside of the Appalachian region, regionally urban areas garnered reputations as more accepting than rural areas. For instance, during his senior year at Hinton High School, Jeff Mann yearned to "'get [his] gorgeous wings and fly away'" to West Virginia University in Morgantown. This goal came from queer friends Bill and Kaye, who had written letters home to Mann detailing their discovery of Morgantown's local gay bars and queer culture.[88] Though he remained closeted to his family throughout high school, he relied heavily on these friendships with many young lesbians and the mentorship of his biology teacher, who remained a substantial source of communal support for him in Hinton as he came to terms and recognized his gay identity.

Through these experiences, Mann, like many other LGBTQ+ Appalachians, felt at odds with the prevalence of heteronormative standards and negative stereotypes of rurality, as he questioned his place and belonging in those spaces. Mann described Hinton as a place where he experienced harassment, ridicule, and violence, and these recollections contribute to dichotomous perceptions of the region. To those who grew up not fitting into those sociocultural norms or to people outside of these spaces, rurality gains a negative association with close-mindedness and discrimination, which portrayed it unsafe. Urban spaces, which were seen by small-town LGBTQ+ individuals as places where they could claim space and identity, became the light at the end of the tunnel where they can also access that level of connection and expression. However, it is never as cut and dry as these dichotomies presume. Mann identified Hinton as an unsafe place to reside, but he could not venture too far from his home due to the

was renovating on July 3, 1980, which may have been an unfortunate accident or an intentional suicide attempt. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 30, 49-50, 52, 126, 205, 219-222.

[88] Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, 16.

importance of familial ties. His extended family of aunts and uncles doted on him, his hometown friends rejoiced in their reunions, and his parents vocally accepted their gay son.[89] Despite these positive connections and associations with rural spaces, Mann doubted that he could ever permanently return due to his negative experiences in Hinton. However, urban spaces in the Appalachian region offered him a compromise: feeling safe, and still in Appalachia. Mann eventually settled in Blacksburg, Virginia where he was hired as an English professor at Virginia Tech. While the employment was a definite perk, the city is also a space where he can have the best of queer Appalachian cultures.[90] While this feeling of sociocultural isolation from his hometown would spur this transition, it would not last as he, like many others, negotiated identity through spatial lenses. While he is not the only individual trying to reconcile a desire for local and communal connection, these ideas emerged as a driving force for LGBTQ+ Appalachians to shift from dissimulative negotiations to overt identity-claiming and place-making.

Queer individuals also created lives in suburban and rural spaces within Appalachia. While many LGBTQ+ individuals within Appalachia were drawn to regional urban centers or outside the region, others migrated to rural spaces for various reasons, including privacy. Dr. Marilyn M. Jody, an English professor and lesbian, recalled her admiration of the local rural communities surrounding Western Carolina University in her memoir *Letter to Emily*. Jody grew up in Ohio and Pennsylvania. However, she chose to make her home and lived much of her life in western North Carolina. While she was employed at Western Carolina University, this decision primarily hinged on her feeling connected to the region. Jody recalls that "the mountains felt like home" from the moment she had entered the region, not only finding solace in the

[89] Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, 25, 45, 92, 108-109.
[90] Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, 45, 102-103.

privacy the rural area afforded her but also striking a chord with her family legacy. Jody's family lineage from her father's side traced back to rural southeastern Kentucky "since Daniel Boone cut his trail through the Great Smoky Mountains."[91] Though Jody was not open with her lesbian identity throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, her relationships with other women, if discovered, were rarely an issue for people she would encounter in Cullowhee outside of her workplace. While the influence of the university may be responsible for introducing tolerance or acceptance that diffused into the surrounding communities, cultures of place within the Appalachian region are also important to understanding Jody's experiences.

For instance, while purchasing land and restoring a traditional log cabin with her former partner, Libby, the only issue she recalled in that process was a persnickety loan adjuster at a local bank. The adjuster insisted that the bank could not issue her a loan because she did not have a husband or father present to cosign.[92] Meanwhile, her dealings with purchasing land and the old cabin, hiring restoration artisans and construction laborers, and open discussions of the project with her former landlady were almost all conducted with Libby present. Jody suspected that many of the folks she was working with had known about the "young ladies" and their project. However, Jody and her partner were treated kindly by artisans and construction laborers involved in the project, especially with seventy-year-old Jack Hoyle. Hoyle felt an intense connection to and appreciation for Jody, referring to the cabin restoration as "our project" and inviting Jody to learn traditional processes for creating materials and construction processes. Jody and Hoyle remained friends after the cabin's completion. They remained in contact for twenty years until his death, which she considered one of the most profound and enlightening

[91] Marilyn Jody, *Letter to Emily* (Indianapolis, Illinois: Outskirts Press, 2010), 61, 78-79.
[92] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 81.

relationships she has made.[93] While Jody carefully navigated these spaces and closely guarded her lesbian identity, she found that the rural spaces around the university felt like home and fulfilled her desire for community.

Dawn Neatherly also recalled the communal fulfillment she felt by attending Western Carolina University, which provided her essential educational, cultural, and social opportunities. Though her father was in the military, and she lived much of her life in Morganton, North Carolina, she described her upbringing as more liberal due to her parent's worldly attitudes. Their support and permissible attitudes were cited as a crucial opportunity for her early exposure to lesbian culture through her cousin's softball team, meeting well-traveled lesbian and bisexual friends in Morganton, and feeling comfortable claiming queer identity among her family.[94] However, Neatherly recalled that an "exceptionally bright girl who loved to learn was not a great fit in 1970s rural North Carolina" as she was "taunted by other children for being smart and she lacked a peer group who respected her talents."[95]

Though these early experiences of sexism had a profound impact on Neatherly, she prevented fixed ideas of gender roles, gender performance, and sexuality limit her expressions of self. Throughout her youth, Neatherly capitalized on opportunities to attend academic-oriented camps hosted by Western Carolina University, which supported her desires for educational stimulation and cultural connection. During these summer camps, Neatherly was not only exposed to local culture and connections in a rural space but also learned by sharing ideas and influences from her upbringing in Morganton. This blend of experimentation, performance, and validation generated a unique expression of belonging, creating a sentimental and intrinsic tie to

[93] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 82-85.
[94] Neatherly, interview by Steiner, January 25, 2021.
[95] WCU Alumni Association, "The Mountains Had Her at Hello," *WCU Stories (blog)*, May 27, 2020, https://www.wcu.edu/stories/posts/dawn-neatherly.aspx.

a place where Neatherly felt most comfortable with her self-expression. In fact, Neatherly recalled that she eventually "saw Cullowhee as her home and Morganton as a place she stayed during the school year."[96] Through this feeling of connection to place and discovering varying modes of expression, whether rooted in academic ambition, gendered expression, or sexual orientation, she chose to complete her undergraduate and graduate degrees at WCU.

However, WCU was not the haven she had always envisioned, and she tried to balance the discriminatory attitudes she encountered on campus. Neatherly found it difficult to seek out LGBTQ+ connections due the prevalent discrimination of the student body. Heterosexual students and some faculty were often "insulting, used [homophobic] slang, accused people of things," and created a social atmosphere that was "not particularly violently negative, but just negative." Therefore, Neatherly and other LGBTQ+ students endured a culture of indirect discrimination while "hiding in plain sight."[97] However, despite this prevalence of homophobia, lesbian students and faculty engaged in social outings and campus activities to connect.

Historically, sports like softball have been strongly associated with lesbian culture and as a way for lesbians to make social connections.[98] In the early 1980s, lesbians and some gay men at WCU engaged in sports, such as volleyball, basketball, or softball, which functioned as a primary connection between campus and local communities. Especially for lesbian students, these sports became part of the social fabric among the campus's LGBTQ+ community, as attending the games held the same gravity as their plans to go out to the lesbian bars in Asheville on Thursday evenings. While many games and practices for campus-sponsored teams and

[96] WCU Alumni Association, "The Mountains Had Her at Hello," *WCU Stories (blog)*, May 27, 2020, https://www.wcu.edu/stories/posts/dawn-neatherly.aspx.
[97] Neatherly, interview by Steiner, January 25, 2021.
[98] Howard, *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, 205, 209, 212, 278; Rosenthal, *Living Queer History*, 107, 111.

intramural sports took place in the Breese and Reid Gyms or the intramural fields, the games would be played and spectated by lesbian and gay students. Basketball games in Reid had a more mixed spectating crowd of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual spectators due to scheduling the women's games before the men's. However, Neatherly asserted that every lesbian on campus would "be in [the] Breese Gym" for volleyball matches. Particularly for volleyball, Neatherly recalled the game's social and competitive atmosphere being "as comfortable as being at the bar. It was just a room full of lesbians watching a ball game full of lesbians, being coached by lesbians."[99] As such, sports became a central aspect for campus circles of lesbian and gay students as it offered opportunities to meet, gather, and connect in public settings while refuting trite stereotypes espoused by heteronormative populations. As these activities became central for establishing connections between lesbians, whether as spectators or players, they would lead to opportunities to plan Thursday night and weekend social outings that pushed the boundary of public expressions of queer identities.[100]

Neatherly's time at WCU also offers insights into the complexities of creating LGBTQ+ social circles and belonging in specific environments within rural spaces. In her oral history, Neatherly described herself as a "cultural bridge" on campus due to her previous exposures to lesbian literature, womyn's music, queer history, and feminism. The WCU lesbian community had been different from her previous interactions with other communities of bisexual and lesbian women, as it "was social … and sexual, [but] not cultural."[101] During her time at WCU, Neatherly's relationships and connections with campus lesbians focused on her role within the

[99] Neatherly, interview by Steiner, January 25, 2021
[100] While Neatherly was ingrained with the campus lesbian community and engaged in sapphic relationships during her time at Western, Neatherly often found difficulties identifying as bisexual. When she began dating a man in her junior and senior years, she lost many relationships with many lesbian friends due to internalized biphobia and being seen as "a traitor" to her queer cultural identity. Neatherly, interview by Steiner, January 25, 2021.
[101] Neatherly, interview by Steiner, January 25, 2021.

community. However, asserting gender identity and sexuality could be fraught with tension for many LGBTQ+ folks on campus. For instance, Neatherly stated that gay and lesbian groups were insular. She remembered that gay men would rarely engage or spend time around lesbians on campus, sparsely engaging at Asheville gay bars on Saturday nights. This separation may have resulted from fear of being outed in terms of "guilt by association" rather than being targeted for open gay expression. As Neatherly points out, it also may have been "a lot more dangerous and … scarier to be a gay man on campus"[102] during the 1980s amid the HIV/AIDS crisis. Moreover, despite her support and associations with lesbian social circles on campus as an openly bisexual woman, Neatherly's friends saw it as a betrayal when she began relationship with a man during her junior year of undergrad. Though she had gained this reputation as an expert on queer culture among the lesbians of WCU, she lost friends for dating him and this social positioning fell apart from biphobia in mid-1980s. Under these circumstances, as seen here with gay men and bisexual people, current perspectives and events may have limited communal engagement as LGBTQ+ individuals prioritize their safety and well-being. However, these influences warrant more investigation into how LGBTQ+ communities shape and are shaped by communities of belonging in unexpected places.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ individuals during the 1970s and 1980s in Appalachia built connections with one another and express queer identities in dissimulative ways to create spaces of belonging. While engaging with some heteronormative behaviors and negotiating "closeted" identity, LGBTQ+ individuals created connections to identify spaces of belonging while maintaining community social and economic status. As LGBTQ+ individuals shaped these spaces of expression and belonging, many still prioritized their connections to the people and places within

[102] Neatherly, interview by Steiner, January 25, 2021.

the region. Though many LGBTQ+ individuals in rural Appalachia dreamed of leaving their rural hometowns for urban spaces to lead more open lives, many often chose not to stray too far from their families. Moreover, many chose to reside and live within those rural spaces to maintain those connections of place.

CHAPTER TWO: OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS: GENERATIONAL DIVIDES AND QUEER CONNECTIONS, 1990-2015

"Do you think anyone else heard me?"[1] The question whispered by Dr. Marilyn M. Jody after announcing the name of the course, Gay and Lesbian Literature, to her trepidatious students evoked laughter from her undergraduate and graduate students. These students, a mix of openly and closeted gay, lesbian, and bisexual students and "about half the class" being straight, open-minded scholars and allies, brought excited energy to this first class in the fall semester of 1994. However, for the instructor and students of the Gay and Lesbian Literature course, this question also addressed the tension in the room. Jody, a distinguished English professor at Western Carolina University since 1967 and a lesbian woman, had only proposed this class and opened about her sexuality to other faculty members after "sexual orientation" had been added to the university's Title IX nondiscrimination clause.[2] Even before the first class meeting, the course received criticism from conservative students and residents surrounding the campus. As the

[1] Dr. Jody's memoir is unclear on when the class was held at the university. However, student course catalogs, the university's nondiscrimination policy, and the campus newspaper, *The Western Carolinian*, helped triangulate an estimated date. In researching these sources, the course was most likely held during the fall semester of 1994. Considering the updates of the nondiscrimination policy listed in the course catalog and the identified denoted year of revision, this strengthens the memoir's place and discussion within the chapter. Marilyn Jody, *Letter to Emily*, (Indianapolis, Illinois: Outskirts Press, 2010), 3; Western Carolina University, *Undergraduate Catalog Issue: The Record '94-'95, Vol LXX, No.1*, (Cullowhee, NC: April 1994). accessed September 19th, 2023, https://www.wcu.edu/_files/academic-enrichment/UG_Catalog_94_95.pdf; Western Carolina University, *Graduate Catalog Issue: The Record '94-'95, Vol LXX, No.2*, (Cullowhee, NC: April 1994). accessed September 19th, 2023, https://www.wcu.edu/_files/academic-enrichment/GR_Catalog_94_95.pdf; Western Carolina University Office of the Chancellor, "University Policy 53: Unlawful Discrimination," May 10th, 1995, https://www.wcu.edu/discover/leadership/office-of-the-chancellor/legal-counsel-office/university-policies/numerical-index/university-policy-53.aspx; Blake Frizzell, "Homosexual Literature: Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover," *The Western Carolinian*, Vol. 60 No. 06, September 22nd, 1994, 15, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/57788.

[2] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 16.

course was the first of its kind on the WCU campus, Jody and her students stood ready to disrupt a long silence within the Appalachian region.[3]

The liminal presence of the "invisible class auditors"[4] that Jody and her students occasionally refer to and some students concealing their texts are also indicative of the culture of silence and the supposedly controversial nature of this class. When Blake Frizzell purchased her books at the university bookstore, she quickly deflected that her books, such as *Gay Short Stories* and *Lesbian Short Stories,* were "just for a class" when the cashier commented on the "strange titles."[5] Moreover, some students feared openly carrying their texts around campus; one student even wrapped her books in brown paper covers to obscure the titles to avoid harassment, criticism, and ostracism from her peers.[6] However, there was a connection to and desire for these works of queer expression and identity. Jody's "invisible auditors," while not physically present in the course, may have also used similar excuses in secreting away the texts as they made off with "half of the books required for [the] class" before many of Jody's students could purchase them.[7] For generations in Appalachia and across the nation, there were few places where LGBTQ+ people could openly express or explore their queer sexuality or gender performances. There were also seemingly fewer places deemed safe to seek answers for those unsure or questioned their identity constructions.

However, these students persisted in their efforts to express themselves and support other LGBTQ+ students. Throughout Jody's memoir *Letter to Emily*, she recalled being consistently surprised and inspired by her students' courage, authenticity, and resiliency. In class, the shared

[3] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 1-4.
[4] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 3.
[5] Frizzell, "Homosexual Literature: Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover," *The Western Carolinian*, 15.
[6] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 3; Frizzell, "Homosexual Literature," 15.
[7] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 3.

deeply personal experiences pushed beyond the paradigms of rejection and acceptance, capturing the complexity of queer histories and education as transformative and expansive. Jody relayed this importance to her department chair and peers when the Gay and Lesbian Literature course came up for review at the end of the semester, advocating for the importance of the class. She presented her student's resiliency and their impactful revelations to a room full of her colleagues. Jody's emphasis on the strength and vulnerability of her students was profound, as she recalled "Dwayne's childhood pain, Leonard's condemnation by his mother, the tragedy of Janet's aunt, Sandy's parents' threats to withdraw her from school, Carol's broken engagement, and Stacey's sham marriage," that emphasized the generational shift of ideas of identity expression, space-claiming, and place-making.[8]

Jody's reflections on the course and her interactions with a new generation of LGBTQ+ and allied students revealed significant generational shifts in expressions of queer identities. Jody possessed a reputation as an excellent scholar and educator. However, the conflict between her role, identity, and emotions during this semester-long class often took a toll. Jody struggled to navigate the professional and personal nature of her teaching and guidance when tackling these discussion topics and themes. In many cases, it became difficult for her to embrace the outspoken bravery of her students, flinching at terms several of her students embrace and use, like "freaks" and "queer." Jody had found herself on the receiving end of those terms as insults, which dredged up painful memories of harassment and loss. However, Jody recognized that this is perpetuating the "real silence" as she admitted, "old habits die hard. … [In class,] every week

[8] Many of these students reveal incredibly personal details of their lives throughout this semester due to the nature of the material they cover in class. These are incredibly important but too much for a single footnote. For the specific quote from the paragraph, see Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 114. For details from the other student's experiences, see Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 6-7, 39, 41-42, 3, 94, 5-6, 93-94, 104, 69, 72-73.

was taking us into more and more painful recollections, and I did not want to go there."[9] Though Jody recognized this transforming vocabulary and vulnerability as a positive shift, it was challenging to personally reconcile given her previous experiences.

Though Jody had been such an advocate for social justice and an accomplished academic, it was difficult for her to publicly come out as a lesbian in the 1990s, to speak out for LGBTQ+ rights, and to advocate for her queer students in professional settings. While part of this was rooted in the respectability politics of her role and position, it also encompassed behaviors she had utilized to ensure her safety. Reflecting on her activism, Jody describes herself as someone who:

> "challenged segregation in the '50s; marched for civil rights in the '60s; for women's rights in the '70s, to end the war every decade. It was always a time to support Peace Talks somewhere, save the environment, [and] challenge the status quo. … Yet, I had never taken the real risk. I had always chosen to be on the side of the angels, at least outwardly. To be a gay activist was to lose the acceptability I had spent a lifetime trying to acquire. So why now? And, O Lord, why me?"[10]

To protect her personal safety and career, Jody actively practiced mêtis to navigate heteronormative standards. Though her personal experience informed her navigations of trauma, tragedy, and oppression, it also allowed her to identify opportunities to covertly build connections, support other LGBTQ+ individuals, and express herself. Teaching this course to this group of students, openly and unapologetically, to move closer to a more empathetic and accepting society was a dream that was coming true. It was a moment when her life's work came to fruition, but she was still struggled to find a way to classify herself within it.

During the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, expressions of queer identity and ideas of place-making among LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia diverged due to generational

[9] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 19.
[10] Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 8-9.

differences. Those coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s in Appalachia (and elsewhere) had embodied sentiments of mid-twentieth-century homophile movements in valuing their privacy while maintaining social standing in their local communities. However, following the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the mid-1980s, views of remaining closeted and the dissimulative maneuvering within heteronormative social norms faded, replaced by overt expressions of queer identity among younger generations.[11] Drawing from the influence of these older generations of private LGBTQ+ individuals, young queer Appalachians forged new expressions of identity, resiliency, and place-making.

Queer Editions: Newspapers and LGBTQ+ Discourse in Appalachia

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, queer sexuality and gender identity emerged as a political and social issue in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, subsequent political activism, and trends in popular culture. In Appalachia, this broadening acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ communities and their advocacy manifested in complex ways. A review of the articles, letters, and columns revealed that straight, cisgender Appalachians sought to codify their discrimination using Christian scripture, family values and morals, and scientific studies. However, LGBTQ+ allies and queer Appalachians utilized the same devices to challenge these assertions and publicly push back against homophobia and transphobia.[12] In the 1990s and 2000s, Appalachian newspapers functioned as forums for public discussions of LGBTQ+ communities, addressing

[11] In T*he Queerness of Home*, historian Stephen Vider argues that "experience, performance, and representation of caring at interpersonal and communal levels helped to counter the feelings of isolation and estrangement" when discussing the impact of LGBTQ+-led support groups and advocacy during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, these ideas also extend to the evolving practices of negotiating expression and belonging among queer communities, revealing generational divergences of expression and performance among LGBTQ+ communities.

[12] Local newspapers provide valuable insights into community, belonging, and building local networks. Their reports on local events, governmental processes, histories, and critical communal changes reflect shifts in local cultures. Newspaper content is either contributed by the public or reported by journalists but ultimately selected by editors to reflect these communities. For total transparency, the number of newspaper articles I read through to establish this claim was 438 articles. This was just a sampling from urban and small-town publications, and more evidence is out there to support this.

the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" directive in 1993, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996, the landmark case *Lawrence vs. Texas* in 2003, or emerging LGBTQ+ representation in media, such as Ellen DeGeneres coming out as a lesbian on *Ellen* (1994).[13] While intolerant Appalachians often responded with harassment and hate, LGBTQ+ Appalachians and allies used this public platform as a tool to encourage "support, understanding, and acceptance of one another on this very basic issue."[14]

First, newspapers possessed a long track record of anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric. From outing LGBTQ+ community members convicted of “crimes against nature” to sensational reporting of gay, lesbian, and transgender “lifestyles,” newspapers had contributed to upholding sociocultural heteronormative standards of place. However, by the 1990s, these outlets became an increasingly contested space for venting or combating anti-gay rhetoric throughout the Appalachian region. Newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and syndicated columns that appeared in Appalachian newspapers indicate a gradual shift from cultures of silence to open social and political discussions concerning LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. These silences often remained in social circles, reinforcing external regional perceptions of Appalachia as a place where residents have "live and let live" attitudes. Alternatively, local newspapers' public and localized audiences offered a low-stakes way to disrupt these silences while

[13] For examples, please see the following articles: Linda Weaver, "TV' Gay Awareness 'Draws Comment." *Chattanooga Times Free Press* (TN), June 15th, 1995: B4, *NewsBank: Access World News*; Lee Anderson. "Clinton, Homosexuals, Secrets," *Chattanooga Times Free Press* (TN), August 7th, 1995: A4, *NewsBank: Access World News*; Bob Kendall, "Naked anger." *Chattanooga Times Free Press* (TN), September 30th, 1995: A6. *NewsBank: Access World News*; "LETTERS TO THE EDITOR," *Charleston Daily Mail* (WV), August 5th, 1996: 4A, *NewsBank: Access World News;* Mary Wade Burnside, "OUT AND ABOUT ELLEN'S COMING-OUT PARTY CLOSELY WATCHED BY STATE'S LESBIAN POPULATION," *Charleston Gazette* (WV), April 30th, 1997: P1D, *NewsBank: Access World News*; Mary Wade Burnside, "HUDSON HAS TWO MOMMIES," *Charleston Gazette* (WV), May 11th, 1997: P1E, *NewsBank: Access World News*; Don Cagle, "Your Views," *The Oak Ridger* (TN), March 4th, 1997, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

[14] Gerald W. Roller, "SEXUAL DIVERSITY IS ANCIENT, MULTICULTURAL," *The Roanoke Times* (VA), July 20th, 2003: 3, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

contributing and appealing to the forum of public opinion. While some contributors remained anonymous behind pen names or vent line columns, others often attached their names to their views to identify themselves as community members. This way, contributors called upon and shaped their reputations and local perceptions of place familiar spaces. Though these processes are complex, newspapers worked to upend cultures of silence in small towns and urban Appalachian communities throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

As previously stated, much of the disparaging and homophobic rhetoric found in Appalachian newspapers cited Christian scripture as justification for discrimination. As religious institutions were and still are pillars of many Appalachian communities, Christian scripture and expressions of belief were woven into regional sociocultural structures. Though his work specifically focused on the evolution of Christianity and environmental activism in Appalachia, scholar Joseph D. Witt argued the influence of religion affirms "the importance of engaging with localized conceptions of place and how these [interconnections] of regional religious attitudes and practices."[15] These religious overtones appearing in public newspaper articles and submissions indicate that the news outlet shapes and is shaped by localized cultures of place.

While these localized overlaps of religion and region revealed shifts in community, trends in national religious praxis and doctrine in the 1990s and early 2000 also influenced this rhetoric. Specifically, connections between anti-gay rhetoric, morality politics, and "family values" listed within these articles are associated with the national rise of the Christian Right in the late twentieth century. Bernadette Barton, in her examination of LGBTQ+ individuals in the Bible Belt, established that "most conservative Christian churches provide guidelines to

[15] Joseph D. Witt, "Religion, Place, and Mountaintop Removal," In *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*, 13, University Press of Kentucky, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gr7dhc.4.

parishioners on how to best conform to church community standards of morality, theology, and behavior."[16] Jeffery Cawood agrees, asserting that many religious communities have negative impacts on contemporary queer Appalachians as local panopticons that enforce certain behaviors and restrict "deviant" expressions.[17] Notably, as seen through editorial opinions and vent lines, much of the anti-gay rhetoric that espoused Christian morality echoed ideals of the growing Christian Right and upholds stigmas against LGBTQ+ people in the region.[18]

In making newspapers a contested site for upending cultures of silence and invoking acceptance (or at least tolerance) of LGBTQ+ communities, Christian doctrine became a touchstone for arguments among both sides of the debate. In many cases from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, homophobic community members frequently cited Leviticus 18:22 and other verses of scripture to decry gay and lesbian relationships, linking the permeability and growing tolerance to LGBTQ+ communities as evidence of "moral depravity" and "moral decline" in American society. This air of religious authority, given religion's crucial presence in Appalachian spaces, aligned with ideas of the Christian Right and Christian Nationalism by attempting to shape attitudes and spaces in a homogenous caste.

For example, in 1996 *Roanoke Times* contributor Albin Crutchfield argued that transgressions against heteronormativity were "vile." Crutchfield claimed he was not alone in

[16] Bernadette Barton, "'God Would Tell on Me': Losing Their Religion." In *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays*, (NYU Press, 2012), 64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfv4h.7.
[17] Jeffery Cawood, Jr., "OUT in APPALACHIA LEAVING the CLOSET in the MOUNTAINS" (master's Thesis, 2018), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/217270151.pdf, 53.
[18] Please see the following sources on the rise of Christian Right politics: Melinda S. Miceli, "Morality Politics vs. Identity Politics: Framing Processes and Competition among Christian Right and Gay Social Movement Organizations," *Sociological Forum* 20, no. 4 (2005): 592, 597, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4540917.; Rebecca Barrett-Fox, *God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right*, *JSTOR* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c6v973, 115, 135; Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2007), 7, 10, 12, 65-67, 200.

perceiving this threat to prevailing social norms. Citing morality politics, he stated that "moral people are sometimes amazed at how quickly gay-pride marches have proliferated in our country… Originally, the demand was to accept gay and lesbian practices as 'normal.'"[19] He later quoted The Bible, adding, "the wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men."[20] By drawing on shared rhetoric of heteronormativity and religion within the region, Crutchfield placed LGBTQ+ populations in conflict with heteronormative ideals of community, casting visibility not only as deviant but also "pride" as sinful. Such ideas refused to acknowledge that LGBTQ+ individuals have and will always make their home in the region. The utilization of Christian doctrine and ideas of morality to restrict "deviance" not only led to the scapegoating of LGBTQ+ communities but condemned acknowledging queerness as a dangerous transgression that "'[fills] hearts of the people … with schemes to do wrong.'"[21]

However, it is essential to note that many letters and opinions are written in broad strokes, inciting outrage, or fear of LGBTQ+ communities but rarely identifying individuals. Most likely, this is because LGBTQ+ individuals in urban and rural Appalachian communities have obscured their own queer sexualities and gender expressions by negotiating sociocultural norms. Thus, the same people writing these anti-gay letters or columns had probably met, befriended, or conducted business with an LGBTQ+ person and may have never realized it. While they argue for discrimination in such narrow terms, it indicates that painting LGBTQ+ people as part of communities threatens their dichotomous understandings of gender and sexuality. By acknowledging them as part of the community, LGBTQ+ people are seen as human

[19] Albin Crutchfield, "LET'S NOT HONOR WHAT IS VILE," *The Roanoke Times* (VA), August 23rd, 1996: A-14, *NewsBank: Access World News*.
[20] Crutchfield, "LET'S NOT HONOR WHAT IS VILE."
[21] Crutchfield, "LET'S NOT HONOR WHAT IS VILE."

and can actively shape the local area, and that is deemed unacceptable by heteronormative standards.

Family members and allies of LGBTQ+ communities pushed back against fearmongering and discrimination by indicating that queer sexuality or gender was only one facet of a person's identity. In 2009, John Anders refuted Patrick Rusmiesel's assertion that "homosexuality" was a "sinful choice" of a harmful lifestyle, he used his own relationships to invoke compassion by emphasizing the layers of community that LGBTQ+ people were involved with. Speaking directly about his unnamed older brother, Anders wrote: "Rusmisel has never known or loved a homosexual. I have. I lived with him for 15 years and still have a special place in my heart for him. As with most people, his sexuality is a very minor part of his life. He's well educated, talented, hardworking, funny, tolerant, loving, generous, well adjusted, [and] churchgoing. What's not to like?"[22]

For many LGBTQ+ Appalachians, determining whether there was a safe person or safe environment to express themselves authentically was a crucial part of coming out. Not only did they have to feel safe among their community and with individuals, but they felt it was essential to build up strong friendships and rapport beyond their sexuality or gender identity. This complex process of acceptance led to ideas of exceptionalism or an individual who was different from the LGBTQ+ community at large. However, it was also a way of dismantling heteronormative barriers. For those who claim degrees of separation from LGBTQ+ people, it

[22] Writer, Staff, “Letter: John Anders," *Martinsville Bulletin* (VA), July 21st, 2009, *NewsBank: Access World News*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/156C90C46E5AAF18.; Writer, Staff, "Letter: Patrick Rusmisel," *Martinsville Bulletin* (VA), July 5th, 2009, *NewsBank: Access World News*, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/156C90BF2DFFDD18.

was also a way of dismantling dichotomous, heteronormative barriers, having created a process of breaking down walls one brick at a time.[23]

Moreover, during the 1990s and early 200s, family members and allies of queer communities in the Appalachian region would also quote scripture and stake their own claims of religious authority. As many letters and editorials pointed out, anti-gay rhetoric is often selective (or bluntly, repetitive) in its condemnation of LGBTQ+ communities as sinful or errant. In 1997, Leonard Pitts, listed several behaviors that were also deemed offensive in the Bible, such as adulterous spouses, men with long hair, and outspoken women, and asserted, "If these people are honest with themselves, they must admit that their antipathy toward gays has less to do with God's law than with human aversion."[24] Nearly a decade later in 2009, Jonathan Reynolds challenged assertions of righteous discrimination, arguing, "Even if God didn't create people to be gay - even if it is a choice - Genesis 1:27 (KJV) says, 'So God created man in his own image.' Homosexuals are also made by God and loved by God. They deserve to be treated with respect."[25] By challenging these claims of religious authority in these homophobic appeals found in local public forums, these letters and articles indicate that not all Appalachians agreed with discriminatory perspectives. At a minimum, they encouraged tolerance and politeness, or at most, acceptance, and support for LGBTQ+ folks in Appalachia.

Syndicated columns, such as advice columns like "Dear Abby" or "Annie's Mailbox," also dismantled regional sociocultural conflicts over LGBTQ+ discrimination. While many of

[23] Not every LGBTQ+ individual who came out was accepted immediately, as numerous factors influence the reception of that information. While many experience love and support, many were met with hesitancy, at best, or rejection, at worst, when coming out to family, friends, or community members.

[24] Leonard Pitts, Jr. "PEOPLE APPLY BIBLE VERSES SELECTIVELY." *Charleston Gazette* (WV), June 5th, 1997: P4A. *NewsBank: Access World News*.

[25] Writer, Staff. "Letter: Jonathan Reynolds." *Martinsville Bulletin* (VA), August 10th, 2009, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

these syndicate columns originated from newspapers outside the region and stem from questions submitted by strangers in different states, these columns reached audiences in several ways. First, advice columns are notoriously anonymous and have often utilized pennames for the question-asker and columnist. This anonymity may allow one to be more candid with their experiences and responses. Occasionally, a syndicated advice column can air disappointments or concerns, but the columnists' and editors' choice to include those entries emphasizes the message's contemporary resonance. Second, many questions are rarely outlandish and could be experienced by anyone, regardless of region, making it applicable to a broader audience. This open appeal informed the decision for regional newspaper editors to include these columns in their issues, as editors were the final decision makers of what makes the newspaper. Though only some readers will interact with them, syndicated columns are explicitly included for content rather than to take up space. These factors connect Appalachia to national LGBTQ+ activism and politics while opening dialogues that circumvent cultures of silence.

In September 1996, newspapers nationwide, including the *Charleston Daily Mail* in Charleston, West Virginia, ran the popular Dear Abby advice column that led to what many considered an astonishing question from a rarely self-identified question asker. Michael Serkin-Poole of Bellevue, Washington, had written the columnist to ask Abigail Van Buren (pseudonym of Jeanne Phillips) to define a "gay lifestyle," as he had often heard the term used but knew it did not describe him, his partner, or any of his gay or lesbian friends. Serkin-Poole described himself as "a 40-year-old gay male … My life partner, David, and I have been together [for] 15 years and have jointly adopted three special-needs children… Like most of our gay and lesbian friends, we don't smoke, drink alcohol, or go to bars." Abby's response is consistent with her other replies to letters centered on LGBTQ+ questions or concerns; she was compassionate, informative, and

helped to upend stereotypes. "As hard as it might be to believe," Abby asserted, "there is no such thing as a 'gay lifestyle,' just as there is no such thing as a heterosexual lifestyle. Gay and lesbian people, like heterosexual people, live in a variety of ways, from poor to middle-class to nouveau riche, from urban to rural."[26] As such, this included submission and response in the nationally syndicated column appealed to reconsiderations of LGBTQ+ stereotypes, discrimination, and heteronormative dichotomies. While some readers may have skipped the column or read and dismissed it, it was intended to reach and impact a reader who may have struggled with questions of identity.

In the 2000s, other syndicated columns like Annie's Mailbox tackled similar questions to empathetically educate the public about the struggles that LGBTQ+ people throughout the nation faced during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In response to a heart-wrenching warning from "Be Prepared for the Unexpected," who described a friend's loss of her boyfriend and her home following his death, Annie (pseudonym for Kathy Mitchell and Marcy Sugar) stepped beyond compassionate consultation and into informative activism. Annie writes in the January 2007 column that "the legal institution of marriage, like it or not, can protect partners from just such financial tragedies. This is one of the reasons why gay couples lobby so hard for civil unions."[27] This statement addressed a crucial platform of the Gay Rights Movement, having outlined a significant reason that LGBTQ+ people fought for federal recognition of gay civil unions and marriages. Before *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), few states recognized gay marriages and civil unions. However, this recognition was rarely transferable to other states and led to legal complications when settling estates. Though the initial letter warned of unexpected tragedy

[26] Abigail Van Buren, "READER WANTS 'GAY LIFESTYLE' EXPLAINED," *Charleston Daily Mail* (WV), September 26th, 1996: 5D, *NewsBank: Access World News*.
[27] Kathy Mitchell and Marcy Sugar, "ANNIE'S MAILBOX: You can't pick your relatives' friends," *Point Pleasant Register* (WV), January 20th, 2007: A005, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

between heterosexual couples, the column took stance to make this tragedy a teachable moment for its readership. With this letter, Mitchell and Sugar seized the opportunity to address current political concerns for LGBTQ+ people and emphasized the commonalities between heterosexual and queer couples.

Though these syndicated articles did not originate from Appalachia and appeared in syndicated columns throughout the United States, they can also uplift conversations within the region. Their appearances in Appalachian newspapers between the 1990s and 200s became significant in understanding generational shifts of navigating identity throughout cultures of silence. For example, many LGBTQ+ Appalachian individuals or couples shared several similarities to Serkin-Poole and his partner, living lives outside of the clichéd "gay lifestyle." They also reflected the concerns of "Prepare for the Unexpected," as they worried about their partner's well-being and what could happen in the case of tragedy. Stephen Vider's *Queerness of Home* pointed out exceptional circumstances where gays and lesbians in urban spaces outside of Appalachia that protected and challenged social and legal oppressions.[28] However, there were limited opportunities within Appalachia for LGBTQ+ populations to question discrimination or make legal preparations openly. With shifting definitions of domesticity, the home, and perceptions of queer identities, LGBTQ+ people and allies resisted discrimination, questioned long-standing sociocultural norms, and emphasized shared experiences. While these discussions may not have been direct verbal conversations, newspapers created spaces for these dialogues to redefine and expand cultures of place and belonging.

[28] Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II,* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 29-30, 39, 41, 146, 170.

"I Can Just Live My Life and Be Me"[29]: Generational Shifts of Covert and Overt Queerness in Appalachia

Northern Appalachia

Louise A. Blum acknowledges the difficulties of maintaining her career and living openly as a lesbian while starting a family in Mansfield and Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, in her memoir, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?* As a memoir covering much of the 1990s, this text provides intriguing insights to understand the complexity of self-discovery and expressions of sexual orientation and gender performance. Louise Blum, a college English professor, diverges significantly from many of the individuals discussed so far as she does not claim a lesbian identity until she is in her thirties. Moreover, the text primarily centers on the joys and difficulties she and her partner, Connie Sullivan, encounter while trying to conceive their daughter, Zoë.[30] Although they are outside the core of Appalachia, residing in Wellsboro and Mansfield, Pennsylvania, their experiences share many similarities with other rural Appalachian narratives in claiming identity and place.

The disclosure and claiming of identity in rural Wellsboro and suburban Mansfield are a complex process for Blum that led simultaneously to celebration and conflict. Blum came out as a lesbian 1991, about a year after secretly dating Sullivan. However, their first serious argument stems from their conflicting perceptions of how and when to come out publicly to their families and community. After Blum affixed a bumper sticker on her truck, which read "Action = Life, Silence = Death" with pink triangles, Connie asked, "What if I don't want to come out the way you do?"[31] Originally from Ohio, Blum was often considered an "outsider" in Wellsboro and

[29] Paul Manogue, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 28th, 2023.
[30] Louise A. Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?: A Lesbian in Smalltown America*, (Madison, Wis.: University Of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 46, 3-4, 17, 260-261.
[31] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 48-49.

Mansfield, but Connie was local. Blum's past experiences required little use of mêtis and navigation of heteronormative cultures of place, and her "outsider" status may have encouraged her to claim her lesbian identity openly.[32] However, Sullivan was well-practiced in those navigations to preserve her safety and family reputation. Though the pair were incredibly committed and loved each other, both were influenced by their personal experiences as they came out.

Blum's recollections of Sullivan's coming out experiences indicated the difficulties of claiming queer identity amid local panopticons. Sullivan grew up in a conservative Irish Catholic family that was well-known in the community as her father was a respected doctor. She had witnessed the fallout of coming out at a young age. Sullivan's oldest sister came out to her parents as a lesbian and she was disowned, allowed no contact with her family until she "renounced her lesbianism … married a man, … and had two children."[33] The differences between Sullivan and Blum's coming out process were striking. Sullivan had to reconcile her use of mêtis to avoid a similar rejection from her parents and preserve her family reputation, figure out how to navigate cultures of silence, and negotiate her identity expressions. However, Blum came out in her thirties, had positive overt queer role models in her life, and possessed less experience with these practices. Moreover, though Blum's parents were not overly supportive or understanding, they did not disown her for being a lesbian.[34]

As Sullivan came out to her family as a lesbian, she claimed aspects of cultural citizenship to assert her rights and communal belonging as a lesbian woman and mother.

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[32] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 21, 30-31.

[33] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 11, 18, 68-69.

[34] There is also a clear indication that Blum's family is less close-knit than Sullivan's. This may also be why Blum felt bold enough to be direct rather than cautious in the coming-out process. Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?*, 158.

Sullivan came out to her parents, brothers, and sisters by inviting them to her or a commitment ceremony to Louise in 1993. She never heard back from her sisters or parents, but her brothers said that “Mom and Dad said they disapproved… but they understood if the other kids wanted to go.”[35] Moreover, Sullivan was rejected by her parents as she writes to inform them Louise is pregnant with Zoë in 1994. Sullivan’s father labeled Blum as an “enticing ticket to hell,” echoing Sullivan’s mother, who stated, “Satan has a hold on [Connie]… [and] that it's wrong for [them] to have this baby."[36] Sullivan and Blum made a significant statement about their place in the local community by marrying, having a child, and intentionally choosing to start their family in Wellsboro and Mansfield. However, Sullivan’s family rejected her and Blum, and the harassment from community members demonstrated the double standards employed by other LGBTQ+ communities in local areas. Despite the accessibility and celebration of critical cultural milestones for heterosexual couples, Connie and Louise were harassed and deemed “s "other” for asserting their right to these expressions of belonging.

Louise and Connie encountered additional challenges in claiming the region as their home through community pushback. Though they have experienced various micro-aggressions and curious glances since they began openly dating, the influx of harassment began during their conception process after they agreed to be part of an article series in *The Star-Gazette* in 1994. The article series highlighted regional diversity, focusing on local families to uplift their love of place and commonalities with other community residents. Following the publication, they received "obscene phone calls," complaints listed in the newspaper, and random jeers from cars that drove past their home. Blum also received harassment at work when a pornographic magazine and defamatory mock newspaper titled "The Phaglight," were stuffed into her work

[35] Blum, *You’re Not From Around Here, Are You?*, 72.
[36] Blum, *You’re Not From Around Here, Are You?*, 194.

mailbox. The mock newspaper featured a hateful article entitled "Lesbian Loses Mutant Alien Baby," that referred (and served as a threat) to Blum's pregnancy.[37] What had they done to deserve such vitriol and harassment? As homeowners, social community members, and a family-oriented couple in rural and suburban America, it feels as if they are met with discrimination simply because they defy the heteronormative paradigms. However, as they came out and lived openly as queer women and refusing to give up their claim to place marked a shift in how LGBTQ+ people navigated and negotiated their identity in regional areas.

Historian Stephen Vider provided context to overt claims of communal belonging through markers of cultural citizenship in his studies of the changing definitions of home and domesticity. He cited the "persistent power of domesticity" as a key influence that shaped American culture following World War II by understanding the dynamics of social citizenship.[38] Specifically, he established that "cultural citizenship emphasizes the everyday practices through which individuals negotiate their relationship to each other and the nation—how they navigate the cultural norms, social categories, and legal policies."[39] Understanding Sullivan's and Blum's experiences through this lens emphasized their resilient methods of claiming space and expanding cultures of place. However, because she and Sullivan remained overt in their expressions of queer identity, Blum was treated as if she had "no turf established here, no property, no job, no claims of ownership, nothing to protect me, to show that I was just like everybody else."[40] Rather than quietly and covertly making compromises with their identity expressions, Sullivan and Blum claimed these markers of belonging. Moreover, they reiterated that their belonging was a matter of respect and asserted their rights as community members.

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[37] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?*, 84-85, 91-93, 204-206.
[38] Vider, *The Queerness of Home*, 3.
[39] Vider, *The Queerness of Home*, 12.
[40] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 206, 102.

Though many in the community reject their claims based on heteronormativity, they found friends and supportive neighbors while asserting their belonging in the contested place."[41]

Two key areas where Sullivan and Blum found support in their community were from obstetrician Dr. Paul Gordon and Blum's college students at Mansfield University. Although the friends they made within the community became crucial for maintaining private support systems, Blum and Sullivan's interactions at the hospital and university uplifted these generational differences of overtly claiming space and community. As Blum's memoir focused on their journey to conceive their daughter, Dr. Gordon was a significant advocate for their acceptance and respect. Sullivan and Blum met Dr. Gordon following their rejection from a different local practice to administer IVF treatments due heteronormative medical policies.[42] Gordon eagerly agreed to assist Connie and Louise, assuring them he would field any concerns and objections from his medical partners so they could receive the treatments. Moreover, he was adamant that Sullivan and Blum feel comfortable and respected. Dr. Gordon shared personal details with them, saying he could empathize with their situation because his best friend was gay, and assured them that they had the right to be as private or open about their appointments with nurses and intake staff.[43] Blum resolved that there was nothing to hide; they were like any young couple trying to conceive a child, and all medical staff should treat as such.

Blum's work as an English professor also placed her in touch with several LGBTQ+ students, which profoundly impacted her as a mentor and strengthened her claims of belonging. Blum initially struggled with her professional responsibilities and how to come out as a lesbian

[41] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 88-89.
[42] Specifically, the doctor from this practice told Blum that because she did not have a husband or boyfriend to approve the IVF treatments, their practice would not give her the treatments. When Connie and Louise indicated that they were a couple, the doctor rebuffed this by saying that they were effectively and legally single. Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 8-11.
[43] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 11-12.

to her students, battling internalized respectability politics of what was appropriate to share at work. However, she began to test the waters by assigning inclusive materials in her lessons, such as Audre Lorde essays, queer-coded films like *I Heard the Mermaids Singing,* reflective journals, and creative writing assignments. The assignments and materials were met with general acceptance, but LGBTQ+ students quickly latched onto the material and built a rapport with Blum. As she recalled, "gay and lesbian students began to seek me out, to talk to me about their lives. … Straight students came to talk to me about their gay friends and family. I [even] moderated a campus forum on gays in the military."[44]

For Blum and her students, these connections with LGBTQ+ campus communities were mutually affirming. At first, Blum's students helped her overtly claim her identity as they brought her into localized queer spaces and networks within the community. Her students expressed their respect and admiration for her as they engaged in candid conversations during office hours, attended events such as the book readings of her novel, *Amnesty,* and celebrated the birth of Zoë. However, Blum also became more confident in her reputation as an openly lesbian professor and began recognizing the importance of visibility and advocacy for her students. Blum became an outspoken bridge to inclusive groups or supportive resources for closeted undergraduates and first-generation college students. Moreover, Blum's visibility allowed younger generations of LGBTQ+ students to see a potential future in Blum's life, where they openly claimed, expressed queer identities, and achieved their goals.[45] As Blum and Sullivan's love strengthened their resolve and they begin their a family together, they forged new paths by spaces of belonging, planted roots in the place they love and want to raise their daughter.[46]

[44] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 83.
[45] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 4, 46-47, 83, 112, 155, 175, 189- 190, 210-211.
[46] Blum, *You're Not From Around Here, Are You?,* 270-271.

Central Appalachia

Early in the 1990s, Timothea Branham, a recent college graduate and lesbian, left her hometown of Pikeville, Kentucky, for Lexington to save her fledgling career. Though she had briefly returned to Pike County to work in Child Protective Services, it became impossible to stay due to the hometown panopticon and her father's sudden legal troubles.[47] In 1990, Timothy E. Branham, an assistant principal in the Pike County school system, was charged with fourth-degree sodomy for engaging in oral sex with a state trooper.[48] This litigation process and subsequent conviction challenged her privacy in this small-town, as she frequently found her own identity and career under scrutiny with local gossip and newspaper coverage. Timothea Branham's reputation and career became jeopardized, leaving her with a difficult decision to remain in Pike County and endure further discrimination or leave for personal and financial safety. For Timothea, the similarity of their names and the abrupt disruption of local cultures of silence proved too risky for her safety; she made the difficult choice to move to Lexington.[49]

While Branham indicated that relocating was beneficial for her career, it also allowed her to live more openly as a lesbian in Appalachian spaces. Moving made her feel as if she "had more choices available to [her], such as living openly in queer relationships and participating in queer communities away from … hometowns."[50] In Lexington, she could connect and build

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[47] Timothea Branham, interview by Zachary Clark Pence, *Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries*, April 14th, 2011, https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7d513tw528.

[48] Scholar Cecelia Park's research and newspaper articles place the arrest in late 1990 and the subsequent trials from 1991-1992. Breed Associated Press, Allen G., "EX-SCHOOL OFFICIAL ADMITS HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY, BUT NOT WITH FORMER TROOPER," *Lexington Herald-Leader* (KY), March 22nd, 1991: C2, *NewsBank: Access World News*; Lee Mueller, "TROOPER FOUND GUILTY OF SODOMY," *Lexington Herald-Leader* (KY), January 12th, 1991: C1, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

[49] Branham, interview by Pence, April 14th, 2011.

[50] Cecelia Parks, "'Be Nice to My Shadow': Queer Negotiation of Privacy and Visibility in Kentucky.," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 30, no. 3 (September 1st, 2021): 372, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A690356785/LitRC?u=anon~a19ab4f4&sid=googleScholar&xid=58158aa0.

relationships with other LGBTQ+ folks with fewer concerns about drawing undue attention. However, she never forgot about the community issues in Pike County and wanted to give back to rural LGBTQ+ Appalachians. Branham's skills as a social worker and her sexuality spurred her interest in working for the AIDS Volunteers of Lexington (now AVOL Kentucky), where she led support, education, and prevention curriculums about HIV/AIDS, administered HIV testing, and supported homebound AIDS patients as a case worker.[51] In 1987, AVOL Kentucky began as an "all-out volunteer mobilization effort to do whatever it took to care for those suffering from HIV disease when few resources were available," specifically focused on serving the state's urban areas. However, the organization would later extend services to rural central and eastern Kentucky with increased awareness of the public health crisis and funding, becoming a "full-service social service agency providing quality and effective housing and support services for people living with HIV."[52] Though it may have been difficult for LGBTQ+ Appalachians like Branham to move into urban spaces, they sought opportunities to support regional LGBTQ+ populations. Although the local culture of silence she had grown up navigating could no longer support Branham, she sought ways to support LGBTQ+ populations claiming space and belonging in the area.

In the mid to late 2000s, LGBTQ+ populations in rural central Appalachia still experienced pushback in claiming visibility and identity in public spaces. Sam Gleaves from Wytheville, Virginia, recalled in 2011 his rocky coming out as an example of the community

[51] Branham is unclear about when she became involved with AVOL regarding her move into Lexington. In her oral history, she states that she continued to work in child protective services for a time after she moved there. However, Branham was a crucial member of the AVOL team and worked there as a housing case worker and HIV prevention specialist. Branham interview; Kerr Brothers Funeral Home, "Obituary of Timothea Branham," March 16th, 2021, https://www.kerrbrothersfuneralhome.com/obituaries.php?view=detail&id=15329.

[52] AVOL Kentucky, "Our History," AVOL Kentucky, March 23rd, 2022, https://avolky.org/our-history/.; AVOL Kentucky, "Services – AVOL Kentucky (Archived)," web.archive.org (AVOL Kentucky, June 14th, 2021), https://web.archive.org/web/20210614191314/https://avolky.org/services/.

pushback against LGBTQ+ youth. Gleaves, an educator, Appalachian musician, and gay man, had known he was gay around twelve years old and began secretly another boy in eighth grade. Though he considered the relationship private and only disclosed it to a few school peers, he was outed by a classmate who disliked his boyfriend. This incident involved said classmate composing a chain email impersonating Gleaves's boyfriend, detailing “some really disgusting sexual acts that had supposedly gone on between him and me."[53] He recalled this act as "vicious" for an eighth-grade student because she sent it directly to school staff and parents. It created a considerable stir that resulted in homophobic discussions and rhetoric within the school community.

Feeling more secure as a college student in 2011, Gleaves distanced himself from the traumatic event by stating that the “brunt of the attack” was focused on the boyfriend, but he was still outed by the act. For a child who relied on school and community support systems, discovering that support was conditionally based on heteronormative standards was traumatizing. Losing trust in those support systems can devastate LGBTQ+ youth. Even among his family, he did not come out to his supportive mother until he is in high school and did not come out to his very religious father until he is in college. Given the circumstances, the situation impacted Gleaves tremendously as he carefully guards his identity expressions within community settings.

Gleaves started to perform his music professionally as a teenager, often for local church congregations, which spurred his concerns about how being identified as gay would affect his reputation and family. These environments made him anxious, feel out of place, and cautious of his expressions as he fixated on minor details like where to park to hide "the rainbow peace sign

[53] Sam Reid Gleaves, interview by Zachary Clark Pence, *Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.*, November 2nd, 2011, https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt72v6987r45.

on [his] car" and avoided "effeminate mannerisms."[54] Given the culture of familial and community respect within Appalachia, respectability politics can inform open expressions and acceptance. Gleaves gave context for this when describing his decision not to come out to his grandparents, as he stated:

> "there's no way I can bridge that gap, I don't think. … My one grandfather, who I love dearly, and I've got [a] good a relationship with him… he's 87 years old [and] a devout Presbyterian. I don't think that he's going to come around… it would disturb him if he knew, in a way that I don't want my 87-year-old grandfather to be worried about. … when I'm out in the community and I see people that would know my grandfather … [be]cause he was like real well known in the community, I feel like I maybe act differently. I maybe do conceal a little bit more. Maybe I'm a little more reserved."[55]

This example of self-awareness supports Jeffery Cawood's theory that "LGBT persons are far more aware of their appearance, body language and other identifiers of personality" as "the concept of surveillance modifi[ies] behavior."[56] Due to these small-town circles, individuals like Gleaves may be more reserved in these environments, protecting themselves and preserving the family's reputation within the community.

These many anxieties stemmed from knowing that Wytheville was not an accepting space, but Gleaves received support from peers and LGBTQ+ at school. Not every student was accepting or open to expressions of LGBTQ+ identity. Gleaves recalled receiving ridicule and harassment from "the guys who played sports … [who] would say things like they were trying to get me to admit to [being gay]."[57] However, the harassment ceased once he publicly came out at school, feeling like he was "maybe loved more because of who I was" when openly claiming his identity. Though the school did not "foster any community" for queer youth in Wytheville,

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[54] Gleaves, interview by Pence, November 2nd, 2011.
[55] Gleaves, interview by Pence, November 2nd, 2011.
[56] Jeffery Cawood, Jr., "OUT in APPALACHIA LEAVING the CLOSET in the MOUNTAINS" (master's Thesis, 2018), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/217270151.pdf, 14, 30.
[57] Gleaves, interview by Pence, November 2nd, 2011.

LGBTQ+ teens bridged this gap by connecting during social periods at school and recreational activities. They were aware that "[they] were living in an area that, that wasn't accepting," but they were supportive of one another in "that teenage way that we united so we could protect each other. It was like a real close-knit group in that way."[58]

Wytheville's LGBTQ+ youth predominantly operated around boundary publics with semi-public and private spaces to meet the community's social needs, but they made efforts to maintain public visibility. Gleaves was involved in planning a Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Day of Silence with friends and peers at their public high school. Though this group was small, they adamantly fought for a public demonstration of remembrance for LGBTQ+ victims of hate crimes and suicide to advocate against discrimination. One friend took the initiative by spearheading the discussions with the county school board and argued against their dismissive attitudes and comments regarding the GLSEN demonstration. Although she had materials provided by GLSEN to guide her statements, she had to be articulate and persuasive in stating her rights as a student, not only to protest but to be visibly queer in public spaces. Eventually, after several school board meetings, Gleaves and his friends were allowed to proceed with the protest, and the participating group was small. Still, Gleaves recalled that the demonstration did receive some backlash from classmates as a "small counter-protest of four or five people [made] t-shirts that they'd made quoting scripture" to denounce their LGBTQ+ classmates.[59]

For Branham, Gleaves, and other rural LGBTQ+ Appalachians, it was difficult to feel comfortable with open expressions of identity and visibility. However, LGBTQ+ individuals challenged cultures of silence that enforce heteronormativity and respectability politics through

[58] Gleaves, interview by Pence, November 2nd, 2011.
[59] Gleaves, interview by Pence, November 2nd, 2011.

tenacity, cleverness, and unity. Branham migrated from her rural hometown to Lexington because Pike County's culture of silence could no longer support her due to her father's sodomy conviction. However, she quickly involved herself in social work that overtly supported and affirmed LGBTQ+ populations. Branham used her skills and identity as a bridge to assert support and belonging for rural LGBTQ+ Appalachians until her passing in 2021.[60] Additionally, Gleaves and his friends were persistent in claiming space in Wytheville. Gleaves was a minor and could not leave Wytheville safely, so he actively chose to do what he could where he was. Although he actively negotiated identity expressions in churches and among older folks, he disrupted these cultures of silence in specific spaces such as his school. Gleaves and his friends do what they can to create spaces of belonging and disrupt intolerance, identifying public places where they could take up space. By acting to actively protest discrimination, intolerance, and support other rural LGBTQ+ folks in Central Appalachia, they created spaces of belonging and disrupted heteronormative sociocultural patterns.

Southern Appalachia

Some LGBTQ+ youth and adults maintained visibility in Southern Appalachia throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In Western North Carolina (WNC), many LGBTQ+ youth were resilient in claiming identity, asserting their cultural citizenship, and creating spaces of belonging. For example, Paul Manogue and his family moved to Sylva in the mid-1990s following his father's leukemia diagnosis. Manogue had frequently visited his grandparents in the area during the summers, and offered Manogue a sense of consistency as his father's work caused his family to move around the country. This was crucial for him, as he identified Sylva as

[60] Branham, interview by Pence, April 14th, 2011; Kerr Brothers Funeral Home, "Obituary of Timothea Branham," March 16th, 2021, https://www.kerrbrothersfuneralhome.com/obituaries.php?view=detail&id=15329.

his home. Manogue stated he had “always known” he was gay since elementary school but recalled most of his family and friends in various towns around the nation as supportive.[61]

However, as Manogue began his senior year of high school in Sylva, he encountered suspicion and pushback as a visibly gay young man. From thinly veiled discriminatory comments to being treated as a curiosity by peers, Manogue’s recollections asserted belonging with confidence, resilient self-expression, and claims of space. Manogue refused to hide that he was gay, and he expressed that through his mannerisms and self-presentation. For instance, he recalled his “kind of ballsy” choice to read *And the Band Played On* by Randy Shilts in the high school cafeteria with no attempt to obscure the title. Manogue recalls this moment as pivotal to making personal efforts to learn about "not just the history of AIDS, but also gay culture" in a space that often "othered" and obscured LGBTQ+ youth’s claims to identity. Choosing to read it in the public setting, among his peers and teachers, disrupted these patterns and asserted Manogue's queer visibility. He did not recall any confrontations or questions from peers about the book. Still, this simple act indicated confidence and openness to discuss (and learn) about LGBTQ+ topics school staff may consider inappropriate or that his peers try to weaponize against him.

Manogue also personally fielded occasional discrimination and harassment from his peers without compromising his morals or identity. Although he remembered the occasional violent encounter where he would physically defend himself, most interactions with peers were benign and rooted in curiosity. His fashion choices and self-presentation usually prompted these

[61] Manogue claims that his mother also had known he was gay from around the same age, and the only person who found an issue with his gay identity was his father. This interview was conducted as part of a course-related oral history project in 2023. While it is not available digitally yet, it can be found in the following repository and possession of the author. Paul Manogue, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 28th, 2023.

interactions as Manogue consistently wore "silk shirts or cologne" while others wore "jeans and t-shirts." Still, despite occasional questions or comments, he wore what was comfortable for him. Manogue admitted these questions may have stemmed from class differences in the region or being the new kid in a small town, but it also indicated Manogue's confidence in his self-expression.[62]

Most notably, Manogue's identity was not a barrier to forming lasting friendships or finding regional spaces of belonging. Manogue recalled being very social in high school as he and his friends would often spend lunch periods together and take weekend trips to Asheville. In his narrative, he described himself a mediator for new experiences, whether it was one of the first openly gay people that his peers met or challenging regional sociocultural conventions. For some, these relationships have disrupted narrow perspectives of people and places. For others, Paul's openness and confidence helped others gauge their own experiences, find their forms of expression, and support others in that process. For one unnamed friend, spending time with Manogue built up her confidence to publicly come out as a lesbian.[63] Although they did not find belonging everywhere in WNC, Manogue's visibility disrupted sociocultural patterns and opened dialogues for new conversations. These actions, therefore, created opportunities to develop new definitions of belonging and cultures of place.

Additionally, Manogue's experiences with friends and local communities after he graduated from Smoky Mountain High School offered a complex narrative of place. Around 1996 or 1997, a friend introduced Manogue, a close-knit group of LGBTQ+ adults who created social cultures of belonging in the rural spaces of Sylva and Cullowhee.[64] This group of

[62] Manogue, interview by Cope, April 28th, 2023.
[63] Manogue, interview by Cope, April 28th, 2023.
[64] Paul Manogue, email to the author, February 2024.

primarily composed of LGBTQ+ folks, and they would attend holiday social gatherings referred to as "Sissies" Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter. This group prevented local LGBTQ+ folks who were disowned or estranged from their families from being alone during the holiday season. The group also scheduled more casual gatherings in private and public settings. Whether it was scheduling movie nights at home with friends with HIV/AIDs to watch movies like *Mommy Dearest* (1981), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), or *Showgirls* (1995) or regular lunch gatherings at local restaurants, Manogue's testimony indicated a thriving social network and a redefined culture of belonging.[65]

Leisure activities, especially in boundary public spaces within rural areas, were also deliberate expressions of community and space. Among friends and supportive "found family," LGBTQ+ individuals gradually felt comfortable expressing identity and claiming space, whether that place is private or public.[66] However, more social groups gathering in public or private spaces indicated more overt expressions of self and connections within a community. In more urban narratives of LGBTQ+ history and community building, these social circles have often oscillated around bar culture. Historians John Howard and Stephen Vider also demonstrate that these ideas extended to rural and suburban spaces, blurring the fixity of public and private spheres.[67] Gay and lesbian bars are often crucial for queer social networks. Still, restaurants and cafes served equally important rules and were often more accessible in rural spaces. Choosing to patronize and gather in these ordinary places accessible to all members of the public complicates these heteronormative definitions of cultures of place.

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[65] Manogue, interview by Cope, April 28th, 2023.

[66] The idea behind this is that in public spaces, queer individuals are not hiding their identity. Still, they may also choose not to disclose it either. This idea could also be similar in private spaces, especially among homophobic family members or unsupportive spaces.

[67] John Howard, *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 33, 64; Vider, *The Queerness of Home,* 3, 15-16, 20.

Local LGBTQ+ populations were also conscious and selective of the public places they patronized and supported in western North Carolina when engaging in social activities. For instance, some of Manogue's friends timed their lunch breaks or work shifts to meet in local restaurants for lunch together. Manogue asserted that they would boycott unsupportive or homophobic establishments, patronizing neutral, supportive, or LGBTQ+ business owners instead.[68] Moreover, this lunch bunch not only offered a way to connect with local LGBTQ+ businesses and people but also functioned as an introductory education in LGBTQ+ culture for straight friends and coworkers. When working in the neighboring town of Bryson City, Manogue approached a straight coworker to join him and his friends for lunch and recalled the impact this invitation had on his coworker.

> "he's like, 'What kind of place have you taken me to for lunch?' And I'm like, 'What do you mean? 'He's like, 'I got a burger but no fries, and you're eating a damn salad with trees in it!' And I'm like, 'What?' But at the end, he's like, 'I've never had an experience like this in my life. [Lunch is] like an entire event. … and the food is not even the most important part of that event. … I had never spent two hours having a meal other than Thanksgiving dinner before in my life, and you guys do that every day for lunch!' I'm like, 'Well, that's part of [our] philosophy, though, try to enjoy as much of life as you can… [because] we get so fed up with everybody telling us we're wrong and talking shit about us and treating us like we don't matter.'[69]

The importance of this lunchtime encounter is that this conversation emphasized the complexity of LGBTQ+ connection and expression in rural communities, simultaneously functioning as usual and unusual. As mentioned, LGBTQ+ individuals created spaces of belonging through everyday occurrences, like lunch meetings, that fostered community relationships within the Appalachian region. As a public space, businesses like Lulu's function as neutral, safe spaces where LGBTQ+ and heterosexual people can meet in the middle to understand the cons and

[68] Manogue, interview by Cope, April 28th, 2023.
[69] Manogue, interview by Cope, April 28th, 2023.

divergences of sociocultural practices.[70] In those spaces, LGBTQ+ folks felt a sense of collective community and experienced belonging in a physical, regional community, which is influential in space-making and claiming.[71]

Out in the Mountains: Queer Belonging and Place-Making in Western North Carolina

In the Southern Appalachian region, WNC created a fascinating case study for charting the progression of queer belonging and place-making. While generally considered a predominantly rural subregion within the Blue Ridge Mountain range with an estimated population of 800,000, the area also hosts urban areas such as Asheville and Boone.[72] The region also hosts several academic institutions, such as Appalachian State University (ASU), UNC Asheville (UNCA), and Western Carolina University (WCU), in addition to parkways, national parks and forests, and cultural institutions like the John C. Campbell Folk School. The beautiful natural environments have frequently made WNC popular among tourists and visitors, but there have been significant increases in regional populations as many have migrated into the region.

Like Paul Manogue, many LGBTQ+ people moved to the Appalachian region for various reasons, and with these relocations, they continued negotiating space and place and becoming part of local communities. John Miele and the late Bud Smith were among those who sought to relocate to the region in 1990 after falling in love with the small town of Dillsboro. Like others, this move offered new opportunities from their previous Fort Lauderdale, Florida residence. Miele and Smith not only enjoyed the charm of the small town but also wanted to become

[70] Lulu is mentioned in the following chapter as once being a lesbian-owned business, which many LGBTQ+ residents patronized to help keep it in business. It was sold to other owners, but it is uncertain if this lunch gathering took place when it was LGBTQ+ owned.

[71] Z. Zane McNeill, *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2022), 32; Mary L. Gray, "'There Are No Gay People Here,'" 123, 125-126.

[72] Michael Cline, "Is North Carolina Rural or Urban? | NC OSBM," www.osbm.nc.gov, November 19, 2020, https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2020/11/19/north-carolina-rural-or-urban#:~:text=The%20most%20urban%20counties%20form.

involved in the community. This decision came as a shock to many of the friends they had made in Florida. Miele recalled, "I had one friend [who] said, 'You can't go there.' He says, 'When they find out you're not married to a woman, they're going to burn crosses on your lawn.' And I'm like, 'this isn't Deliverance. … it's not like that, we know the area.' And we were in-your-face kind of guys…"[73] Though they had yet to disclose their partnership to the local community beyond co-owning The Golden Carp, Miele asserted that the locals quickly connected the dots and did not see it as an issue. In addition to co-owning their business, which offered a retail selection of "[home accessories], fine art, and unique gifts,"[74] they became heavily involved in local politics, as Miele held multiple offices on the local Merchants Association county advisory boards. Smith later became a twice-elected alderman for the town council.[75]

When considering their integration and involvement with the community, Miele emphasized the compassion and close-knit ties often romantically attributed to rural small towns. This atmosphere appealed to Miele and Smith, so getting to know the community personally and learning about the area eased their inclusion into the local community. Miele asserts, “the people around here, I discovered if they see that you want to become a part of the community and not tell them how to run their community or how to do it better, as most people from out of state or up north do, they'll welcome you with open arms.”[76] This comment supported the sense of loyalty and love of place that Loyal Jones discussed in his collection of short essays,

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[73] John Miele, interview by Sarah K. Steiner and Travis A. Rountree, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, February 16th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63052.

[74] Betty Farmer, “WCU Students Teach Business Owners to Use Social Media,” *Smoky Mountain News (digital*,) April 28th, 2010, https://smokymountainnews.com/archives/item/937-wcu-students-teach-business-owners-to-use-social-media.

[75] Miele, interview by Steiner and Rountree, February 16th, 2021.

[76] Appalachian Funeral Services and Crematorium, "Obituary of Ralph Joseph Smith," (Appalachian Funeral Services, September 20th, 2015), https://appalachian.funeraltechweb.com/tribute/details/773/Ralph_Smith/obituary.html.

Appalachian Values. According to Jones, Appalachians are generally suspicious of new folks moving into their communities but are genuinely hospitable.[77] While Miele and Smith may have raised *some* suspicion, their appreciation of place, local community support, and long-term partnership (as they had been together since 1977) may have spurred community inclusion. As Miele described him and Bud as respectfully "in your face" types of guys, their visibility as business *and* romantic partners may have challenged preconceptions held about gay and lesbian couples in the region. By upending these preconceived notions of heteronormativity among locals, they were potentially able to disrupt harmful perceptions of LGBTQ+ people as perpetuated by religious doctrine, small-town gossip, national news, and the persistent culture of silence in the Appalachian region.

Miele and Smith were middle-aged and established in their careers and relationship, which may have aided their integration and acceptance into the community. As they made their home and established their business in Dillsboro, they found spaces of belonging to connect with other LGBTQ+ individuals. They were embraced by the small-town community, even in ways that surprised them. For instance, a couple they had befriended through their business later shocked Miele by confessing that they had written him and Smith into their will as their children's guardians in the event of their passing. Though Smith and Miele never had to step up to that duty, that action displayed immense trust and support in them. Moreover, when Bud Smith died in 2015 from a brain aneurysm, Miele recalls that "over 500" community members attended his memorial service.[78] Despite the potential dangers and difficulties of being visible as a gay couple, this initial level of acceptance by the local community helped to pave the way for broader spaces and the creation of belonging in LGBTQ+ individuals of the region.

[77] Loyal Jones and Warren E. Brunner, *Appalachian Values* (Ashland, Ky.: Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1994), 81-82.
[78] Miele, interview by Steiner and Rountree, February 16th, 2021.

Like Smith and Miele, other LGBTQ+ individuals and couples found spaces of belonging and acceptance in the WNC area. Betsy Swift, a midwife, and lesbian, moved from Buffalo, New York, to Sylva, North Carolina, with her partner Barb in 1998. While they had initially moved closer to Barb's sister in the neighboring city of Asheville, privacy was a crucial factor they considered in this process. As a midwife, Swift was a diligently private individual, given the levels of intimacy and trust that came with her work as a midwife. They were drawn to the small town of Sylva as they liked the scenery, small-town feel, and the "lefty" atmosphere like Asheville. Following their move into the region, they eventually met and befriended other LGBTQ+ people in the community, including Marilyn Jody, John Miele, and Bud Smith.[79] Like John and Bud, it is possible that their status as middle-aged people, being more established in their careers and relationships, aided their integration into the area.

However, unlike Jody, Miele, or Smith, Swift recalls the importance of the growing internet culture, which was instrumental in her decision to relocate as it offered opportunities to connect privately and gather information about the experience of LGBTQ+ people in the area.[80] Swift's online research came primarily from chats and connections through "AOL interest groups," or chat rooms open to people with specific or specialized interests. By logging in and engaging with these chatrooms, Swift gauged and obtained candid information about other's experiences with visibility, privacy, and quality of life as an LGBTQ+ person in Appalachia. Though this act was seemingly simple, to Betsy and Barb, it was just as crucial as visiting the town and talking to the locals before settling there. Swift recalled this experience as a way of

[79] This interview was conducted as part of a course-related oral history project in 2023. While it is not available digitally yet, it can be found in the following repository and is in the author's possession: Betsy Swift, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library—LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 23rd, 2023.
[80] Swift, interview by Cope, April 23rd, 2023.

ensuring their safety and getting to know the region, as neither had been raised in the core of Appalachia, stating:

> "we'd read and were reassured that people said that people in Appalachia were kind of live and let live, you know, as far as we had heard. We had been planning to move to North Carolina for a few years, so every time we came to visit Barb's sister, we would just go for drives. And there were certain areas people really warned us against… Like, 'don't go to Madison County.' … So, we were reassured that people were kind of going to leave you alone, it was kind of it felt safe that way…"[81]

While cultures of silence were still prevalent in rural Appalachian spaces at the turn of the century, the internet offered a way to put LGBTQ+ people in touch with one another. Unlike newspapers that publicly contest, shape, and contribute to a town's image, private communications online allow for a more candid and informal relay of information and experiences. Swift's experiences represented how the digital age allowed for her and her partner to overtly, yet privately, research and consider what their lives could be like as lesbians in WNC. By engaging in these processes and connecting with individuals, they gathered information to navigate safely sociocultural settings, meet their needs, improve their quality of life, and ensure their privacy and economic security.

While it could be challenging to navigate space and find community as a new or very private LGBTQ+ in the area, the internet made this process manageable, reducing the guesswork and energy exerted to find other LGBTQ+ people by putting them directly in touch. Jill Ellern, a librarian, and lesbian living in WNC, explained that online social networking facilitated her connections with local and statewide LGBTQ+ populations throughout the 2000s. As a very social person who was interested in keeping in touch with queer culture and communities, the online chat rooms and ListServs provided her with a safe opportunity to make these connections. While there were various in-person LGBTQ+ groups in the area, such as WCU's Lavender

[81] Swift, interview by Cope, April 23rd, 2023.

Bridges and later Out in the Mountains, attendance could be thin or quickly dwindle due to concerns of harassment, discrimination, or backlash from the local community.

Though these in-person groups were essential to Ellern's desire for queer socialization, she was eager to find ways to ensure that group members felt safe and secure to meet regularly. Ellern took to the internet to help with the organization, communications, and connections of these groups, beginning "various email groups so that we could all talk about events and things that were going on, create connections, let people know that there were still folks in the area and that they weren't isolated too far."[82] Beyond private email servers, some public websites became crucial in finding friends and partners and organizing for LGBTQ+ people around the Asheville area. Ellern identifies internet sites such as PlanetOut, which had several state-based chat rooms, ListServs like Sheville and Sheville AfterDark, and Yahoo groups as crucial digital platforms where these connections occurred. For Ellern, online communication socialization provided more stable opportunities to maintain connections and discover LGBTQ+-friendly spaces.[83]

Utilizing internet resources and online socialization from Swift, her partner, and Ellern indicated shifting trends in how LGBTQ+ people created spaces of belonging nationally. John Howard, historian of rural LGBTQ+ history in the US South, and sociologist Mary Gray argued that internet usage, whether the chat rooms of the 1990s and early 2000s or contemporary social media platforms, were instrumental in providing safer modes of communication for LGBTQ+ individuals.[84] While technological advancement was not accessible for low-income queer

[82] Jill Ellern, interview by Danny Woomer, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 6th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63269.
[83] Ellern, interview by Woomer, April 6th, 2021.
[84] John Howard, "Digital Oral History and the Limits of Gay Sex," in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, ed. Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley (New York City, New York: NYU Press, 2016), 309, 327-328; Mary L. Gray, "'There Are No Gay People Here': Expanding the Boundaries of Queer Youth Visibility in the Rural United States," in *Appalachia in Regional Context: Place Matters*, ed. Dwight B.

Appalachians in the late-twentieth century, it became a predominant mode of connection and communication with educational, professional, and social investments in digital technologies. The growing accessibility and access to virtual modes of communication changed the ways that queer people connect. Moreover, as Howard explained in his work on early modes of digital oral history with gay men, using digital spaces like chatrooms allowed LGBTQ+ people to "share [their] stories spontaneously, warts and all."[85] As Howard denoted, many historians who fret over oral histories (or, in this case, chatroom logs) voice concerns about fallible memory, too polished narratives, and professional etiquette between the interviewer and subject. Naturally, these trappings are less of a problem in casual conversation. Still, Howard pointed out that the forum of a chatroom, ListServ, or private messaging allowed for further negotiations of boundaries and opportunities for more candid expression. As with Swift's experiences of querying LGBTQ+ individuals living in Appalachia through online interest groups, there was no reason for these individuals to deceive Swift by fabricating their experiences. Additionally, rather than fearing self-disclosure or being overheard in an in-person, public space, the digital connection allowed these individuals to be more candid and open with their experiences.

Moreover, this extension of innovating digital space as a place for queer community and gathering is associated with LGBTQ+ youth. Still, this transformation's origins lie in the older queer populations using this technology for similar purposes in addition to survival. Unlike public newspapers, LGBTQ+ people accessed digital media and sites that facilitated direct queer connections with one another. This is not unique to WNC for this case study, but the evidence discussed so far demonstrates the regional usage. Many of these sites and platforms were

Billings and Ann E. Kingsolver (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1z27j0k.11, 126-127.

[85] Howard, "Digital Oral History and the Limits of Gay Sex," 325.

publicly available, yet most users were from the LGBTQ+ community. In this sense, there was an inherent trust in digitally connecting and building a sense of identity and belonging to assure safety and social connection. As Gray argued, life in the digital age can "shape and destabilize our sense of where we imagine the centers and margins of living take place" as digital communication and media maintain negotiable levels of privacy, offering opportunities to "circulate and reinforce where queerness happens and its 'imagined audiences.'"[86] Contrasting chatrooms and ListServs to newspapers, older LGBTQ+ populations connected, organized, and maintained visibility in the public eye to expand definitions of cultural citizenship and civil liberties. Therefore, digital spheres emerged as an essential mode of queer community building and connection within the nation and the Appalachian region. While older LGBTQ+ folks would pioneer this method of connection and organization to fit their individual needs, younger generations would carry on these ideas while capitalizing on technological innovation to make cyberspace a forum of queer expression.[87]

However, the traditional modes of finding community and making connections with LGBTQ+ people were still prevalent. In Buffalo, Swift recalled social spaces and practices such as women's dances, softball leagues, and inclusive bookstores that played crucial roles in understanding her lesbian identity. She was politically active with several LGBTQ+ organizations in Buffalo and regretted stepping away from that role for her safety when moving to WNC. Though similar opportunities for political activism and involvement existed in this area, middle-aged and older LGBTQ+ people may have felt safer sticking with dissimulative

[86] Mary L. Gray, "'There Are No Gay People Here,'" 115.

[87] Mary Gray's work on the usage of social media and internet platforms by LGBTQ+ youth in rural spaces has made an intrinsic impact on the ways queer communities are shaped and built. Mary L. Gray, "From Websites to Wal-Mart: Youth, Identity Work, and the Queering of Boundary Publics in Small Town, USA," American Studies 48, no. 2 (2007): 51, 53, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40644068; Gray, "'There Are No Gay People Here,'" 116, 122-123.

patterns of negotiating space and identity. Conversely, many younger LGBTQ+ folks were open about their identities but identified privacy as a right rather than a means of survival. As Swift and her partner sought out the LGBTQ+ community in small-town circles of the Western North Carolina region, they became connected with local gay and lesbian residents through recreation or leisure in their day-to-day lives.

Although more LGBTQ+ folks began to meet and socialize in public areas, more formal meetings and events suffered from infrequent scheduling and dwindling attendance.[88] Individuals like Miele, Swift, and Jody wanted to organize regular gatherings for local LGBTQ+ populations in semi-public spaces and foster connections with younger LGBTQ+ populations. Though there may have been other less formal and more frequent meetings in WNC, they were most likely in small groups at private residences, or for short periods in semi-public spaces.[89] With this increasing interest in socialization, John, Bud, Jody, Joanne, Betsy, Barb, Alice, and Nancie planned a social potluck Out in the Mountains. This group would become essential for rural LGBTQ+ social networks in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a groundbreaking expression of place-claiming and community in Jackson, Haywood, Macon, and Swain counties. However, significant debates over how and why it occurred may indicate the organization's varying social purposes.

Understanding the conflicting testimonies of the origins, intent, and purpose of Out in the Mountains led to crucial insights into social perceptions and goals for rural LGBTQ+ populations. Among these claims, Dr. Travis Rountree asserted that the group began at WCU in

[88] Ellern, interview by Woomer, April 6th, 2021.

[89] Discerning these types of gatherings is hard because they blend in with the day-to-day. These connections and gatherings are likely like Manogue's small, candid holiday gatherings or brief meetings in spaces like Lulu's. However, larger events took place as well. Betsy, Barb, John, and Bud all met Marilyn, Jody, and Joanne when they were invited to her annual pool party, which Swift describes as widely attended by "gay[s], lesbian[s], and everybody else in between."

the 1980s specifically for LGBTQ+ professors and faculty. This claim may be grounded in some truth; Dr. Marilyn Jody was a founding Out in the Mountains member and knew many LGBTQ+ faculty members on campus. It is possible that the group began as a small gathering or has connections to Jody's annual pool parties. Still, Rountree's statement reflected the reputation of academic institutions as more open to expressions of identity and creating spaces of belonging. Rountree uplifts these histories as a WCU professor, a founding member of both the campus's LGBTQ+ Archive of Jackson County and the local Sylva Pride organization, which reflects his interest in rural and campus LGBTQ+ histories.

However, interviews with Miele, Swift, and the late Nancie Wilson complicated these assertions as no one cited specifically when the group began to meet.[90] Even in Jody's memoir *Letter to Emily*, she discussed small gatherings and a Christmas Party with her students, but there were no mentions of Out in the Mountains.[91] Considering these testimonies as Miele and Swift place their formation following their move into the area, it is likely that Out in the Mountains formed in the late 1990s or early 2000s.[92] Miele recalled being interested in forming the group after remarking to a new-to-the-area lesbian couple about how many lesbians they knew from

[90] JL. A. Bourgeois, "Q&A: Travis Rountree on the History of the LGBTQ+ Community in WNC," *Mountain Xpress*, January 13th, 2023, https://mountainx.com/news/qa-travis-rountree-on-the-history-of-the-lqbtq-community-in-wnc/.

[91] Due to her memoir focusing on the mutual impact of her students and the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, it seems understandable that she would not mention Out in the Mountains. However, John and Bud do have an honorable mention in the text for a clever quip about lesbians' shoes. Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 101, 103-104; for John and Bud's mention, see Jody, *Letter to Emily*, 10.

[92] This concern is later expanded on when examining the oral histories of John Miele, Betsy Swift, and Nancie Wilson in discerning the group's purpose and meeting space(s). Nancie Wilson places her partner Deacon Alice Mason as being ordained in 1992 at the St. David's Episcopal Church in Cullowhee, North Carolina, making this the most likely meeting location by making use of the Fellowship Hall if a member of the parish would supervise the event. Miele says the group formed after they moved here in 1990, and Swift indicates it formed after she and her partner moved to the region in 1998. Unfortunately, I could not find flyers or advertisements I could find to verify the dates. However, it is my understanding that Out in the Mountains was formed between 1998 and 2001.

Dillsboro and Sylva. However, they had not met as many gay men.[93] This is not to say that gay men were not in the WNC area, but it was more likely that regional gender dynamics played a role in socialization patterns for rural LGBTQ+ communities.[94] Regardless, Miele, Swift, and Wilson agreed that Dr. Marilyn Jody was significant in organizing and inviting people to the group, which created a sense of a more overt community.

Still, where the meetings took place also remains disputed. Nancie Wilson and Betsy Swift recall St. David's Episcopal church hosting Out in the Mountains meetings, where they were parishioners. Wilson provided compelling evidence of the location, as her partner, the late Deacon Alice Mason, "preached love from the pulpit"[95] and St. David's was known as a progressive parish since 1992.[96] Wilson's and Deacon Mason's connections to the church asserted that "the church was gracious enough" to offer the space,[97] while Miele thought it may have been a Methodist church.[98] Given the many churches in town, Miele's statement may have been a minor error. However, Wilson and Swift's identification of St. David's is also crucial, as it ensured the church's legacy as a progressive, inclusive parish that differed from other local churches.

Out in the Mountain's meetings also served different functions for each member, and Miele, Swift, and Wilson provided insight into what the gatherings looked like. The group hosted

[93] Miele, interview by Steiner and Rountree, February 16th, 2021.
[94] As Dawn Neatherly's oral history in chapter one mentions, men may have felt more inclined to remain socially private or gather in small groups due to regional paradigms of masculinity. Given local panopticons and regional influence, they may have felt more pressure to obscure their sexuality and behaviors, but they could also have simply felt less comfortable seeking other group settings.
[95] Nancie Wilson, interview by Caiden Constantino, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, March 4th, 2022, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/64563.
[96] Macon Funeral Home, "The Rev. Deacon Alice Mason - Thursday, December 22nd, 2016," March 16th, 2017, https://www.maconfuneralhome.com/memorials/the-rev-deacon-alice-mason/2806224/obituary.php.
[97] Wilson, interview by Constantino, March 4th, 2022.
[98] Miele, interview by Steiner and Rountree, February 16th, 2021.

about fifty members, ranging from young members who sought safe places for expression to older members who sought socialization with other LGBTQ+ couples.[99] However, whether members viewed it as a social or a political group depended on the narrator. Wilson stated that Out in the Mountains was strictly a social potluck with no political leanings or inclinations and that keeping politics separate from the proceedings was important.[100] Given the overtly LGBTQ+ space, the fellowship of the group, and its connections with St. David's, it may have been imperative for Wilson to assert that the group was strictly unpolitical. Swift also supported this assertion. However, reflecting on those meetings, Swift also posited that simply being together and gathering may have been political (or, rather, an act of resilience.)[101] Miele also recalled that social gatherings were not always without friction. According to Miele, gendered divisions emerged that created issues within the group. He explains that "the boys didn't like that the girls wanted to 'play kumbaya' in the corner, and there were fights with that," as he echoed a frequent refrain, "Guys, it's just for a couple of hours, just make the peace."[102] With these various testimonies of what Out in the Mountains meetings were like and the group's intent, scholars can identify that social connections and spaces of belonging were crucial for rural LGBTQ+ communities. Concerns about keeping the group unpolitical stemmed from drawing the attention of other community sectors and ensuring the safety of members and the fellowship hall.

Lastly, several factors contributed to the group's disbandment in 2015. Miele, Swift, and Wilson agreed that group membership began to dwindle, especially as the founding members stepped back from organizational duties as health issues arose. They had hoped to let younger

[99] Michelle Cooper, interview by Rachel Shaw, *UNC Asheville | Asheville Pride Oral History Collection*, June 26th, 2021, https://www6.unca.edu/ohms/viewer.php?cachefile=APOH062.xml.
[100] Wilson, interview by Constantino, March 4th, 2022.
[101] Swift, interview by Cope, April 23rd, 2023.
[102] Miele, interview by Steiner and Rountree, February 16th, 2021.

members take over, but today the group exists solely as a social media page. Swift and Miele agreed that health issues and tragedy ultimately ended Out in the Mountains. Jody's partner, Joanne, was diagnosed with cancer around this time, prompting them to step away from organizing until Joanne's passing in March 2015.[103] John also stepped away from the group in September 2015 after Bud suddenly passed away after a brain aneurysm.[104] However, Wilson explained that the group "disbanded years ago, simply because there was no longer any reason for it. People were going all different ways, and… once we started getting some acceptance, we just thought, 'well, okay, we don't need to do this.'"[105]

Wilson's indication of LGBTQ+ political declension and shifting perspectives connected regional LGBTQ+ communities with national political attitudes and sociocultural shifts. Specifically, 2015 is often considered a landmark year for the Gay Rights Movement, with *Obergefell v. Hodges* constitutionally guaranteeing marriage equality. Four years prior, in 2011, the Defense Directive known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was federally repealed. These decisions that supported marriage equality and repealed exclusionist military policies were crucial platforms for politically active gays and lesbians in the 1990s and 2000s, so having achieved these goals may have led to a decline in political advocacy. As historian and archivist Martin Duberman stated in his reflective piece *Has the Gay Movement Failed?*, many gays and lesbians settled with this political progress.[106] In viewing the disbandment of Out in the Mountains from this perspective, knowing it was primarily gay and lesbian members, members may have felt

[103] "Joanne Cleary Obituary (2015) - Sylva, NC - Asheville Citizen-Times," Legacy.com (*Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 22nd, 2015), https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/citizen-times/name/joanne-cleary-obituary?id=18184542; Swift, interview by Cope, April 23rd, 2023.
[104] Appalachian Funeral Services and Crematorium, "Obituary of Ralph Joseph Smith,"; Miele, interview by Steiner and Rountree, February 16th, 2021.
[105] Wilson, interview by Constantino, March 4th, 2022.
[106] Martin Duberman, *Has the Gay Movement Failed?* (Oakland, CA: University Of California Press, 2018), 65, 73, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqpp.1.

satisfied with feeling more politically protected and thought that they could be more overt in their expressions of queer identity.

While Out in the Mountains intended to meet the social purposes of its members and facilitate connection in the Western North Carolina area, it was also a (mostly) overt group in the local community that created a space of belonging. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place,* bell hooks established the importance of marginalized communities building ties to and investing within a community. Like the LGBTQ+ populations in WNC, these groups endeavored to find spaces where individuals fit into the local dynamics and upended existing barriers. Though regional obstacles perpetuated heteronormative paradigms of rural spaces and living, Out in the Mountains allowed members to claim belonging and community in the Appalachian region.[107] Although it was a monthly social gathering, Out in the Mountains indicated the cleverness and resiliency of LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia. Though it was not an intentional resistance, the group's legacy became a testament to LGBTQ+ history in Jackson County and an inspiring example of fostering a rural queer community. Jody, Joanne, Alice, Nancie, Betsy, Barb, John, Bud, and other local gay and lesbian couples, such as Chris, Herb, Dottie, and Jane, created a group to gather with their community.[108] Through these monthly meetings, they shaped their own cultures of place and created a space claiming identity, space, and belonging to their home of Western North Carolina.

What does Out in the Mountains and the various narratives about its creation and goals tell scholars about queer Appalachians and designated LGBTQ+ spaces in Appalachia? First, it is unlikely that it was the only group of its kind in the Appalachian region. Other groups like Out in the Mountains may have operated within that liminal space between public and private and

[107] bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3-4, 11, 14, 20-22.
[108] Swift, interview by Cope, April 23rd, 2023.

capitalized clandestine structures of organization and meetings. Moreover, these testimonies showed how crucial it is to read within the margins of the archive and oral histories. The field needs more studies of how LGBTQ+ communities in rural spaces created belonging and claimed space, and this example serves as a crucial juncture for expanding the field. Second, studying these conflicting narratives can inform scholars about the correlations between memory and meaning for Appalachian LGBTQ+ communities. Alessandro Portelli's work in understanding the link between memory and oral history offers a way to untangle this web. In "The Death of Luigi Trastulli," he posited that the "discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections … but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination to make sense of crucial events and of history in general."[109] In short, the discrepancies between these narratives highlighted the organization's meaning and the founding members' roles in creating Out in the Mountains. Considering these principles and the conflicting oral histories of Out in the Mountains, scholars can chart the evolutions of belonging, claiming identity, and place-shaping among LGBTQ+ populations in Appalachia.

Conclusion

Despite regional and national sociocultural heteronormative barriers, queer individuals in Appalachia sought to upend these dichotomies in tenacious and creative ways. With personal and political influences, generations of LGBTQ+ communities sought new ways and methods of establishing connection while reforging new expressions of identity, resiliency, and place-making. Cultures of silence typically associated with the region began to dissolve with the growing media and political awareness of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, leading to

[109] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 26.

open discussion of queer sexuality and gender in public media and community spaces. Though discrimination and harassment remained in these open discussions, LGBTQ+ individuals asserted their right to privacy, visibility and to live as the most authentic versions of themselves. While older generations often opted to continue dissimulative negotiations of space and place, younger generations were overt in shaping space and creating spaces of belonging. Though these methodologies diverged in practice, they emphasized living traditions of resilience and strength of LGBTQ+ communities in the Appalachian region.

CHAPTER THREE: CONTINUING LEGACIES OF QUEER APPALACHIAN RESILIENCY, 2010-2023

The County Commissioner's meeting in Jackson County, North Carolina, took an unexpected turn on September 12th, 2023, as seven community members signed up to speak at the meeting to demand a formal apology to members of the LGBTQ+ community from Commissioner John W. Smith. A month prior, local organizations Sylva Pride and Sylva Belles Drag collaborated to organize a fundraiser for the third annual Sylva Pride event by hosting a Mx. Sylva Pride Pageant. Local drag performers could compete for the title and honor of Mx. Sylva Pride 2023 at this private fundraiser scheduled at the public library in the community room after business hours. The event began with a confrontation between attendees, volunteers, disruptive protestors, and local law enforcement. Commissioner Smith then discussed this August 13th confrontation on the Jackson County Unity Coalition's Facebook page, allegedly upset that the event occurred on county property.[1] Commissioner Smith's comments were allegedly derogatory and also "reckless and potentially dangerous" toward local LGBTQ+ populations, referring to them as the "perverted 1%."[2] Although Smith and the disruptive protestors were not the only county residents to share these homophobic comments, they reflected predominant heteronormative ideas of place and belonging. Smith specifically calling local LGBTQ+ populations the “perverted 1%” demonstrated an attempt to exclude queer

[1] Beth Lawrence, "County Commissioners Hear Worries over LBGTQ+ Safety, FRL Agenda," *The Sylva Herald* (The Sylva Herald, September 13th, 2023), https://www.thesylvaherald.com/news/article_9e51c4ee-524c-11ee-868b-2b4c16998a46.html.

[2] The release of these comments in the public record is still under contention, given that the Facebook group is private. However, digital screenshots and Mackey's letter indicate Commissioner Smith's derogatory comments are more than allegations. Lawrence, "County Commissioners Hear Worries over LBGTQ+ Safety, FRL Agenda,"; Jackson County NC Local Government, "9/5/2023 - Regular Meeting," YouTube. (YouTube, September 5th, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmlmUJvZWCU; Hannah McLeod, “Sylva Pride Pageant Event Elicits Threats, Controversy,” *Smoky Mountain News*, August 23rd, 2023, https://smokymountainnews.com/archives/item/36245-sylva-pride-pageant-event-elicits-threats-controversy.

Appalachians from the community, minimizing their roles as participants in local culture and ignoring their historical presence in Jackson County.

Burgin Mackey was the first to speak, clad in an emerald dress and tartan shawl. She took her place at the podium with a fierce resolution to emphasize the rights of LGBTQ+ people in the county. In their statement, as a representative of Sylva Pride and Sylva Belles Drag, Mackey used Sylva Pride as an example of redefining definitions of community by outlining the role and visibility of queer people in the small town of Sylva. According to Mackey, Sylva Pride organizes events, such as the 2023 Mx. Sylva Pride Pageant, with funds donated by local businesses, as actively engaged in community work, and has support from community members. Sylva Pride had chosen to host the event on county property because they intended to showcase and support *county residents.* Sylva Pride had followed the guidelines of renting this public community space, including paying rental fees, supplying their materials, and scheduling the event after operating hours to avoid contention.[3] However, local anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric disparaged these public displays and gatherings of the queer community. Mackey asserted that while everyone is entitled to their opinion, LGBTQ+ people have the same civil rights as all American citizens and that local LGBTQ+ populations would not tolerate discrimination or exclusion from their region. Delivering a poignant quote from the reigning Miss Sylva Pride 2023 and Jackson County local Josie Glamoure, Mackey argued, "We have always been here. We will always be here. We're just choosing to no longer be silent, be invisible, to be

[3] Burgin Mackey uses she/they pronouns. McLeod, "Sylva Pride Pageant Event Elicits Threats, Controversy."; Jackson County NC Local Government, "9/5/2023 - Regular Meeting," www.youtube.com (YouTube, September 5th, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmlmUJvZWCU.

complacent. We're queer, and we are Southern Appalachian: those two things go hand in hand for us. We are proud to be both, and we don't back down."[4]

Mackey's demand for an apology from Commissioner Smith to the LGBTQ+ community in Jackson County offered compelling example of how these communities have continued to claim space and construct and defend resilient communities in Appalachia. Though these efforts had previously been more dissimulative and private, they have become more emphatic about establishing a historical and contemporary presence, belonging just as they are. Mackey's engagement with local government processes, stating the need for an apology at the public commissioner's meeting, and citing her rights as a citizen indicate that by 2023 this shift was in progress. By speaking confidently as a queer person and an active member of Jackson County's community, she refused to negotiate her identity in the presence of a public official who would allegedly ostracize her. Burgin Mackey was and remains a member of the LGBTQ+ *and* Jackson County communities and will not compromise on claiming her place within either of these spaces.

Many challenges have been posed to LGBTQ+ communities within Appalachia as they have fought to create visible communities, claim identity, and place, and live their lives as community members. Whether faced with outright discrimination, harassment, or threats of violence, LGBTQ+ communities have continually balanced their safety and expressions of identity while advocating for acceptance and equality. Throughout the complex history of space- and place-claiming in the region, there have been heteronormative pressures and local sociocultural structures that motivated dissimulative navigations of place and identity among queer Appalachian communities. Although these pressures of homophobia and transphobia

[4] Jackson County NC Local Government, "9/5/2023 - Regular Meeting," www.youtube.com (YouTube, September 5th, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmlmUJvZWCU.

persist, generations of LGBTQ+ Appalachians currently engage in overt expressions of identity by publicly upending heteronormative ideologies of place and visibility. Through advocacy, community organizing, and embracing complex forms of self-expression, LGBTQ+ Appalachians continue to build and support resilient communities of belonging.

"Don't You Try to Hide Him": Gender, Labor, and Belonging

When Sam Williams (nee Hall)[5] signed on to become an underground coal miner in Kanawha County, West Virginia, he had not anticipated that most workplace hazards and dangers would come from his coworkers and managers. When reflecting on his time in the mines, Williams was proud of his work as a coal miner, and he missed being among the "top dogs on the coal crew."[6] However, the dangers of the occupation significantly increased when he was suspected and subsequently outed as gay by his coworkers. From 2005 to 2010, Williams endured verbal harassment, physical threats to his safety, and destruction of his personal property. Ultimately, the harassment and threats became so profound that Williams sued the Massey Energy subsidiary for sexual harassment and “unspecified damages for lost wages and emotional distress” in December 2010.[7]

As a native of the West Virginia, former Marine, and working-class gay man,[8] Williams had immense respect for miners in the coal industry. Williams, then known as Sam Hall, had

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[5] Many of the articles and sources cited in this chapter often refer to Sam as "Sam Hall," which was legally his name when he filed the lawsuit. However, Sam married his partner, Burley Williams, in 2011 in Washington, DC. He has since taken his partner's surname, Williams, legally. Roxy Todd of West Virginia Public Broadcasting authored the primary article to articulate this shift, and this work follows that praxis.

[6] “Top dogs” is what Williams says in the interview. Roxy Todd, "Haunting Banjo Tune Inspired by Coal Miner's Struggle," West Virginia Public Broadcasting, January 23rd, 2015, https://wvpublic.org/haunting-banjo-tune-inspired-by-coal-miners-struggle/.

[7] Staff writer Andrew Clevenger. "Gay miner sues Massey subsidiary, alleging harassment." *Charleston Gazette* (WV), December 27th, 2010: P1A. *NewsBank: Access World News*.

[8] Jason Kyle Howard, interview by Zachary Pence, *Queer Appalachia Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries*, June 11th, 2011, https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7hx34mnd6m.

signed on with the Spartan Mining Company, had hoped to make a living in the coal industry he had grown up around. However, he recalled in later interviews being very careful to remain closeted and did not disclose his gay sexual orientation to his coworkers. Unfortunately, his peers began to suspect that he was gay, as they would "just watch, follow, [and] see me come out of a bar, [or] automatically stereotype me."[9] The harassment had started when a manager alleged that Williams had a "Brokeback Mountain moment" with a coworker after Williams shared, they had gone horseback riding on a day off. The discriminatory behaviors against Williams quickly escalated. Some coworkers lewdly exposed their genitalia to Williams at work and defaced his vehicle with signs accusing him of pedophilia, or etched messages such as "quit fag" into his car doors.[10] His partner, Burley Williams, recalled constantly fearing for Sam's safety. At one time, Williams's coworkers had removed the wheel weights off his truck, making the drive home dangerous on a "one-lane mountain road with significant drop-off."[11] Burley stated, "it was nerve-wracking because when he didn't come home, I had to go out, drive to the mines and go search for him. I'm thinking someone's shot him on the side of the road." Burley eventually applied for a concealed-carry permit and purchased his first gun "in case they were ever confronted when they went out in public."[12]

[9] Todd, "Haunting Banjo Tune Inspired by Coal Miner's Struggle."
[10] "Fag" or "faggot" is a derogatory slur used to demean LGBTQ+ people and should not be used in common vernaculars. I have chosen not to censor the term, unlike some newspapers have while reporting this story, to retain the severity of the harassment that Sam Williams faced while working for Spartan Mining Company. Although this does continue to perpetuate the use of the slur, it also details the level of discrimination, danger, and hatred that Williams faced from fellow miners. Clevenger, "Gay miner sues Massey subsidiary, alleging harassment," *Charleston Gazette* (WV), *NewsBank: Access World News*.
[11] Christy Mallory, Luis Vasquez, Taylor N.T. Brown, Rayna E. Momen, and Brad Sears, "STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION," *THE IMPACT OF STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: Against LGBT People in West Virginia*. The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35035.5, 6.
[12] Todd, "Haunting Banjo Tune Inspired by Coal Miner's Struggle."

Williams informed his managers of the severity of the harassment and was transferred across several mining sites while working for the Massey Energy subsidiary. However, supervisors and mine inspectors told him he "had no rights" to be protected in the industry.[13] Some of the managers were equally culpable in Williams's harassment as they delivered veiled threats that "accidents happen every day" in the mines or explicitly stated, "I wish all faggots would die" while making direct eye contact with him. One manager even threw away William's filed complaints to prevent investigation or mediation from upper management, ensuring that harassment against Williams continued.[14]

Though Williams had endeavored to address the discrimination amicably and professionally with his managers and superintendents, he quit coal mining in December 2010 and "was escorted off [mining] property by a security guard."[15] Shortly after, he filed a lawsuit against the company for sexual harassment. Williams could not file a lawsuit against Massey Energy Company for discrimination given that West Virginia, like many Appalachian states, omitted sexual orientation in anti-discrimination laws. However, then-West Virginia Senate President Jeffery Kessler invited Sam to become a spokesperson for Senate Bill 226 and House Bill 2045 in 2011, which sought to update the state's anti-discrimination laws to include sexual orientation. In a speech supporting the bills, Williams urged West Virginians to protect LGBTQ+ children and adults from "mental anguish and bodily injury … because of who they are."[16] Both bills died in committee in 2011, and Williams settled out of court in 2012 with Alpha Natural

[13] Mitchum, "Workplace Discrimination Series: Sam Hall," Center for American Progress.
[14] Mitchum, "Workplace Discrimination Series: Sam Hall," Center for American Progress.
[15] Mitchum, "Workplace Discrimination Series: Sam Hall," Center for American Progress.
[16] Watchdog West Virginia, "WVLEG: Supporters Rally for Anti-Discrimination Bill," www.youtube.com, February 21st, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-B006ueeboY.

Resources, which purchased Massey Energy in June of the previous year. [17] However, Williams used the methods and language of the lawsuit to refute discrimination and assert that belonging represents a new wave of LGBTQ+ Appalachians space-claiming.

The harassment that Williams experienced as a miner was based on trite homophobic rhetoric and stereotypes of gay men, but it also reflected heteronormative expressions of gender and masculinity. Coal mining is a labor-intensive occupation and is dangerous, given the environmental hazards, precarious working conditions, and heavy machinery used in extraction.[18] Because of these precarious conditions, coal miners developed an innate level of trust and respect. However, these relationships, like mining, has been "constructed… as a hypermasculine industry" that evokes "indexes physical strength and hardworking masculine bodies."[19] Historically, labor organizers portrayed coal miners as family men to advocate for fair treatment and higher wages. By embracing the projected image of miners as "providers" engaging in dangerous, strenuous physical labor to support their families and meet the "demands of the company for production and the demands of the nation for energy," coal mining became coded in heteronormative terms.[20]

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[17] West Virginia Legislature, "Bill Status - Complete Bill History," www.legis.state.wv.us, accessed November 10th, 2023, http://www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Status/Bills_history.cfm?input=226&year=2011&sessiontype=RS&btype=bill; West Virginia Legislature, "Bill Status - Complete Bill History: HB 2045," www.wvlegislature.gov, accessed November 10th, 2023, https://www.wvlegislature.gov/Bill_Status/bills_history.cfm?year=2011&sessiontype=rs&input=2045.

[18] For a brief history of miners' experiences and the coal industry's industrialization, see Ronald D Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945* (Lexington: University Press Of Kentucky, 2008), 15-24.

[19] Rebecca R. Scott, "Men Moving Mountains: Coal Mining Masculinities and Mountaintop Removal," in Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields (Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 65, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsd37.7.

[20] Scott, "Men Moving Mountains: Coal Mining Masculinities and Mountaintop Removal," in *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*, 67, 71.

Hypermasculine perceptions of mining are not only problematic because they perpetuate "racializing discourses of abject labor and an excessive closeness to nature," but also because the coal industry was not always a predominantly male workplace. Historically, mining operations also employed women and children in various roles in the industry.[21] However, the prevalence of superstitions and discriminatory practices to encourage gendered divisions of labor later diminished women's employment in the coal industry.[22] In her study of gendered divisions of labor and the harassment of female miners, sociologist Suzanne E. Tallichet argued that workplace cultures became sexualized "based on their production(s) of gender,"[23] or ideas of fixity of gender in public and private spheres. Tallichet identified that female coal miners' transgressions of fixed categories of gender roles resulted in them becoming targets of sexual harassment and bribery, derogatory humor, and abusive language.[24] Moreover, opportunities to train women as miners often hinged on "favoritism, seniority, and trust," which were "commodities male miners acquired far more easily than women"[25] due to ideas of masculinity in the industry. Through these exclusionary tactics, male coal miners actively forced heteronormative gender roles and upheld their claims to masculinity throughout the industry. By embracing the idea that men were strong providers who engaged in "real work" and that women and children were dependents, these cultures of masculinity informed exclusive claims of belonging and the construction of cultures of place.

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[21] Scott, "Men Moving Mountains: Coal Mining Masculinities and Mountaintop Removal," in *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*, 65-68.
[22] Scott, "Men Moving Mountains: Coal Mining Masculinities and Mountaintop Removal," in *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*, 67, 69.
[23] Suzanne E. Tallichet, "Gendered Relations in the Mines and the Division of Labour Underground," Gender and Society 9, no. 6 (1995): 699, https://www.jstor.org/stable/189536.
[24] Tallichet, "Gendered Relations in the Mines and the Division of Labour Underground," 698-699.
[25] Carletta Savage, "Re-Gendering Coal: Female Miners and Male Supervisors," Appalachian Journal 27, no. 3 (2000): 239, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41057390.

Moreover, when Sam Williams worked for the Spartan Mining Company in 2005, employment in the coal industry was dwindling as corporations cut labor costs by introducing heavy industrial machinery. In 2006, Scott Finn of *The Charleston Gazette* reported the loss of jobs as a "crisis of Appalachian masculinity," elaborating that the changes directly challenged these culturally masculine tenets of coal mining. With loss of income and difficulties in finding employment in similar industries, cultural and economic change challenged the internal constructions of masculinity. Moreover, the coal mining men of the Appalachian region lost an essential connection to their regional contextualization of community and belonging. Finn reports that the inability to find work, compounded with poor physical and mental health support, led to growing rates of substance abuse and self-harm that affected entire communities.[26] When miners faced these changes and challenges, they attempted to cling to and preserve what they believed bound their communities and sense of self together.

For Williams, his gender identity allowed him to get a foot in the metaphorical door because of gender biases in hiring. However, he eventually became a target as he differed from prevailing ideas of heteronormative masculinity. Additionally, Williams, as a gay man, was subject to the stereotypes of weakness, effeminate behavior, and "deviant" sexuality. His coworkers possibly grew uncomfortable with his presence on mining sites due to these stereotypes in an already tenuous workplace environment. Williams proved he could do the work, recalling that he often filled his coal cars by himself to preserve *his* safety from volatile

[26] This article is an anonymous letter to the editor commenting on a previous article run in the paper. While it directly references the article, I could not find the original piece. Anonymous, "Jobless: Honest Count Needed," *The Charleston Gazette*, August 9th, 2006, https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/jobless-honest-count-needed/docview/331365981/se-2?accountid=14968.

coworkers.[27] However, other coal miners assumed his "weakness" in heteronormative terms and continued their effort to exclude him from the workplace.

Williams's performances of masculinity conflicted with the gendered culture of the coal industry. Williams grew up in Appalachia, was familiar with the prevalence of and pride in the coal industry and emulated many regional gender norms. He understood the challenges and dangers of the occupation, so he worked hard to ensure everyone's safety and attempted to create a rapport with his coworkers. For example, Sam Williams described himself as an excellent team player by doing his part and ensuring that "the next man on the line"[28] was safe. However, his dedication to his work may have yet to bridge some social barriers in workplace conversations. Williams was closeted at work, so when coworkers discussed their families and activities outside of work, he was selective in sharing personal details. Although Williams also embodied the role of a family provider, he felt it was unsafe to share this, given the heteronormative culture of the mining industry.[29] This careful and dissimulative navigation of sharing his identity limited his connections to other male coal miners, which may have instigated their scrutiny.

Although Williams eventually quit mining to ensure his safety, he was resilient in his decision to hold Massey Energy accountable for the actions of its supervisors and employees by suing for sexual harassment. The coworkers and supervisors on the mining site actively discriminated against Williams in his five years at the Spartan Mining Company. Due to legislative constraints, he could not sue them, citing discrimination constraints.[30] Sam Williams reported that his fellow coal miners used lewd actions and derogatory language, asserting

[27] Mitchum, “Workplace Discrimination Series: Sam Hall,” Center for American Progress.
[28] Mitchum, “Workplace Discrimination Series: Sam Hall,” *Center for American Progress*.
[29] Todd, “Haunting Banjo Tune Inspired by Coal Miner’s Struggle.”
[30] Watchdog West Virginia, "WVLEG: Supporters Rally for Anti-Discrimination Bill," www.youtube.com, February 21st, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-B006ueeboY.

heteronormative definitions of belonging in the industry. By subjecting Williams to these acts, his coworkers did not consider him equally as a man and, therefore, did not belong in the industry.[31] These actions violated sexual harassment sanctions already in place to protect female coal miners.[32] This created an opportunity for Williams to challenge the actions of Massey Energy employees and supervisors, claiming rights and upending heteronormative definitions of place. Williams could do the work of a coal miner, confident in his queer identity, and deserved to work in a non-hostile work environment. By suing under sexual harassment, Williams asserted his rights as a worker, belonging as a cultural citizen, and disrupted heteronormative conceptions of place.

Regional and cultural constructions of masculinity fueled the discrimination that Williams experienced in the mines. By suing the company for sexual harassment, Williams legitimized his identity and asserted his belonging in regional communities. In *The Queerness of Home,* Stephen Vider established that courts and legal action have been essential for LGBTQ+ communities, establishing their citizenship rights, achieving equality recognition, and furthering nondiscrimination practices. Specifically, Vider claims "how homophile activists discussed and mobilized [their relationships] were shaped by broader political and cultural discourses," indicating the legislative processes as both a means to challenge heteronormativity and legitimize their identity.[33] In Williams's case, he refused to compromise his claims of place, belonging, or expressions of identity and utilized previously set sanctions to raise questions about equal rights and heteronormative definitions of belonging.

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[31] Mitchum, "Workplace Discrimination Series: Sam Hall," *Center for American Progress*.
[32] Scott, "Men Moving Mountains: Coal Mining Masculinities and Mountaintop Removal," in *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*, 67, 69.
[33] Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 43.

In *Intimate States: Gender, Sexuality, and Governance in Modern US History*, Vider added a further dimension to Williams's case to assert his rights against Massey Energy. Vider's essay focused on how zoning law court cases extend "functional family" definitions to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ couples and other nontraditional family models. However, Vider's concepts applied to Williams's case as well, as "laws have been wielded as both a shield and a sword to defend and enforce a narrow model of heteronormative domestic citizenship."[34] In following this narrative thread, Williams's lawsuit indicated and identified challenges to heteronormative ideas of equity, belonging, and masculinity within the region. Williams was not the first and certainly not the last gay coal miner in Appalachia, and he was not the first to be outed and harassed by his coworkers because of his sexual orientation.[35] However, he was the first (if not *the* first) in recent memory to challenge the heteronormative systems that contributed to his discrimination overtly.

The language of Williams's case also addresses crucial questions of who was protected in their right to work and what acceptable work conditions were. Coal miners and families of coal miners in Appalachia have a rich history of protesting exploitation, inequitable treatment, and poor working conditions. In many ways, Williams's framing of the lawsuit bore many similarities and carries the legacy of resistance within Appalachian labor history. Although Williams's coworkers attempted to make the workspace unsafe and hostile and ostracize him from claiming

[34] Stephen Vider, "'What Happened to the Functional Family? Defining and Defending Alternative Households before and beyond Same-Sex Marriage'" in *Intimate States: Gender, Sexuality, and Governance in Modern US History*, ed. Margot Canaday, Nancy F. Cott, and Robert O. Self (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 219.

[35] To quote John Howard, coal miners who engaged in "homosex" that I can identify in the Appalachian region comes from Miss Helen Compton's oral histories. Briefly discussed in chapter one, she describes her experiences seeing two men (most likely miners) "a'kissin' in the coal fields" and describes that they were later ostracized when community members burned crosses in front of their homes. While I could not find an exact date of this event, the context implies it was in the early 20th century, possibly the 1920s or 1930s. Carol Burch-Brown, "It's Reigning Queens in Appalachia," Vimeo, November 17th, 2011, https://vimeo.com/32294930.

place, he asserted he still deserved to be treated with respect on and off the job site. Using the language of sexual harassment supported these claims, extending the protections that prohibit gendered discrimination in the workplace to outline the need for equitable treatment of all employees and their right to work in the industry.

Sam Williams' story is a compelling example of space-shaping and claiming. Though William's story was covered in the press for several years during and after the case filing, it scarcely appeared as more than a blurb or an example in academic and legal publications.[36] Moreover, these narratives of change agents are needed within Appalachian communities to initiate conversations of belonging and culture of place to expand on those definitions. As one anonymous reader wrote to the vent line of the *Charleston Daily Mail* in March 2011, following his endorsement of the senate and house bills, "Why was the story about Sam Hall, the gay coal miner, not put on the front page? Don't try to hide him."[37]

Out and Open: Businesses, Place-Claiming, and Belonging

In Western North Carolina during the mid-twentieth through the early twenty-first centuries, businesses emerged as a central pillar for LGBTQ+ Appalachians to be present in local community circles, creating spaces of belonging within the queer community and offering safer public or semi-public spaces for queer gatherings. In the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, many gay and lesbian residents became business owners. They opened businesses, such as restaurants, music stores, a flower shop, and even a full-service gas station.[38] Moreover, these businesses

[36] It is also crucial to mention here that William's story may have gained the traction it did because he is white and a cisgender man. In this case, many narratives from BIPOC, gender-nonconforming, or feminine narrators may be overlooked due to racial and gender biases.

[37] More research into Williams's case and other cases from diverse BIPOC, gender-nonconforming, and feminine populations is needed to shape this fledgling study of place-claiming in the Appalachian region. Anonymous, "Vent Line," *Charleston Daily Mail* (WV), March 4th, 2011, *ProQuest Central,* https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/vent-line/docview/855006707/se-2.

[38] There is a complex history of LGBTQ+-owned businesses in rural western North Carolina beyond those listed here. While a few specific businesses are named in Betsy Swift's interview, the owners' names have not been

were public spaces open to all local community members, allowing these gay and lesbian business owners to engage and maintain a positive presence in that community and supported their financial security. This reception of these queer-owned businesses allows them to become central in dissimulative space shaping among LGBTQ+ residents. It allows gay and lesbian business owners opportunities to create safer connections among local LGBTQ+ folks.

However, in creating a respectable presence and growing their business within the county, these institutions benefitted from the collaboration between business owners and patrons to create spaces of belonging. Through this collaborative space-shaping, these businesses became a place where marginal queer residents could more openly express their identity and find belonging in local LGBTQ+ circles. When moving to Sylva in the late 1990s, Betsy Swift

included in the text as the business was either sold to new owners or to uphold the privacy of the current business owner. The prevalence of these enterprises in this region provokes questions as to how and why LGBTQ+ individuals opened and patronized these types of businesses and what ways they covertly market and engage with local LGBTQ+ populations over time. While many of these businesses contemporarily do not hide the fact that they are LGBTQ+ supportive or owned, some have also opted not to disclose their own sexual orientation or gender identity. For specific information on the businesses established here, see Swift's interview. For other referenced businesses, which are either mentioned by name in other interviews or vaguely referred to, see Daisy Anderson and Helen Tugwell, interview by Rachel Shaw, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, July 7, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63266; Mark Bryant, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 22, 2023; Michelle Cooper, interview by Rachel Shaw, *UNC Asheville | Asheville Pride Oral History Collection*, June 26th, 2021, https://www6.unca.edu/ohms/viewer.php?cachefile=APOH062.xml., Jill Ellern, interview by Danny Woomer, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 6th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63269; Kaleb Lynch, interview by Travis Rountree and DJ Williams, Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County, March 12th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63026, Paul Manogue, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 28th, 2023, John Miele, interview by Sarah K. Steiner and Travis A. Rountree, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, February 16th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63052, Karson Walston, interview by Travis Rountree, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, March 18, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63070; John Wermuth, interview by Noah Ellis, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, September 17, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63067; John Wermuth, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 13, 2023, and Nancie Wilson, interview by Caiden Constantino, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, March 4, 2022, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/64563.

recalled that many local businesses, such as Lulu's or In Your Ear Music Emporium, were essential places to connect with the local LGBTQ+ population and the town.[39] As Swift described these experiences with the local businesses in Jackson County and the evolution of overtly claiming and supporting LGBTQ+ spaces, she posited that "[these] spaces that [were] already intersectional [spaces], but [they] go out of their way to make sure that we know that we're included."[40] In these spaces, LGBTQ+ patrons found a sense of belonging in the local community and were eager to strengthen those connections. However, it becomes a mutual collaboration as local LGBTQ+ folks try to patronize these supportive places to keep them in business while claiming space within the local community.

Fig 1 and 2. These pictures feature the author and their nibling with City Lights Café's sandwich board in spring 2017. Both images were taken by author and used with permission.

Contemporarily, many of these businesses have become more overt with their expression of being queer-inclusive and supportive spaces, even enrolling directories such as Blue Ridge Pride's Business Alliance and Cornbread and Rose's Rainbow Directory. Though many businesses have closed, such as John Miele's The Golden Carp, or have been sold to new owners, such as Lulu's On Main, the reputation and legacies of these spaces remain in local memory. For example, the City Lights Cafe has established itself as an inclusive space for the local LGBTQ+ community in Jackson County. Though the Cafe space has

[39] This interview was conducted as part of a course-related oral history project in 2023. While it is not available digitally yet, it can be found in the following repository and is in the author's possession: Betsy Swift, interview by MJ Cope, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library—LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 23rd, 2023.
[40] Swift, interview by Cope, April 23rd, 2023

undergone many iterations operating under many business owners and various names, City Lights Cafe has established itself as an overtly supportive space for local LGBTQ+ populations.[41] Though the efforts began subtly with messages on the sidewalk sandwich board or a stained-glass pride flag suncatcher in the window, the business has become more openly claims and welcomes local LGBTQ+ populations. Currently, the Cafe has partnered with organizations like Sylva Pride to support fundraising for community events by selling specialty menu items. City Lights Cafe also has also supported queer employees as well, offering a space for them to market their crafts and artwork or participate in public fundraising for employees seeking gender-affirming care.

Moreover, LGBTQ+ business owners in the Jackson County area have also taken steps to become more open with their self-expression. For example, Karson Walston, a local business owner in the Jackson County area, successfully managed his pest control business while publicly coming out as a transgender man. His pest control business, The Bug Lads, services many residential and commercial properties in Western North Carolina. Having worked in the area for nearly seventeen years, Walston had an established reputation and trust within the community as earnest, hardworking, and reliable. That reputation followed him as he transitioned, though there were some difficulties. Walston describes his transition and coming out as a process and offers much grace to community members who have adjusted to his chosen name and pronouns. He describes the experience as akin to introducing a new employee to clients; clients may say, "'I

[41] It is important to note that the City Lights Bookstore and the City Lights Cafe are separate businesses owned and operated by two people. However, they operate out of the same building and share similar reputations as LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces.

don't like this employee. Maybe I do. I'm not sure' or 'No, I don't like this employee. I don't want you here anymore.'"[42]

Walston's transition indicated crucial shifts in overt expressions of self and place claiming for LGBTQ+ communities in WNC. Additionally, he offered an incredibly compassionate approach to creating belonging when facing adversity. Beyond Walston losing customers who took issue with his transition, he was asked why he chose not to relocate his business to "change." He responded that he had built his life and reputation in this area of Southern Appalachia; his ethic and ability to do the work had not changed, only his name and performance of gender. Walston, however, recognized that many will not change their views or perceptions of LGBTQ+ people instantaneously and that it takes time. Though it can be challenging, Walston did not let this prevent him from living openly and authentically as a man. As he stated, the transition did not affect how many people in the community cared, supported, and showed up for him, which empowered him to focus his time and energy on his family, work, and running a successful business.[43]

Moreover, Walston's interview also indicated the importance of community institutions in empowering claims of place and belonging. Whether these institutions are social organizations or community businesses, these places created spaces to forge connections between LGBTQ+ individuals and help create visibility, accepting spaces, and ties to place. Specifically, this can be found in Walston's interview when he was inspired to take steps towards transitioning after meeting a transgender person from Western Carolina University (WCU). Walston recalls thinking, "'If this kid can do this, I can do this.' I don't care about the age difference or anything

[42] Karson Walston, interview by Travis Rountree, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, March 18, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63070.
[43] Walston, interview by Rountree, March 18, 2021.

like that. But I said, 'If somebody can do that in college, I can do it.'"[44] Though Walston did not identify this individual or their role outright, the connotation indicated that this individual was possibly a student or staff member. Through their social interactions, Walston found a sense of belonging that resonated more with his gender performance. He was positively impacted to begin the transition process and live authentically in a rural space.

This case study of businesses in Jackson County served as a means for queer business owners to seek to belong in local communities to become overtly accepting and embracing rural queer populations created opportunities to further rural queer studies. As historian John Howard details in his seminal work, *Men Like That*, Howard posits that business districts were not only social hubs for LGBTQ+ individuals but also places to seek intimate relations after business hours.[45] Though it was unclear if these businesses were places that fostered physical intimacy between LGBTQ+ couples and friends, they did offer spaces to strengthen platonic and romantic intimacies. Pairing Howard's ideas and incorporating them with Mary Gray's theory of boundary publics, these businesses have become a critical spatial and physical representation of claiming and creating community in contested spaces.[46]

LGBTQ+ businesses in Jackson County created community connections, and business owners found belonging by opening themselves to broader community populations. This counters a broad assumption of queer isolationism in rural spaces. In following these frameworks to explore the ways that community is forged and claimed in contested spaces, scholars may further the field of rural LGBTQ+ studies to uncover queer histories hidden beneath the cover of

[44] Walston, interview by Rountree, March 18, 2021.
[45] John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), 95.
[46] Mary L. Gray, "'There Are No Gay People Here': Expanding the Boundaries of Queer Youth Visibility in the Rural United States." In *Appalachia in Regional Context: Place Matters*, edited by Dwight B. Billings and Ann E. Kingsolver, 113–114, 127, (Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2018,) https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1z27j0k.11.

heteronormative cultures of place. Many LGBTQ+ people in Appalachia ultimately felt isolated of growing up and coming out as queer, which is essential in understanding how and why LGBTQ+ people left their hometowns or rural regions. However, what about those who chose to stay? Where was it that they could find community, and how did they get to a place where they felt secure to become visibly queer and embrace local LGBTQ+ populations? Looking at where they worked, where they invested their time and money, and how they connected can answer those questions.

"Cornbread and Roses, Too": Community Organizing and Belonging

For gay individuals like Ethan Hamblin and Sam Gleaves, spaces like Berea College allowed them to meet, explore, and conceptualize their identities. When they considered the impacts of region and place on these formations in their studies, Hamblin and Gleaves recognized not only the need to disrupt long-prevailing cultures of silence about queer identity in Appalachia and belonging.[47] During a conversation between the two in 2011, Gleaves stated that it was essential to be where "both of those could be celebrated," and eventually established the link by proclaiming, "'Well, we're Fabulous and we're Appalachians, so we're 'Fabulachians.'"[48] Ethan Hamblin also addressed the term with scholar Rae Garringer, stating the term was coined by Gleaves and him to "represent the queer community in the Appalachian region." Garringer's use and interpretation of the term helped to popularize it, arguing that

[47] Sam Gleaves, "Rainbow Sign," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 20, no. 2 (2014): 140, https://doi.org/10.5406/jappastud.20.2.0139.

[48] It is also important to note that "Fabulachian" has also appeared in studies to discuss the racial experiences of young Black women in the Appalachian region in an article by Stephanie Troutman. In the context of Garringer's work and Gleaves's discussion, "Fabulachian" reflects an identity that claims queerness and place in regional identity. While Troutman's work is vital and crucial for the field, this study is limited to the exploration of the term under definitions of queer regional space and identity. R. Garringer, "'Well, We're Fabulous and We're Appalachians, so We're Fabulachians': Country Queers in Central Appalachia," *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2017): 82, https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2017.0006.

Fabulachian reflects, "the process of staying [in the region] for young queer Central Appalachians" and "the need to rename our identities, to connect to other LGBTQIA people in the mountains, and to demand that we belong, that we exist, and that we have been here all along."[49] Through Garringer's discussion of a growing Fabulachian presence in their master's thesis and publications, queer Appalachians were asserting self-determined methods of space-claiming, redefining cultures of place, and interpreting identity.

Colleges and universities within Appalachia played positive roles in the lives of LGBTQ+ Appalachians as a space for queer expressions and connections. Specifically, queer Appalachians who chose to pursue higher education described college as a place to explore and define their identity while creating connections with other LGBTQ+ folks.[50] However, simply focusing on college experiences privileges a particular perspective rather than the complex entirety of queerness in Appalachia, explicitly overlooking those who began working a trade or a working-class job rather than pursuing higher education. In these cases, like with Sam Williams and as John Howard argued in *Men Like That*, identity can still be explored, defined, and understood in spaces where queerness is unexpected.[51] Jeffery Cawood argues that "fear of

[49] Garringer, "'Well, We're Fabulous and We're Appalachians, so We're Fabulachians,'" 90.

[50] This has long been a debate topic on whether sexual orientation and gender identity are innate or constructive expressions of self. Many scholars of LGBTQ+ history agree and posit that identities are constructed within environments on psychic levels, establishing how and why a person pursues or displays certain expressions of sexuality or gender. However, other scholars believe there may be more to it than just social formation. As G. Samantha Rosenthal states, "I personally do not like the "born this way" theory of identity formation. As a trained historian, I can only see my queerness and transness as historically contingent, si-mul-ta-neously -limited and enabled by the epistemologies and categories of the world in which we live. The most coherent explanation in my mind, therefore, for why I am the way I am is this: queer history made me queer." While this is true, scholars should investigate how queerness develops (and differs) within cultures of place and should include roles of place and regions. For further discussion of these topics, consult James T. Sears, *Growing up Gay in the South* (London: Routledge, 1991), 13, 15, 18; John Howard, *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 42; Gregory Samantha Rosenthal, *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City* (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina Press, 2021), 13.

[51] Howard, *Men Like That*, 28, 63, xv, 68, 131, 52

surveillance is a significant modifier in the social performance of LGBT individuals, specifically Appalachian LGBT persons."[52]

For example, within Western Carolina University, many LGBTQ+ students used a variety of spaces and organizations to gather, create friendships or relationships, and discuss issues that the queer community will face over time quietly or openly. Lavender Bridges was the first overtly queer gay and lesbian support organization to form on campus, advertising for potential members in the student newspaper as early as October 1985.[53] Though Lavender Bridges received mixed receptions from WCU's student body, it became an active and present support group for lesbian and gay students until about 1991.[54] Following Lavender Bridges, LGBTQ+ organizations such as the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Association and Bisexuals, Gays, Lesbians, and Allies for Diversity (BGLAD, later UNITY!) would come and go throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.[55] Although these organizations changed over time, their presence and activities on campus indicate a desire among LGBTQ+ students to engage and gather within the community.

Following the traditions of previous campus-based LGBTQ+ groups, student-led organizations like BGLAD/UNITY! created social connections between queer students on campus through regular meetings and events. Kaleb Lynch, a transmasculine alumnus of WCU

[52] Jeffery Cawood, Jr., "OUT in APPALACHIA LEAVING the CLOSET in the MOUNTAINS" (master's Thesis, 2018), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/217270151.pdf, 13.
[53] Anonymous, "Gay Student Organization Fights for Recognition," *The Western Carolinian* (NC) Vol. 50 No. 12, November 7th, 1985, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/54378; Cooper, interview by Shaw, June 26th, 2021.
[54] Michelle Mazzuco, "'Coming out Day' Is Friday," *The Western Carolinian* (NC) Vol. 57 No. 9, October 10th, 1991, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/56580.
[55] Christy Hicks, "National Coming Out Day," *The Western Carolinian* (NC) Vol. 62 No.8, October 10th, 1996, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/58878.; Kaleb Lynch, interview by Travis Rountree and DJ Williams, Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County, March 12th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63026.

and local animal advocate, enrolled at the university in 2005. In his oral history about why he chose Cullowhee after growing up in Raleigh, Lynch states that the LGBTQ+ groups, specifically BGLAD, were a draw for him. When he had lived in Raleigh, Lynch did not have the opportunity to get involved "with groups like that in high school."[56] BGLAD, which would later be renamed UNITY! in an initiative sponsored by him and co-president Aaron Camp, it became an essential group for Lynch as a student and graduate of the university. Getting involved as a member and leader of the organization allowed him to create social connections on campus. However, it also empowered Kaleb to pursue his fullest expression of self.

Though the organization primarily functioned as an LGBTQ+ social space, BGLAD also advocated for LGBTQ+ students on campus. According to Michelle Cooper, a mental health counselor at WCU during the 2000s, BGLAD created a presentation for the university's Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) that determined the needs for staff and instructor support of LGBTQ+ students. At that time, WCU administration and CAPS had been debating the need for a Safe Zone Program, which allows for staff and faculty to receive certification that they are educated on LGBTQ+ identities, concerns, and issues to support LGBTQ+ students best.[57] With BGLAD's presentation, the program was approved, and WCU faculty and staff began to become Safe Zone trained.[58] In this case, LGBTQ+ students acted as agents of change on a small-scale level to assert their needs and further the cultures of belonging on the university campus.

[56] It is unclear if this was because Lynch was young or because he was closeted during that period. Lynch, interview by Rountree and Williams, March 12th, 2021.
[57] Cooper, interview by Rachel Shaw, June 26th, 2021.
[58] Cooper, interview by Rachel Shaw, June 26th, 2021; Nancie Wilson, interview by Sarah Steiner, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library—LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, April 5, 2022, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/64565.

Moreover, BGLAD/UNITY! extended opportunities for student self-expression by coordinating and planning campus-based events, like drag shows, to unite LGBTQ+ students. Although it is unclear when drag events began on campus, these performances were well underway before Lynch and Camp's initiative to change the group's name to UNITY!.[59] Moreover, recent evidence indicates that the drag events on campus may have been subversive and more private before becoming publicly accessible for broader participation and attendance.

For example, campus-based drag shows would not only serve as creative outlets and social events for LGBTQ+ college students but also tackle ongoing LGBTQ+ political issues. One of the earliest publicly reported instances of drag performances on campus comes from a subversive performance during a voter registration drive in 2012. Members of the LGBTQ+ student organization UNITY! used the drive to plan a subversive drag show to educate peers about upcoming legislation from the General Assembly of North Carolina called Amendment One. At the time, Amendment One sought to limit opportunities for LGBTQ+ partners and other nontraditional partnerships by categorizing legal marriage and civil unions between "one man and one woman."[60] According to *The Western Carolinian*, "the event… began with a flash mob"[61] with members of UNITY! dancing with "a local drag queen [marching] to the [campus's]

[59] In an interview in the *Smoky Mountain News*, faculty sponsor and WCU professor Dr. Laura Cruz, UNITY! organized drag shows "all the time," indicating that the group had sponsored drag shows for quite some time. The newspaper also states that there had been "A drag show [in April 2011] at the University Center … [which] attracted upwards of 450 spectators, according to members of the student group UNITY!" It is unclear exactly when these shows began, but there had been a history of drag on campus before 2012. Quintin Ellison, "WCU Students Stage Drag Show to Get out the Vote against Gay Marriage Proposal," smokymountainnews.com (*Smoky Mountain News*, January 26th, 2012), https://smokymountainnews.com/archives/item/6074-wcu-students-stage-drag-show-to-get-out-the-vote-against-gay-marriage-proposal.

[60] Ellison, "WCU Students Stage Drag Show to Get out the Vote against Gay Marriage Proposal"; Walter H. Dalton and Thom Tillis, "SENATE BILL 514," Pub. L. No. 514 (2011), https://www.ncleg.net/sessions/2011/bills/senate/pdf/s514v5.pdf.

[61] Katy Williams, "Race to the Ballot Kicks off at Western Carolina," The Western Carolinian, February 2nd, 2012, http://www.westerncarolinian.com/2012/02/02/race-to-the-ballot-kicks-off-at-western-carolina/.

fountain area lip-syncing Lady Gaga's 'Born This Way.'"[62] This drag performance drew attention partly because it was not part of WCU's official voter registration event schedule.

Though the brief performance was subject to pushback, it was an effective tactic by queer college students to draw attention to LGBTQ+ issues within the state. As noted by local reporters, the performance brought attention to UNITY's voter registration booth, where they shared information about Amendment One and the harm it posed for LGBTQ+ and heterosexual families. This was also not the only tactic employed by UNITY to sponsor voter registration, as they offered more traditional incentives such as free candy, free pizza, and admittance to a dance party later in the evening (which also had a drag show) for each individual registering to vote. However, the impromptu drag performance was a display of queer visibility, which drew attention from spectators as it disrupted the ordinary proceedings of events.[63] Though subversive drag performance was subject to criticism from campus and community populations, student leaders seized the opportunity to emphasize queer visibility to raise awareness of local political issues and encourage college voter participation.

Although college student-led, LGBTQ+ groups helped to create belonging for queer college students and community members within Western North Carolina. Some difficulties came along with being visibly queer in rural spaces. Although BGLAD/UNITY! had offered Kaleb Lynch a support system of friends and allies, living authentically and visibly as a transmasculine person in Jackson County was not easy. For example, Lynch recalled often feeling isolated as he had to live in a dorm alone on campus. Lynch recalled the financial stress

[62] Williams, "Race to the Ballot Kicks off at Western Carolina."
[63] Williams, "Race to the Ballot Kicks off at Western Carolina."

oh having to "pay like $2,000 extra to live in a single… student dorm … which was kind of cool, but it was away from everything else on campus and kind of isolating."[64]

Moreover, Lynch was open about his transition, which he described as "a weird educational experience for a lot of people, just my existence being here and living authentically." In many cases, the strangest thing that Lynch would encounter was the constant barrage of questions about his transition, which occurred almost daily and unexpectedly. One of the most bizarre encounters happened in the drive-thru of a regional fast-food restaurant, Bojangles, where the cashier asked him at the window, "Ain't you the one that had the sex change?" Without missing a beat, Lynch responded, "Aren't you the one that's talking about something that ain't none of your business?"[65] While student-led organizations played a crucial role in the early twenty-first century for individuals like Lynch in leading more overt lives, many LGBTQ+ individuals still had to contend with discrimination and navigate heteronormative sociocultural standards.

However, not every organization or claimed queer space was accessible. Though BGLAD/UNITY! served as a connection for young adults and drew older LGBTQ+ individuals in from surrounding communities. Additionally, many of the individuals who discuss or have shared information about their roles and participation in these spaces were overwhelmingly white. Plainly speaking, queer youth, adults, and elders who were working class, impoverished, immuno-compromised, disabled, and BIPOC may have lacked access or entry to these methods of claiming and creating place.

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[64] Kaleb Lynch, interview by Travis Rountree and DJ Williams, Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County, March 12th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63026.

[65] Lynch, interview by Travis Rountree and DJ Williams, *Western Carolina University | Hunter Library - LGBTQ Archive of Jackson County*, March 12th, 2021, https://southernappalachiandigitalcollections.org/object/63026.

For individuals like Jen Harr, an agender and grey/ace social worker and community organizer in Sylva, North Carolina, a need for overt and inclusive community space in rural areas motivated her to create Cornbread and Roses (CBR).[66] Though the Harr family is originally from South Florida, Jen moved to WNC when around five years old and was raised in Sylva. Although Harr does not consider themself Appalachian in a "traditional" sense, they described the region as a "heart space," meaning it is not only a place they call home but a place that Harr profoundly cares about and is committed to supporting.[67] However, in an interview with Matt Sawyer on the *Story Made* podcast, Harr detailed that finding and claiming space in Sylva could be problematic when she was growing up. Although she "loved the feeling of community" in the small town, some spaces were inaccessible to her as a Jewish person, and many of these community events occurred in religious-based spaces.[68]

Though Harr traveled outside the Appalachian region and eventually returned to urban spaces such as Boone and Asheville in WNC while in college, Sylva was still the place she considered home, and returned to it in 2019 when she had gotten "sick." During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Harr spent much of the lockdown reading and ruminating on the roles of self and place in a community. While reading *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States* by Samantha Allen, she was drawn to the text's disruption of urban exodus narratives that many rural LGBTQ+ people hear of and experience. Primarily, Allen posited that this was

[66] Jen Harr uses she/they pronouns. Agender is a gender identity under transgender and nonbinary gender categories, meaning that an individual either does not align with heteronormative expressions or performances of gender or experiences a lack of gender. Grey/Ace is associated with the term Greysexual (or graysexual), which falls under the umbrella of asexuality but does not necessarily fit the standard definition of asexuality. This could mean sexual attraction is not a priority in pursuing a relationship, but that person may experience sexual attraction and act on it under certain circumstances. (Simply put, "not usually, but sometimes.") Jen Harr, email to author, March 2024.
[67] Jen Harr, email to author, April 2022.
[68] Matt Sawyer, "Jen Harr," Produced by Matt Sawyer, *Story Made Project,* November 15th, 2022, Podcast, Length 01:25:51, https://www.storymadeproject.com/podcast/episode/1b73baa7/jen-harr.

not always a helpful tactic in finding belonging, which inspired Harr to think of ways to support and uplift the LGBTQ+ community in her hometown.[69]

This venture of creating community support and cementing overt expressions of belonging began small, as Harr founded and connected a group of queer Appalachians and allies called Sylva Queer Support and Education Network (SQSEN). Though their work began to provide support and education on LGBTQ+ identities and issues within local spaces, they began to hear more from queer youth about how they felt there were few examples of what it meant to be queer in rural Appalachia and their fears of rejection, ostracization, and violence. The group also branched out into organizing events, offering events such as Pride Picnics in local boundary public spaces, creating opportunities for overt place-claiming.[70] However, Harr felt inspired to take this initiative one step further to create a permanent space that could continue to offer "the support, food, love, and joy" she had desired in her youth, just "without having to change anything that [she] believed and who [she] was as a person."[71]

CBR was founded as an LGBTQ+ community center in Jackson County in the fall of 2021 but quickly expanded its mission in response to recognizing the growing needs of the local community.[72] By opening as a nonprofit organization under the name Cornbread & Roses Community Counseling (CBRCC), Harr and other members of CBRCC have expanded the organization's mission to offer sliding-scale mental health services. Additionally, CBRCC offers dedicated services for marginalized populations to be heard and to address direct issues

[69] Sawyer, "Jen Harr," November 15th, 2022, Podcast.
[70] Jen Harr, email to author, April 2022.
[71] Jen Harr, email to author, March 2024.
[72] While Harr is not the only person involved with making Cornbread and Roses the organization it is today, she is the only person I received consent from to discuss the organization and its mission. Much of these descriptions come from Jen's perspective as a director, but they would be the first to reiterate that CBR is as great an organization as it is through the work of its volunteers and staff.

occurring in community spaces. This includes harm reduction or community concern seminars, a low-restriction food pantry open to all in the local area, support groups funded by community donations, and events or programs to serve local LGBTQ+ populations. Engaging with the various issues and populations in local communities, Harr and others at CBRCC established a visibly queer presence, identified their belonging within the region, and embrace nuanced definitions of identity and region. By building a culture of belonging, many Appalachian residents can actively shape and engage in claiming space and community in the WNC region.

Today, in 2024, CBRCC is one of many organizations that actively works to shape and claim space for queer communities in Southern Appalachia. CBRCC also partners with and supports community organizations that share similar missions of creating equitable support networks for marginal populations in Southern Appalachia and establishing communal belonging. These organizations include Sylva Pride, initially formed by Dr. Travis Rountree and a committee of community members; Sylva Belles Drag, a network formed in 2020 to support local drag performers; and Unequolada, formed by Cherokee LGBTQIA2S+ individuals on the nearby Qualla Boundary[73] While each of these organizations has varying missions and goals, their collaboration and partnership create networks of community organizers and volunteers to actively participate in becoming agents of change. With these organizations embracing the challenges of community work, this infers a broader shift in sociocultural perceptions of place as LGBTQ+ people actively claim space in the region. A direct result of this locally is the creation of the Rainbow Directory of Jackson County, created by CBRCC in 2023. The Rainbow

[73] Unequolada means “Rainbow, Rainbow Hearted” in Tsaligi or Cherokee. It was formerly known as Nudale Adantedi, meaning ‘to love differently’ in Tsaligi or Cherokee. 2024; Hannah McLeod, “Sylva Shows Community ‘Pride,’” (*Smoky Mountain News*, September 8th, 2021), https://smokymountainnews.com/archives/item/32138-sylva-shows-community-pride.; Unequolada (@unequolada), "Why Change Nudale Adantedi?," Instagram, July 23, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CvGG-rqJmw9/?igsh=NWlpYTUwNmhyZTVq.

Directory serves as a resource for local queer populations to find LGBTQ+-affirming spaces, services, businesses, or firms in the county.[74] These types of directories have clear historical precedents with gay cruising literature and contemporary precedents, such as Tranzmission's directory for inclusive healthcare providers for transgender and gender non-conforming folks.[75] However, these relationships built between varying populations in public spaces within the small-town begin to assert not only the town's LGBTQ+ presence but also cultivate a reputation of inclusivity.

One thing that makes Harr and CBRCC's work so important is its mission and community support. Specifically, Harr, members, and volunteers of CBRCC work in tandem with local Sylva businesses and organizations such as The Community Table, City Lights Bookstore, City Lights Cafe, WildKitchen Supply, and the Jackson County Friends of the Library to support the local community.[76] These relationships between CBRCC local businesses and other community organizations expand the radius of support to include several local marginalized populations in the WNC region. At the same time, these services are also not limited to LGBTQ+ populations but are often helpful for many queer locals to find supportive businesses for a variety of needs. For example, CBRCC's partnerships with The Community Table and regional food banks created food pantry services with low restrictions to serve those affected by food scarcity. CBRCC's pantry can serve local undocumented families by not requiring government IDs to access food pantry services and offer delivery appointments to homebound clients who lack consistent transportation.[77] Additionally, with WildKitchen

[74] Cornbread and Roses Community Counseling, LLC, “Jackson County’s Rainbow Directory,” Cornbread & Roses Community Counseling, 2023, https://www.cbrcounseling.org/resources.
[75] Tranzmission, “Resources,” Tranzmission.org, October 17, 2018, https://tranzmission.org/resources/.
[76] Jen Harr, email to author, March 2024.
[77] Jen Harr, email to author, March 2024; Cornbread and Roses Community Counseling, LLC (@cornbread.roses), "Updated Food Pantry Hours" Instagram, January 17, 2024,

Supply's offer to utilize a portion of its retail space, CBRCC hosts Edna's Closet. Edna's Closet is a pop-up thrift store that offers affordable gender and size-inclusive clothing and uses those profits to support its community counseling mental health services. These funds are crucial to continue CBRCC's work providing low-cost mental health services and support groups. However, Edna's Closet also creates an opportunity for lower-income LGBTQ+ residents or closeted queer youth to access clothes that affirm their gender identity and presentation.[78]

Although CBRCC is not the only organization to support LGBTQ+ populations in Appalachia, it provides compelling examples of claiming place, belonging, and the history of queer resilience in Appalachia.[79] Harr's mission and the existence of CBRCC can be seen as the culmination of generations of efforts from LGBTQ+ Appalachians to create more inclusive spaces and forge a culture of belonging. The same businesses and community structures that made it possible for community organizations like CBRCC to exist are *still there*. Through generations of dissimulatively building and connecting with local LGBTQ+ individuals to create spaces of belonging, organizations like CBRCC have emerged. Moreover, those same individuals and businesses continue to invest in claiming space and community by supporting CBRCC as partners and volunteers. Harr's vision of creating a space that embraces LGBTQ+ Appalachians continues to build on these efforts and incorporates existing cultures of place in

https://www.instagram.com/p/C2NEMTSO1Oj/?igsh=cDhuNWx1d3ltaGpp&img_index=1; Cornbread and Roses Community Counseling, LLC (@cornbread.roses), "Queer Lending Library," Instagram, March 6, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C4LdckgRRRw/?igsh=MTFkMHh3MWY5ZWU4aQ%3D%3D.

[78] Cornbread and Roses Community Counseling, LLC (@cbr.ednascloset), "Welcome to Edna's Closet," Instagram, December 3, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/C0ZIzwkOslW/?igsh=ZHRsY2xqejVodGFp.

[79] Many organizations deserve to be uplifted and recognized for their efforts, but I lack the time and space to discuss this project. As mentioned directly in the text, Sylva Belles Drag, Sylva Pride, and Unequolada have contributed exponentially to WNC, but also Blue Ridge Pride, Western North Carolina AIDS Project (WNCAP), Tranzmission, and YouthOUTRIGHT. Outside of Southern Appalachia, organizations like the Stay Together Appalachian Youth Project (STAY) and Appalachian OUTREACH are doing fantastic work supporting LGBTQ+ Appalachian communities.

creative and inclusive ways. In this sense, organizations like CBRCC work toward addressing crucial community issues through a grassroots network of agents of change. Through their efforts, future generations of LGBTQ+ Appalachians will not have to understand the mountains as "a beautiful prison,"[80] but as a beautifully complex place where they belong and can call home. As Harr so rightfully inferred with her organization's name, they can have their cornbread and roses, too.

Conclusion

The Appalachian region is a space that encompasses complex experiences and notions of place and belonging. It is wholly inaccurate to define the region in simple terms. The various people and places of the region live in what Z. Zane McNeill calls "many Appalachia's," which creates a nuanced and compelling study region. Moreover, many LGBTQ+ Appalachians are cognizant of these complexities and have endeavored to embrace that nuance. In the past, many LGBTQ+ Appalachians felt it was nearly impossible to stay in the region due to threats of violence, discrimination, harassment, and ostracization. However, many were able to capitalize on the privacy and navigate the heteronormative cultures of place to carve out spaces of belonging. While these endeavors began privately and in covert ways, these expressions of queerness and belonging evolved over generations to include overt claims of place and queer visibility within contested spaces. Contemporary LGBTQ+ populations utilize previous traditions of space-claiming but also utilize methods such as community organizing and legal action to identify their roots proudly and publicly in the region and their rights to live openly as queer in Appalachian spaces. From connecting and building community in dissimulative ways to living visibly queer lives, authentic expressions of self, and proudly claiming place and identity, LGBTQ+ individuals in Appalachia have *always* been part of this region and *always* will be.

[80] Jeff Mann, *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 42.

CONCLUSION:
RAINBOW CONNECTIONS AND PRIDE IN APPALACHIA

At the beginning of the research process, this project sought to answer five main questions, also asking several important follow-ups about the experiences and history of queer Appalachians and their communities: How do queer Appalachians describe and create communities of belonging within the region? How does this coincide with identity construction through regional and community belonging, and what barriers have they encountered with these negotiations? What social and cultural conditions allowed for the emergence of visible queer communities in Appalachia, and how has this growth evolved? How fluid are identity expressions and negotiations in the Appalachian region, and how can these definitions extend beyond binary terms? Finally, how does the narrative of queer Appalachian communities and individuals challenge characterizations of Appalachia in historical and media-driven narratives?

Firstly, LGBTQ+ populations in Appalachia have evolved and developed in their efforts to create communities of belonging and utilized creative methods to foster community connections. At least from the 1970s, many feared ostracization, harassment, and violence when considering coming out in Appalachia. Due to these concerns, many LGBTQ+ Appalachians had (and continue) to leave the region in search of safe urban spaces and anonymity. Though many LGBTQ+ Appalachians left for urban spaces or colleges to escape rural hometowns, many felt connected to their homes and never ventured too far. Those who went to large cities outside the region would stay there, but just as many would eventually return as they felt at home in the region. In the 1980s at the height of the AIDS crisis, many gay men would return to the region to seek immediate medical care and to receive care from their families. However, in the 1990s and into the twentieth century, LGBTQ+ folks began to migrate in large numbers into the region as

they valued the privacy of rural spaces, wanted a change of pace, or wanted to be closer to family. As younger generations of LGBTQ+ Appalachians came of age in the region during the twentieth century, many resolved to stay and became more overt in their claims of places.

Within these spaces, LGBTQ+ Appalachians actively engaged in various methods to seek out and create a culture of belonging. Though these definitions of belonging differ within the subregions of Appalachia, many sought places where they could authentically live as themselves, whether partially or entirely. Moreover, they sought to connect with small or large populations with similar values, love of place, and interests. Safety has played a critical role in defining cultures of belonging from the 1970s through the 2020s, though it has manifested differently. Earlier on, safety was sought by navigating heteronormative standards to find belonging within broader community populations, leading many to open businesses to establish their economic security, garner locally respected reputations, and use this position to connect with other LGBTQ+ individuals in the area.

Additionally, many navigated heteronormative sociocultural standards to find places to foster platonic, romantic, and physical intimacies by utilizing “boundary public spaces.” From recreational activities such as sports leagues, parkway dates, and camping trips, meeting for lunch at restaurants, patronizing queer-owned businesses, or meeting in private homes, LGBTQ+ Appalachians found one another. These connections also took place within contested public spaces, beginning with covert classified ads in regional gay newspapers, to more public letters to the editor's columns and monthly potlucks in rented fellowship halls, to town forums and overtly LGBTQ+ community organizations.

Secondly, there is no one comprehensive narrative of coming out as LGBTQ+ in Appalachian spaces, as the coming out process is a continual process. Still, there were several

ways to hide, embrace, or perform their identities. Initially, many LGBTQ Appalachians' expressions or performances would only be in private or clandestine spaces. However, while some were only comfortable sharing their identities with other LGBTQ+ friends or supportive family members, others were more complex in constructing or performing their identities. In this research, specifically for queer women, some LGBTQ+ Appalachians could reside in a liminal space where they were not openly identifying as queer but not necessarily denying it either. In most cases, that liminal space was rarely challenged. However, regional sociocultural constructs of gender, place, and respectability posed barriers to seeking belonging in broader Appalachian communities. It was more likely for queer men to attempt to completely obscure their gay or bisexual orientations by entering heterosexual relationships or marriages.[1]

Though family and roots of place are considered necessary by many LGBTQ+ Appalachians, they also became barriers in the context of local panopticons and heteronormativity. These expressions reflected similar national issues but were often steeped in regional influences of local panopticons in rural places, creating barriers to open expressions of self. If a queer individual's family was not prominent or notorious in the rural spaces, they could operate with more privacy and discretion. However, small-town social and gossip networks scrutinized others from prominent families. In this case, several LGBTQ+ Appalachians refrain from publicly coming out to family or broader circles of community.

Moreover, other barriers to openly expressing queer identity and associating with the LGBTQ+ community stem from heteronormative ideas of gender, sexuality, and politics of

[1] There is also a possibility of lavender marriages taking place in Appalachia, which remains an unexplored possibility. Specifically, though this is not addressed in the project at large, evidence of this shows up in Thom Koch's essay "Late News" in *Crooked Letter i* when discussing his late-in-life realization that his wife was a lesbian (knowing he was gay when he married her). I chose not to include this information here because I needed to figure out where this fit, as I had not come across any other evidence quite like this. However, it serves as an exciting avenue to pursue further research.

respectability. Although many LGBTQ+ people are currently out and make little attempts to obscure or deny their queerness, discrimination, harassment, and threats of violence are still present within and outside of Appalachian communities. Much of this rejection and vitriol towards visible and vocal LGBTQ+ Appalachians (or anything related to the topic of non-normative gender identities and sexualities) is steeped in the rhetoric of Christian Right and conservative political movements from the mid-twentieth century onwards. As discussed in chapter two, predominant rejections of LGBTQ+ individuals were delivered in codifying queerness as sinful and morally abject by quoting Christian scripture. Additionally, in chapter three's discussion of Sam Williams' harassment by fellow coal miners, discrimination also stemmed from harmful and defamatory stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people as deviant or perverse. These narrow heteronormative paradigms are not only influenced by regional cultures of place but also national dichotomies of gender and sexuality. These pose enormous barriers to expression and identity performance within broader community structures as garnering this reputation of "deviant" or difference reflects on family reputation, access to employment, and cultural rights of privacy.

Although there are barriers in Appalachia that make rights to cultural privacy difficult to exert, such as local social panopticons, LGBTQ+ Appalachians have creatively navigated local social spheres and heteronormative dichotomies to identify ways of creating and defining community. By initially negotiating expressions of queer identity and seeking acceptance under heteronormative or respectable roles in local areas, LGBTQ+ people were able to carve out public and semi-public spaces to gather and connect. Business owners, especially in rural places, were critical in opening these spaces. Colleges and universities also contributed to this as a space that operates slightly outside local panopticons and has grown more diverse. In these spaces,

LGBTQ+ youth, students, and faculty explore different methods of fostering LGBTQ+ campus communities and personal expressions of identity. Moreover, communities and relationships also blossomed in private spaces and boundary publics. Though these expressions and gatherings have become increasingly public over time, the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and issues in politics, media, and place have allowed LGBTQ+ Appalachians to claim a place and shape inclusive space in the region.

Fourth, at least from this presentation research, expressions of queer identity and claims of place have been more rigid than fluid within Appalachian spaces until recently. However, this area of research deserves more scholarly exploration than is found in this project, and from this research, expressions and identity negotiations operated heavily within binary paradigms. While lesbian and bisexual women were able to occupy liminal spaces where they could present or behave more masculine, gay, and bisexual men typically could not offer those same opportunities. Even within more tolerant spaces, such as colleges and universities, queer men often remained vigilantly closeted due to fear of discrimination and harassment. While several struggle to break through binary barriers of expression in the mid to late-twentieth century, this begins to shift in the mid to late 1990s and early twenty-first century following national LGBTQ+ advocacy and media visibility.

Moreover, transgender, and gender nonconforming Appalachians (who are woefully underrepresented in this research) seemed to face intense scrutiny in their homeplaces. However, further investigation needs to explore the historical regional barriers to transition and accessibility for gender-affirming care. Contemporarily, many transgender and gender nonconforming Appalachians are often vocal agents of change and involved in visibly LGBTQ+ community organizing. While there is some discourse of transgender and gender nonconforming

people operating within heteronormative barriers to navigate expressions of self, it often occurs in generalizations and vague terms. Still, due to heteronormative cultural barriers (both in communities and some archives), it is challenging to trace transgender histories in the region.

However, some histories persist and have become visible within the region for future scholars to pursue future works, with all credit due to trans-activism and archival works. For example, Aleshia Brevard of Erwin, Tennessee, a renowned actress, Playboy Bunny, and transwoman, was often harassed by local boys and men for her more feminine expressions of self. As she states in a blog, within this culture among the "rough and randy farm boys," in her hometown, "a boy … was considered sissy if he wanted clean clothes. I wanted my sox to match my hair ribbon."[2] She would eventually leave the region for San Francisco in the late 1950s before her life "truly began" in 1962 when she received gender reassignment surgery. When she returned to Tennessee to recover from the surgery, her family accepted her transition.[3] Before she died in 2017, Brevard would alternate between living in California and Tennessee and remained proud of her Tennessee roots.

Additionally, Holly T. Boswell, a transwoman who had resided in Asheville, North Carolina, since 1976 and became an important transgender activist within regional and national spaces. She left her legacy in the urban Appalachian city as she helped to establish transgender support systems. Boswell, who came into the region as a "back-to-the-land flower child," found the area more open to her explorations and expressions of gender identity as she would "visit clubs dressed as a woman" and met others who performed and expressed gender in alternative

[2] Aleshia Brevard, "Aleshia Speaks!," *AleshiaBrevard.com* (blog), November 14, 2008, http://www.aleshiabrevard.com/AleshiaSpeaks.htm.
[3] Nikita Shepard, "A Tennessee Trans Icon Comes Home: Remembering Aleshia Brevard," *Spectrum South - The Voice of the Queer South*, November 20, 2017, https://www.spectrumsouth.com/tennessee-trans-icon-comes-home-remembering-aleshia-brevard/.; The Brooks Fund History Project, "The Brooks Fund History Project - a Secret Only God Knows Documentary," www.youtube.com, April 4, 2017, https://youtu.be/vj-KSfY-yw4.

ways.[4] She would go on to found the Phoenix Support Group in Asheville, one of the region's first inclusive gender-questioning support groups. She was also the first to use the term transgender in her essay "Transgender Alternative" and created the transgender symbol in 1993.[5] Although she passed away in 2017, she was a critical transactivist and pioneer in urban Appalachian spaces to upend binary understandings of gender in her local community and create spaces for gender-nonconforming Appalachians to explore their own gender identities. By delving into the lives of Brevard, Boswell, and other gender nonconforming and trans people, scholars can expand the field by illuminating transgender history in Appalachia.

Lastly, narratives of queer Appalachian communities and individuals contribute to the work of scholars to upend previous characterizations of Appalachia as an isolated and anachronistic place. As scholars seek to uplift narratives and histories of place that establish and embrace the complexity of regional place, queer Appalachian history helps to bind those narrative threads together. Historically, LGBTQ+ history in the region allows for expansions of urban and rural narratives of place-claiming and shaping while tracing identifiable links to national political and sociocultural shifts. Centering LGBTQ+ history and how the community flourished in these regional spaces upends anachronist perceptions of the region. Through these lenses, scholars can elucidate Appalachia as a contemporary space, with college-educated and working-class communities working together to find spaces of belonging, challenging political, labor, economic, and sociocultural perceptions of place. Although several themes and trends resound from previous perceptions of place, such as connections to environment, family, and

[4] Jennifer M. Barge, "Letter: Celebrating Local Trailblazer Holly Boswell," *Mountain Xpress,* August 15, 2017, https://mountainx.com/opinion/letter-celebrating-local-trailblazer-holly-boswell/.
[5] Barge, "Letter: Celebrating Local Trailblazer Holly Boswell,"; Holly Boswell, "Reflections of an Asheville Counter-Culture Explorer," Mountain Xpress, October 1, 2014, https://mountainx.com/opinion/reflections-of-an-asheville-counter-culture-explorer/.

religion, they become contextualized in new ways of understanding relationships between people and place, being and becoming, and resistance and resilience.

While the field of queer Appalachian studies is growing exponentially and charting new paths into how scholars contemplate and understand an already complex region, this thesis aims to support the field by documenting (at least) part of its origins. To tackle the history of a marginal population in a broad region is ambitious, and this project is by no means perfect. However, it aims to open avenues for conversations about intersections of region, place, identity, belonging, and resilience, uplifting a narrative of the mountains from a population of its people relegated to the margins. For its success in celebrating the strength and resiliency of LGBTQ+ communities who have loved the mountains and have or currently live in Appalachia, let this work function as a step towards creating a more inclusive and diverse field of study. For its flaws and errors, I am sure there are many; let it be a piece to raise questions, further historical inquiries, and inspire documentation of queer Appalachian communities. Scholars who write bottom-up histories of the region have frequently identified how proud Appalachians are *of* the mountains, which is crucial in raising their consciousness. It is time for a new chapter of Appalachian history focusing on pride *in* the mountains and the LGBTQ+ people who call them home. To conclude this project on a hopeful, paradoxical note: the work of uplifting Queer Appalachians and their history is just beginning. (*How exciting!*)

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