

ACTUALIZATION THROUGH ACTIVISM: TRANSGENDER MEDIA MAKING IN  
CENTRAL APPALACHIA

BY  
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## DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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## ABSTRACT PAGE

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Using ethnographic methods, this dissertation explores transgender media makers and their works in Central Appalachia. It employs audience studies, queer/trans migration, and queer rurality to understand the drive of these makers and their audiences. A documentary tour, an Instagram account/zine, and a filmmaker provide the means to further understand trans life in the region and what compels the makers to do their work. Through this media making activism, a new migration theory, “actualization through activism,” and a new area of study, “trans rurality,” are developed and proposed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I knew I wanted to work with Cassius Adair from the moment his job talk started while he interviewed at the University of Oregon. I watched people move to the edge of their seats while he spoke. If not for that movement, I would not have been aware I was doing the same. He's a tremendous talent and dynamic intellectual. I'm excited to see what he does next, and I always will be.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Appalachia and transgender identities aren't commonly thought about together, even sounding contradictory to some. This dualism is partially due to the dominant narrative that queer people want to live - or only exist within - big cities, a myth that negates most of the United States as a viable living space and seeps into trans narratives under the LGBTQ umbrella. Because Appalachia is often conflated with rural, the omission of queer and trans people from the record is magnified. Over the past few years, a shift began to occur with more queer and trans visibility, and its reception is mixed. That visibility for transgender Appalachians is made salient through activist transgender media producers.

To understand the experience of transgender people in Appalachia, I spent a year working closely with two transgender-run media activist groups - the Instagram, zine, and mutual aid project Queer Appalachia and the crew of Transilient's docu-series *Climbing Every Mountain*. In addition to those organizations, I interviewed and observed transgender documentarian Oakley Fugate who works with the media, arts, and education outfit Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

While I got to know those media makers, I also attended queer events, found unlikely allies, and got to know many other people involved in transgender media activism in the region. As a transgender person from Central Appalachia, I've closely watched the region's politics along with the queer and trans activism it generated in the years prior to my fieldwork and since then.



## Background

Leading to the 2016 elections, the idea of Appalachia as “Trump Country” proliferated in the press and purportedly secured Donald Trump’s election. In tandem with the build to the elections, Author and Venture Capitalist JD Vance’s 2015 book *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* spent over 70 weeks on the *New York Times Bestseller List* (Catte, 2018). Vance’s controversial memoir looks at his family in Ohio, tracing the inherited violence and poverty they experience to Eastern Kentucky, solidly Central Appalachia. Netflix purchased the movie rights for \$45 million with star power Director Ron Howard and leading roles for Amy Adams and Glenn Close. While the movie was met with terrible reviews, the popularity of the book helped JD Vance launch a political career.

In addition to the elections and best-selling book, Dolly Parton’s seemingly continuous rise in fame and financial backing of the Moderna vaccine Covid-19 fuels some of this national attachment to the region. Appalachia is in one of its media cycles, much like it was in the literature and journalism of the late 1800s and the 1960s War on Poverty. This attention can be positive (Dolly Parton), but it tends toward the negative (JD Vance).

While Appalachia is having one of its moments, so is transgender identity. In 2014, Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time Magazine* for the article “The Transgender Tipping Point,” sparking a conversation, which exploded a year later with Caitlyn Jenner coming out as transgender on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Bathroom legislation and military bans emerged along with more representation and media interest. Anti-transgender legislation has grown with every year, and many states within Central Appalachia help pave this path.

Appalachia and transgender people are gaining media attention. There is also, of course, the intersection of these identities. The South, on the whole, is queer. It juts from normative

conventions with many parts of the United States, thus getting the status of “other.” The number of LGBTQ present speaks to a type of double queering. The region contains the largest queer-identifying population. The Southeastern United States, Central Appalachia included, has 35 percent of the United States LGBTQ people, according to a study by UCLA’s Williams Institute (2014). While the study is getting dated, it shows Appalachia and the South as the region with the highest number of LGBTQ people in the country. This data dismisses a myth perpetuated by urban bias.

Another study from UCLA’s Williams Institute (2017) found West Virginia contains the highest number of transgender-identifying teenagers (13 to 17), twice the national average. With the rise in trans identifying people, those statistics are certainly higher now. The CDC (2022) found that the number of trans-identifying people ages 13 to 24 more than doubled between 2017 to 2020, moving from .5 percent to 1.4 for ages 13 to 17 and 1.3 for ages 18 to 24. This population - transgender people in rural areas and Appalachia - has mainly gone unstudied and ignored. The regional-organized groups that openly support trans people, however, are growing in number.

## **Rationale**

Understanding the work and role of Central Appalachia transgender media producers and their reception opens the opportunity for a greater understanding of the transgender experience in Appalachia and perhaps many other rural communities throughout the country. Better comprehension can add dimensions to the idea of Appalachia and the experiences of transgender people. It can illustrate more ways to be in the body, in the rural United States, or just in the United States.

Because I am a trans-masculine person and a media-activist/professional/academic from Central Appalachia, I am incorporating my experiences through this highly reflective ethnography of trans-media producers (made by and/or for trans-identifying people). Using ethnographic methods, I employed interviews, observation, field notes, textual analysis, digital archive work, and reflective journaling to understand what compels these trans-media producers to do their work and how the region and its audiences perceive it. Queer and transgender migration, queer and transgender rurality, and audience theories are applied to understand the work of these media producers and the reception of their work. Ultimately, I look to answer the core question: What does the production and reception of trans-produced media say about transgender lives in Central Appalachia? What can this knowledge do to support them?

## **The Chapters**

The text is laid out as follows. Chapter 2 provides the historical background by putting Appalachian Studies and Transgender Studies in conversation. It addresses separate and overlapping issues the two fields face and their histories. Chapter 3 contains the literature review and covers queer and transgender rurality, queer and transgender migration, and audience studies and reception. The rurality, migrations, and audience approaches provide the guiding theories for thinking through my fieldwork. Chapter 4 discusses the methodology and tools used in research.

Chapters 5 to 11 are the results of the fieldwork. Chapter 5 focuses on the documentarian Oakley Fugate. I encountered Oakley in three different settings – the second annual Pikeville Pride in Pikeville, KY; the Young Appalachian Storytellers event in Jonesboro, TN; and the multi-media outfit Appalshop in Whitesburg, KY. Chapters 6, 8, 10, and 11 trace a transgender health documentary by the group Transilient. I accompany the documentary crew on tour from

West Virginia to Georgia. Chapters 7 and 9 look at the zine, mutual aid, and Instagram account Queer Appalachia's rise in popularity and cancellation. The dissertation ends with a discussion in Chapter 12 and the conclusion in Chapter 13.

## **Definitions**

Understanding the following words and phrases helps shape the text. It shows how these words are used within the writing.

**Transgender:** Let's not define this. You don't hear the rules of the sports game beforehand. Even if I did, I still wouldn't know them because I don't care. At this juncture, that's likely true for people who don't know what transgender is. For people who need transgender defined for them, a google search might be a better starting place.

**Media:** This piece looks at the body as a medium in conjunction with what is usually considered more traditional media – newspapers, social media platforms, television, film, and more. The body is medium, too, used to convey information within itself to function and with each other.

**Trans-media producers:** These are the media makers. The person is either transgender or making media that focuses on transgender people or both.

**Work:** The work extends to include the transgender media maker's efforts and results.

**Audience:** The audience is both the maker and the people who receive this work. It can also extend to the desired audience. This text looks at the audience of the maker, the receiver, and the intended receiver.

**Reception:** The reception seeks to find a response to the transgender-media makers' work. This can be through the production of it, the public response to it, and its ability to be found.

## Chapter 2: History and Context

To provide the context, I place myself within the work, give a brief history of Central Appalachia, address transgender representation in the media, look at transgender people in Appalachia, and put emerging themes in conversation, such as storytelling, binaries, bodies, and temporalities. This chapter reflects and expands upon a piece I published in the anthology *Y'All Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* (Banks, 2022).

### My Context

“I’m sewing a dress for my new granddaughter,” my mom says to me over the phone. It’s clearly a conversation starter, but I opt to ignore it and move on to the next topic. It doesn’t take long before she begins to speak about her church and how it isn’t recognizing same-sex marriage yet and perhaps not accepting openly queer people into the congregation. The second part of this conversation is downplayed on her part.

Within two years, my family had three people identify as trans. I’m one of them. For me, it was a matter of learning the language, accepting myself, and seeking hormone replacement therapy. It helped that I’m at a university in a liberal Oregon college town. I felt more comfortable undergoing the physical changes in this space. I can’t imagine how I would have taken those steps in my hometown and the response to it.

My family lives in Eastern Tennessee, solidly Central Appalachia. As a queer person who seems to lack closets, my experience growing up in the area was not optimal. In elementary, I

was placed in a behavioral program, so I would stop talking in class, and I did for the next 10-plus years, both in and often out of the classroom. Many people avoided eye contact with me, an important detail my spouse noted when she first started visiting my hometown. Upon hearing this, I knew that was an integral part of growing up. I was to be quiet as well as ignored. Essentially, I was supposed to disappear. It took a long time to work toward being a well-socialized person and someone who possesses self-respect.

This isn't the complete story, however. Conversely, I was raised by a village and by the people who did support me. It was a sprawling group that ranged from a large family to several of my church's congregation to some people I encountered day in and out in - what was, at the time - a rural town by federal government standards. While I did not thrive in this place, I would learn that metropolitan cities - New York and Philadelphia - proved to be hard, too, in their own ways.

In recent years, I noticed the assistance and support trans-identifying family members are getting and the issues they are encountering. I left when I was 18 and returned for a couple of unpleasant years as a newspaper reporter in my 20s, living in other people's small towns. I further solidified that I should not live in the region. The way people interacted with my family, however, made me deeply curious about what changed culturally in the area, or if anything really did. Through the news, I saw some progress that appears to be occurring.

The year 2018 marked the first pride parade in Johnson City, TN, near my hometown. Upwards of 10,000 people attended in a town of approximately 70,000 inhabitants. The parade received threats from a white nationalist group, spurring the attendance and driving more people to appear to support the event (Paykamian, 2018; Pernhe, 2018). The police presence was strong in the crowd, complete with helicopters hovering over the celebration. Three-time *RuPaul's*

*Drag Race* Alum Eureka O'Hara served as the parade marshal in its second year. Eureka, who identifies as non-binary and lived as a woman for five years, is from Bristol, TN, a city adjacent to Johnson City.

Before my fieldwork and research, I didn't know what to make of the atmosphere for transgender people in Central Appalachia. I had my experiences, ones I can only trace to a degree before I get into memory's murky territory. It gets even trickier since I was not speaking about my experiences around the times they happened; because I wasn't talking much, I've noticed I don't remember growing up as well as so many other people do. The levels of erasure I experienced are multiplicitous.

Around the time of Donald Trump's presidential election, I began to see a rising popularity in trans-driven (content and makers or both) media groups, such as Queer Appalachia and Transilient, and an occasional individual like documentarian Oakley Fugate. Their presence indicates a level of trans visibility I did not expect. As of 2021, Knox Pride and Pikeville Pride - two LGBTQ centers - opened. The LGBTQ population is becoming more outspoken and present. The number of small-town and rural Pride celebrations is rising, too, celebrations such as Jefferson County Pride in Dandridge, TN, and Beckley Pride in Beckley, WV. I took that into account as well as the region's history and screen representation to provide context, perform fieldwork, and analyze my findings. To fully understand, both transgender studies and Appalachian studies need to be in conversation.

## **Images of Appalachia**

After the Civil War, entrepreneurs flooded Appalachia, capitalizing on land and natural resources (Drake, 2001; Eller, 2008). During this time, the United States experienced economic

growth. Industrialization fueled this boom, and the urban Northeast needed materials for its factories (Eller, 2008). Appalachia met those needs with an abundance of natural resources and a workforce. Company-run towns sprung up, people migrated for jobs, and those who already were residents shifted their focus from farming the land to mining it.

Post-Civil War, there was what amounted to a rediscovery of America and a desire for stories about the quirky corners in its vast landscape. Driven by travel writing, this period of local color stories propagated the imagination of North America, outwardly shaping the stories of place and solidifying them in the collective consciousness. Through these writings, Appalachia became romanticized or deviant. In terms of screen representation, think of the sweetly simple television series *The Waltons* versus the menacing-packed thriller film *Deliverance*. These portrayals sum up the duality often present in the land and the portrayal of its people.

History Professor Steven Stoll (2017) points to an article in *Lippincott's Magazine* as a starting point for the unsavory and social misfit Appalachian archetype. The feature article focuses on a home the author stopped in Southeastern Kentucky in 1869. The author presumes the homeowner to be a former slaveholder who is now wallowing and rotting on his property. The disgust the author feels toward the man then shifts to all poor white people in the vicinity, a murky area in the Civil War that was aligned with a mixture of Confederacy but — it can be easily argued - more Union advocates. The author describes people's physical abnormalities - elongated bones, loosely attached muscles, and disproportionate features. Essentially, the writer posits the people as another race, as Stoll notes:

This racialized condemnation, perhaps more than any other insult and degradation they received, most indicates the extent to which they had fallen down a cultural gradient, from the formidable owners of their material world to curiosities - at best the makers of homely quilts and rough-hewn furniture, at worst moonshine distilling insurgents and violent slackers against the social order. The disparaging writing about the poor whites of the southern mountains tends to assert or imply their incapacity for historical change. It



accuses them of stagnation amid opportunities for wealth. Rather than admit that they did not understand the people they confronted, the journalists, social scientists, and tourists who produced this writing often castigated and dismissed them (16-17).

The Great Depression further solidified Appalachia as America's go-to for poverty. The economy came to a halt, and families moved in with families (Eller, 2008). Like the rest of the country, World War II resurrected the economy in Appalachia; there was a new need for resources, and the structure to obtain them was in place (Eller, 2008). The mining companies began employing more people again. Parts of Central Appalachia that fell outside of coal mining territory were harvested for other natural resources and often made into factory towns. Many coal mining companies and other outsider industries employed unethical practices – low pay, dangerous work, union-busting, contaminated drinking water, poor environmental practices, destroyed settlements, among others. By the 1960s, a large portion of Appalachia was being mined, and factories were established throughout the region (Drake, 2001).

In the 1960s, Johnson and the Kennedys turned national attention toward Appalachia and its poverty. Historian Ronald Eller notes (2008) that the economy was booming, and the country was becoming a world power. This growth prompted presidents and other government leaders to examine what they identified as a part of the country that is out of step with the rest, lagging in development. The War Against Poverty was declared. Vista workers and television news people became common in the small towns and hollows throughout Appalachia (Barrett, 2000).

In the film *Stranger with a Camera* (2001), Documentarian Elizabeth Barret and her community remember their Eastern Kentucky communities swarming with media outfits during the 1960s. "Almost every time you looked up, there was a newspaper reporter or a magazine reporter or a television reporter or a crew," said Tom Gish, publisher of the Eastern Kentucky newspaper *The Mountain Eagle*, in a filmed interview.

As Barret shows, this coverage produced pictures of children playfully eating dirt and being labeled as hungry as an example of the poverty porn being produced. For instance, the piece *Christmas in the Appalachians* involves an interview with a woman about the upcoming holiday and money issues, adding voiceovers such as “It is as if she lives in a country far removed from ours.” This coverage proved to be embarrassing for its recipients and the small communities they inhabited. The influence of government and media recognition produced a variety of reactions and prompted policies.

As part of the response to the War on Poverty, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was formed. While the commission does excellent work, it also makes missteps. In the 1990s, ARC aimed to create more employment opportunities by making Appalachia resemble a suburb (Eller, 2008) to compensate for the decline in factory and coal mining jobs. The plan worked, but the jobs were low-wage, low-benefit positions like Walmart. This shift led to cultural loss and a decline in locally owned businesses.

Meanwhile, during the War on Poverty in the 1960s, Appalachia proved to be as prominent on prime-time television programming as it was in the news. *The Beverly Hillbillies* was one of the top-rated shows of the decade, with *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Waltons*, and *Hee-Haw* not far behind. Tangentially related shows like *Green Acres* and *Lassie* performed well, too. There was a nostalgia for rural life as the US became increasingly urbanized (Lipsitz, 1986). The capturing of these cultures on the small screen has also been referred to as imperialistic (Lipsitz, 1986; Newcomb, 1979; Harkins, 2003). These portrayals provide one more way to claim territory in the US and tame a land too often portrayed as wild, its people included.

While the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, it is curious that television focused on poor white people (Harkins, 2003); it was a way to erase black people and the

nation's role in their marginalization. It is an extension of television producers' identities and their white and middle-class imagination. As historian Elizabeth Catte (2018) points out, Appalachian people of color have experienced erasure repeatedly. When the coal mining industry was booming, she found that, depending on the location, the mines employed between 20 to 50 percent black men. The influx of Mexican and South American immigrants to the region in the 2000s never makes the Appalachian narrative. These are not stories that get told when the national media addresses Appalachia. These stories are rarely captured in Appalachia, either.

Television's "hillbilly" portrayals were often childlike (Newcomb, 1979). *The Beverly Hillbillies'* Clampett family never adapted to their home of Beverly Hills. They wore ragged clothes, cooked the same opossum food, and cracked Confederacy jokes in their mansion. They were perceived as undeserving of their money because they didn't know what to do with it. While Andy Griffith was not childlike – because he is a sheriff – side characters like Gomer Pyle and Barney Miller were. These tropes exist within hillbilly portrayals as one more way to show their difference, to paint a region as one-note, simple, and undeserving of responsibility.

Media Scholar Horace Newcomb (1979) ascribes to the idea that American imperialism is a critical component in Appalachia's representation. He also notes a binary. Appalachia is the "other." People outside of it can feel better about themselves because they aren't from there (Newcomb, 1979). This trope was recently revisited in the 2016 Trump election when the region was dubbed "Trump Country," aka other America. Appalachia, on its own, didn't elect Donald Trump as president.

JD Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2015) is a prime example of the recycled narrative surrounding Appalachia. Vance claims insider status through his grandmother and grandfather, who married and moved away when they were

teenagers. The book opens with a history of his hillbilly family's violence and notoriety. Vance even links his family lineage to the legendary Hatfield/McCoy fight. Spoiler: By the end of the book, the reader...if they are paying attention...would see that he spent a few summers as a child visiting Appalachia. Yet, Vance considers himself an expert. He blames the domestic violence his family experienced on its Appalachian legacy. This attribution frames the region as so depraved that it produces only a lineage of trauma, addiction, and violence. While I will never deny intergenerational trauma, it seems like a stretch to blame it on a large and varied territory. His stance oversimplifies Central Appalachia and reduces it to a stereotype. By doing this, he makes his story more palatable for the country. It speaks to the ideas that are already in the country's larger consciousness.

In line with repetitive cycles, Eller (2018) compares the past lines of government handouts to the current lines at Walmart. He also sees the influx of pharmacies and the medical industry as the present regional entrepreneurs. There is a consistency in how the region is treated.

A 2019 *New York Times* article (Robertson) featured Mined Minds, a non-profit school/employer that set up shop in rural West Virginia. The newly started company received a grant for over \$1 million from the Appalachian Regional Commission. The founders moved from Chicago to West Virginia to fix the employment issues in the long wake of decreased mining jobs. People quit their jobs to enroll in the funded program. Students were neglected to the degree that they disenrolled. Many who did not enroll were expelled. Meanwhile, the founders jetted around the world and partied. Many locals said it was the same thing they always experienced, just history repeating itself. While it is technically not possible for history to repeat itself - time, context, and people change - it is possible to be trapped in a narrative and experience the same patterns of interactions and treatment.

## Transgender People in the Media

Much like Appalachia, transgender people get rediscovered in the media. C. Riley Snorton (2017) ties the mutability of gender to blackness in his sprawling book *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Using the United States as the site of exploration, Snorton begins with slavery in the mid-1880s and moves through history to the Black Lives Matter Movement to illustrate the continued presence of black trans people. Also steeped in revisionist history, Emily Skidmore (2017) examines trans men in the press in her book *True Sex: The Lives of Transmen at the Turn of the 20th Century*. The text shows the stories of trans men being “discovered” as trans men through newspaper articles, sometimes obituaries. Small town newspapers didn’t sensationalize these stories; when cities picked up reports of small-town trans men, the stories received plenty of attention, with the phrase “true sex” often accompanying them.

Another piece by historian Emily Skidmore, “Constructing the Good Transsexual” (201), maps the media circus around Christine Jorgensen’s transition in the 1950s. While other transwomen received some attention, Jorgensen’s whiteness and adherence to the binary beauty standards garnered her the most attention (Skidmore, 2011). It’s almost impossible to read the piece without thinking about Caitlyn Jenner’s *Vogue*-cover transition announcement and how that overshadowed the work done by transwomen of color activists like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock. These representational traps and their politics are present in abundance.

Morgan M. Page (2018) runs a trans history podcast and notes the media’s tendency to “rediscover” trans people from Jorgenson to 1970’s tennis star Renee Richards to the present day. Scholar Susan Stryker (2008) observes this, too. She says transgender people have

consistently appeared in the media since the 1950s. According to Page (2018), the only thing that will change the novelty of trans people is for more trans-media producers to exist. Slowly, trans-produced media are emerging. Yet trans-produced media have a history of cis-led media representation of trans people to overcome.

For decades, television's transgender characters would appear briefly and as people to be mocked, either jokingly or more aggressively (Lester, 2015; Miller, 2015). Kay Siebler (2012) found that digital cultures tend to push transgender into binaries for larger consumption, portraying transgender as transexual and continuing to over-simplify gender. Depictions that focused on medically transitioning and equated genitals with gender, such as *The L Word* and *Sex and the City*, became common (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). The gay and lesbian tropes of victim or villain found in film (Russo, 1981) fit perfectly with trans characters on both the small and big screens.

In recent years, regular transgender characters have appeared on television (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). The narratives became somewhat more nuanced, evolving past one-note characters who are deviants or suicidal. Trans men and trans-masculine people, overall, are still markedly underrepresented (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). While Capuzza & Spencer see progress, many narratives about trans people and the "wrong body" still circulate. The lack of trans-masculine and nonbinary people is not an afterthought; it is a substantial portion of trans-identifying people.

Since Capuzza and Spencer's study, more trans characters have graced the screen, and trans people typically play those roles. According to a 2021-2022 GLAAD report, 42 transgender characters appeared in scripted series out of 775 regular characters on television. Shows like the

trans-forward *Pose*, *Euphoria*, and *Transparent* have emerged. With each year, more people are learning how to articulate their transness and gender identity, too.

Unfortunately, the visibility of transgender people on the screen corresponds to the rise in violence against transgender people, particularly transgender women of color. As Eric A. Stanley, Johanna Burton, and Reina Gossett emphasize in their anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017), representation has been heralded as a means to understand oneself and find solace. The 2014 “Transgender Tipping Point” coincided with a jump in violence, which has only continued since then. The American Medical Association referred to the increase as an epidemic in 2019. Anti-transgender legislation is rising with this visibility. With each passing year, the number of transgender-related hate bills increases, focused on preventing healthcare, curbing involvement in sports, and policing gender in education.

### **Transgender and Appalachia**

Trapped narratives, misrepresentation on the screen, and belittlement in the news are just a few of the themes linking transgender and Appalachia studies (Banks, 2022). The idea of “wrong bodies” is one of the tropes bridging Appalachian and Transgender Studies. Before JD Vance, Henry Caudill was perhaps the last famous author to write a non-fiction book about Appalachia with his 1963 best-seller *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. Cotte (2018) connected Vance to eugenic proponents and white nationalists through the few citations he uses in his book and the rhetoric toward the region.

While Caudill was a significant force against coal mining companies and other profiteers, he teamed up with a couple of white supremacists (a segregationist and a KKK member) and

attempted to implement a sterilization plan - that failed - in Eastern Kentucky. The two most well-known writers about Appalachia have strong ties to the eugenics movement, which shapes their viewpoints on the region and contributes to the popular imagination of Appalachia.

“Imagine what it feels like to understand that if someone decides to purchase a book about Appalachia, there’s a 100 percent chance that they will be recommended not one, but two books used by their authors to win the esteem of white supremacists and eugenicists,” Catts (pg. 91) says in *What You’re Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018). The ties between Appalachia and transgender move past the body and into time.

Questions of temporalities come into play when the two areas are discussed. Appalachia is perceived as backward, out of step with the modern world. Meanwhile, there are views of transgender people being both too radical and stuck in past notions of gender. Looking at the two fields together could create another way of thinking of temporalities. Putting Appalachian and trans studies in conversation allows for a more nuanced understanding of both and an exploration of ideas. The fields of queer rurality and queer migration together can help guide the understanding further.



## Chapter 3: Literature Review

For this study, I draw from theories in queer migration, queer rurality, and audience studies. These three fields need development and application within transgender studies.

### Queer Rurality

Starting in the 1990s, the field of queer rurality is still in its early stages, likely because queer and rurality have been seen as antithetical for so long. Societal connotations with rural appear to have shifted in recent years, creating a wider gap between rural and urban. Academics Mary Gray, Colin Johnson, and Brian Gilley (2016) believe the word “rural” changed from sparsely populated to a conservative worldview within the United States. The term comes with political implications that further position the space as uninviting to LGBTQ people. Larger discourse and academia did little for LGBTQ populations for ages, often leaving them out of the conversation.

As Gender Studies Professor Colin Johnson (2013) points out in his book *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*, America developed a narrative surrounding geographic norms, which involves LGBTQ turning away from the countryside. This idea is understood and expounded upon by various scholars (Weston, 1996; Halberstam, 2005; Herring, 2010; Colin, 2010; et al.) invested in queer rurality. Queerness lives in the city, a narrative that erases many people and fails to foster nuisance thinking. Until recently, this larger narrative has been challenged more in mainstream conversations.

As Colin (2010) notes, the 1949 Kinsey Report observed that rural communities had the highest level of homosexual activity. This information, however, did not drive scholars to look to

queer rural populations early on. When historian John D’Emilio (1993) talks about the formation of the homosexual identity, it is through queer migrations to the city and the recognition and naming of each other. The city is an interesting place to start; it’s just unclear why so many studies stayed urban and not just urban but metropolitan hubs. This fixation flattens the discourse around queer people and excludes so many of them. Transgender populations experience yet another layer of exclusion. Queer rurality often focused on sexuality, not gender.

English Professor Scott Herring (2010) says he is bored with people talking about queer culture like it only resides in New York or San Francisco. It undermines other queer lives in the United States (Herring, 2010). In recent years, popular culture started showing a small but growing number of transgender people in rural places, such as the HBO-produced documentary/drag makeover series *We’re Here* and the Manhattan, Kansas-based comedy *Someone Somewhere*. Additionally, lesser queer-standard places like Toronto for *Sort Of*, St. Louis for *The OA*, and San Diego for *The Fosters* have emerged on the screen. While there are few examples, the representation is shifting. This change is due to the streaming wars, the need for content, and a growing interest in queer and transgender lives outside of traditional storytelling.

The long-term fixation on queer people in queer cities also masks the migrations of this population, which can be from “other” places or a few blocks away. Anthropologist Kath Weston (1996) found that so many queer people in San Francisco were rural transplants, which led to her piece “Get Thee to a Big City.” In the article, she talks to people about how they came to the city, but also found that people originally from the cities had similar ideas of exploration and finding oneself, such as taking the train to a different neighborhood and seeking out people like them.

Weston refers to this relegation of gays to the city as an erasure of small towns and rural lives. Rural queers who enter the urban environment suffer from alienation because of these narratives. “The gay imaginary is not just a dream of a freedom to be gay that requires an urban location, but a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between urban and rural life,” according to Weston (1995, p. 274). While this essay focuses on sexuality, it is not far flung to say that genders functioning outside of assigned-at-birth binaries caused more disruption to the migrants’ lives than their sexuality. It made them visible as an “other.”

While set only in the larger US South, Performance and African Studies Professor E. Patrick Johnson (2008) ’s *Sweet Tea* showed many ways black gay men could not just inhabit the region but also enjoy their lives in or out of the closet. Some transmen were included in the book, containing over 90 interviews with Southern black gay men. Refreshingly, Johnson incorporates the church, a difficult element to skip in the region but often happens in studies and pieces about queer rurality.

Johnson (2008) notes that many men used the church choir as a creative outlet and to meet other men. He also interviews people who saw it as an advantage to be more than out of the closet but to be “flaming.” It often provided them with more support and protection from their peers. Johnson complicates the regional stereotypes by incorporating the racial diversity that is too often overlooked when addressing the South, Appalachia, and rural locations.

Let us pause for a moment. Noticing someone’s sexuality is usually seeing someone’s gender first and then assuming sexuality. Many trans people may never be clocked as trans because they have a binary look. The label queer encompasses many people marked by having identities outside of societal norms. It mixes sexuality and gender, and there are benefits to this.

It can allow people to name their queerness without giving details and aims to create a larger community. It can also result in too much conflation, as the LGBTQ umbrella is inclined to do. It makes it harder to understand the issues that affect transgender people or lesbians or any identity on its own. This idea appears in trans studies regularly. Pulling the transgender out of queer allows for a closer examination, one that queer rurality easily overlooks. There is a need for transgender rurality as its own field.

### **Transgender Rurality**

In a rare and popular piece that addresses transgender rurality in academia, English and Gender Studies Professor Jack Halberstam (2005) looks at the stories surrounding the murder of Brandon Teena in Humboldt, Nebraska. Halberstam coined the phrase “metronormativity,” which refers to cities as the dominant discourse. Queer people in cities saw the story of Brandon Teena as reinforcing their notions of the wicked little town or countryside they left or, for some, never inhabited. Other coverage viewed Brandon’s transness as a perversion of the rural, pressing the body into conforming in a restricted space (Halberstam, 2005). Much like urban areas, rurality and the experience within those spaces differ. Even within Central Appalachia, there is a mixture of urban and rural. A regionally specific look could offer more developed insight into the impact of place on a group with the potential to apply to other rural and small-town locations.

Furthering the exploration of trans life outside of metropolitan areas, Media Studies Professor Andre Cavalcante (2018) performed an ethnographic study of transgender lives in the Midwest and San Francisco to develop his idea of “lived queerness.” The idea is that trans people want to live ordinary lives and be recognized for their queerness. The study examines

media and transgender people's understanding of their representation. The research occurred before the transgender tipping point in 2014, thus providing a unique snapshot of a time. It shows the strong drive trans people have to see themselves reflected in screen representation.

During his fieldwork, Cavalcante (2016) produced an article called "'I Did It All Online:' Transgender identity and the management of everyday life." It features a Midwestern woman who figured out how to approach transitioning without a physical community by relying on digital resources like Susan's Place's online community. Cavalcante notes that while it allowed her to continue in her own space and get the help she needed, the online component also compromised her anonymity and safety. This trade-off worked for the person featured in his case study, but it may not for many others (Cavalcante, 2016). This quandary is an issue that many people in rural places and small towns face. Anonymity is often not an option while transitioning online and in person. It creates vulnerability.

Sociologist Miriam J. Abelson's book *Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America* (2019) looks at transmasculine people throughout the United States to understand how race and place shape masculinity. Abelson comes to understand that many trans men take a "Goldilocks masculinity," not too intense or understated as they understand themselves more.

In a section of rural redneck men, Abelson's participants see the term redneck as interchangeable with hillbilly and white trash. Voices of trans men from Tennessee and Kentucky emerge in the work, some from Appalachia. Participants viewed rednecks as white, uneducated, conservative people who hunt and fish. Another marker of the redneck, according to the trans men interviewed, was a hatred of effeminate men and a disrespect for women. "... interviewees' narratives entwined the redneck with racism, homophobia, sexism, and violence,

and the redneck was placed in rural spaces. Indeed, this is why trans men viewed rural spaces as unsafe for anyone who is not like the redneck (p. 34).” This masculinity continues to create a different and precarious position for trans people in small towns and rural locations.

In Ableson’s findings, the redneck represented the hypermasculinity of the rural and the South. One participant from Appalachia saw a regional binary of effeminate gay men to hypermasculine rednecks. The ability to understand one’s masculinity outside of the two extremes can be difficult and potentially dangerous.

These studies are just the tip of an area of research that needs a deeper understanding. Thinking through trans rurality and calling it a field of study opens opportunities for more research in the area and creates the focus this population deserves.

### **Central Appalachia and LGBTQ**

Why examine Appalachia in particular? Central Appalachia is symbolic of rural America, a place the country frequently associates with poverty, geographic isolation, and being out of step with the contemporary. As noted earlier, there is a lengthy history of Appalachia being portrayed this way (Drake, 2001; Eller, 2018; Harkins, 2001; Newcomb, 1979; Newcomb, 1983, etc.). It embodies what many people view as the rural and sometimes even The South. It is often what is thought of when the word hillbilly is used. “Thus, ‘the hillbilly’ served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the ‘mainstream,’ or generally nonrural, middle-class white American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society,” (Harkins, 2001, pg. 7).

The most renowned study about queer Appalachians specifically was performed by Anthropologist Mary Gray (2009). Gray undertook a 19-month ethnography in Appalachia that focused on queer people and how they used the media. Gray decentralized media as the object of study to look at the lives and the way media accompanies them. In the book's conclusion, she found that people were okay with queer folks if they didn't stand out or put their identity before the community. For me, this means queer people must work with the cultural default of straight and cisgender. Because the book focuses primarily on sexuality instead of gender, it's impossible to tell if this means the default for trans is cisgender or strictly binary. Straight and cisgender people are often unaware of how much they lead with their identities because they are normalized. Maintaining a status quo could easily turn into the silencing and omission of a population. Until recently, it seems it did.

While Gray's work is highly admirable, she speaks primarily with cisgender, white teenagers in the 2000s. This skewed population is in large part because of access issues. The social and cultural atmosphere has changed since then. There is space for an ethnographic approach that puts transgender and genderqueer people at the forefront in Appalachia. More ideas could be explored. The media are not decentralized in this dissertation research; media sits at the forefront. Transgender rurality needs to be explored as a field. Media-making serves as a means to approach and establish transgender rurality. Central Appalachia provides a rich place to further this development.

Over the past few years, scholarship about queer and trans lives in Central Appalachia began to emerge more frequently and from people who reside or are from the region. In 2020, one of the first anthologies to organize queer contributors from Appalachia was published: *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia: Imagining and Writing the Unspeakable Other* by Hillery Glasby, Sherrie Gradin, and Rachael Ryerson. It's no coincidence that the words "Queer

Appalachia” are used; at this point, it is how a population is interpellated by the media project, zine, and Instagram account. Queer Appalachia became a moniker. Queer Appalachia’s founder Mamone teamed with Sarah E. Meng to pen the last chapter in the collection “Queer Appalachia: A Homespun Praxis of Rural Resistance in Appalachian Media,” which examines the success and origin story of the Queer Appalachia project.

The anthology came on the heels of books that bristled against the popularity and messaging in JD Vance’s *Hillbilly Elogy*, such as Elizabeth Catte’s polemic *What You’re Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018) and Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll’s collection *Hillbilly Reckoning: A Regional Response to Hillbilly Elogy* (2019). These books showed a general renewed interest in the region by people with deep connections to it. For the first time, queer activists and academics began being part of the larger conversation about Appalachia. As Zane Z. McNeil (2022) notes, the area of Appalachia studies contains a long-standing call and response history. Fortunately, it stays in dialogue, and those conversations are starting to include LGBTQ voices.

In 2022, an anthology edited by Z. Zane McNeill called *Y’All Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* was published. The collection features more queer and trans voices from and within Central Appalachia, showing the enormous scope of ideas and approaches that LGBTQ Appalachians contain. The anthology centered on and was inspired by Queer Appalachia and the conversations it sparked. I teamed with Queer Appalachia collaborator Chelsea and its administrator Mamone to help write their contributions. Elements of those chapters are present in this dissertation.

The anthology’s authors thoughtfully and collectively decided to remove the chapters I wrote in collaboration with Queer Appalachia. This decision occurred in a meeting I attended in



August of 2020 in response to *The Washington Post Magazine* article “The Tale of Queer Appalachia: A popular Instagram account raises funds for LGBTQ people in Appalachia. But does the money really go where it’s supposed to?” I was approached about an additional piece, which I did propose and pen. It serves as the basis for the second chapter of this dissertation.

Both *Y’All Mean All* and *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia* feature a mixture of personal essays and academic pieces, spanning disciplines and experiences. The collections allow more voices and approaches to be heard, pushing back against classist access to publishing. These collections challenge the Christian rhetoric that dominates Appalachia and excludes queers, calling for more queer rural narratives, speaking to older LGBTQ people in the region, paralleling queerness with a rejection of better and sustainable farming methods, among a plethora of other interdisciplinary topics.

Various patterns appear in the texts: displacement, home, and an ask for better understanding and recognition. Glasby, Gradin, and Ryerson (2020) are hesitant to use the word diaspora because of its connotations. As they say, Central Appalachian’s LGBTQ population are not Syrian refugees. Appalachia’s queer people are displaced because of their identity, be it leaving the region or feeling unwelcome within it. While leaving Appalachia can allow its queer population more safety and openness, it comes with a catch; they face discrimination because they are Appalachian. Regional stereotypes are made more salient. People begin to experience issues because of their accents and other aspects of their cultural upbringing.

In 2021, the University of Kentucky Press began a call for book proposals about marginalized identities in Appalachia titled “Appalachian Futures: Black, Native, and Queer Voices.” More literature directly related to queer people in Appalachia from queer people in Appalachia is emerging, like *Another Appalachia: Growing Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain*

*Place* by writer Neema Avashia (2022) and *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City* by History Professor Gregory Samantha Rosenthal (2021). This emergence is in no small part due to trans media projects and the increasingly vocal queer community in the region.

## **Queer and Trans Migration**

It is easy to argue that queer rurality is an extension of queer migrations or vice versa. The two fields merge and overlap easily. Queer migration is a field that addresses the movement of queer people in space, life, and psychological developments. These migrations can include coming out (Bond-Stockton, 2009), moving to another location (Weston 1996), experiencing queerness in different places (Halberstam 2005; Herring 2010; Johnson 2008), and traveling as a way to construct the self (Aizura 2018; Prosser 2013). Even the concept of sexual orientation involves moving toward something and orienting the self in a direction (Ahmed, 2006). Transgender has movement built into its language. Movement is an essential part of trans identity.

In a piece about communities, Scott Morgensen (2012) looks at gathering subjectivities through a Radical Faerie retreat (a gay rural retreat) and how it helps with feelings of liberation and cultivating a portable home. This work shows the importance of community and space for queer people to inhabit. Gathering subjectivities provides a valuable framework for trans-activism and the community formation that stems from it.

In a similar study, Carol Sandilands' (2002) work focuses on lesbian separatists in rural Oregon and how that shapes identity in ways different from day-to-day heterosexual culture. There is a retreat for the fairies and separatists, a regrouping that is spiritual and affirming. Even

for all the settlement issues the lesbian separatists experienced, the removal/retreat provides a means of self-discovery and autonomy. It is a type of reconfiguring that occurs outside the heterosexual compulsory world and, seemingly outside the city constraints, such as higher living costs and smaller spaces.

Reconfiguring home and space are vital to understanding how transgender people work on projects, as activists, and place makers where they may not be accepted. Transgender media projects can play a role in helping name home and the identity within it. Additionally, those projects can potentially serve as a “portable home” as well. Trans gatherings can offer a space to escape from the dominant scripted behavior. Conversely, creating this trans space may legitimize lives, offer support, and as a spot for activism, regardless of what happens with the transgender media producer’s final products.

As Sarah Ahmed (2005) notes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, heterosexuality is prevalent and shapes the world; there is more comfort in complying with compulsory heterosexuality and cisgender normativity. Those norms are so dominant, saturating one’s life so much that “One does not notice this as a world when one has been shaped by that world, and even acquired its shape” (p. 148). This creation of a trans-prominent space potentially offers a retreat within a region that has problems with sexuality and gender.

Geographer Andrew Gorman-Murray (2007) further expounds upon the idea of these migrations as an identity exploration without geographical limitations. Gorman-Murray (2007) explores queer migrations and how the concepts can expand outside the rural-to-urban binary by turning the theory inward, to the body and as an identity quest. Identity often relies on other people and their perceptions; it is not just an internal revelation. Being immersed in like-minded people helps solidify or explore that identity.

According to Gorman-Murray, queer displacements and identity quests are peripatetic (migratory) and non-linear. “Rather, peripatetic displacements suggest that queer migration is sometimes a continuing search for sexual identity, an ongoing journey of self-discovery, where each site of attachment is a material context to work on embodied identity and desire -- typically selected for its potential to engender exploration and interactivity, and thus nurture sexuality -- and final emplacement is deferred for some time” (p. 114). While Gorman-Murray emphasizes sexuality, these ideas easily extend to gender, particularly transness. In and of itself, transness implies movement, making transgender migration theory an area ripe for study.

Pulling from transgender autobiographies and his own experience, humanities Professor Jay Prosser (1998) examines how trans people perceive embodiment and its navigation. On the external side, Gender Studies Professor Aren Aizura (2018) looks at the journeys faced by transgender people who have to travel to pursue surgery, one that requires capital. It contains a narrative of “elsewhere” for fulfillment. This narrative of elsewhere consistently requires a displacement to become whole, one that can be witnessed repeatedly in queer rurality and migrations. It shows that these ideas apply to transgender. More focus on that journey is needed.

Queer migration theory and the importance of archiving subcultures, particularly queer ones, provide the means to unpack the trans-forward media projects and community I met during the collaborations and interviews. The fieldwork appeared prime for further understanding myself, the trans-media makers, the people they interview/serve, the regional attitudes, and their audience. Traveling throughout Central Appalachia puts an additional spin on the migration element. The gathering of primarily transgender-identity people is a force of change within itself.

Of course, it’s hard to know about any of this without archiving trans-Appalachian experiences. Jack Halberstam (2005) looks at subcultures and notes how they were studied

historically. Often, male-dominated, white youth cultures were the object of study. I would add cis-gendered and straight to this list, too. These youths showed an aversion to/rejection of parent cultures. The subculture theories excluded sexuality and gender from their discourse. Queer subcultures are not stepped in opposition to parent cultures. Halberstam suggests the need to be more of a relationship between the theorist and the subculture; the studies should go beyond heterosexual, white teenagers; and there needs to be queer archiving, preserving queer historical experiences.

### **Audience Studies**

Audience studies provide insight into the perception and reception of other queer and trans folks in the region. It allows for more voices to be heard from within the area. Throughout my fieldwork, I ask who the audience is and seek responses to the transgender-produced media. By looking at the audiences, I can gather more insight into the cultural response to the transgender media producers, their creative works, and their followers. It allows me to evaluate better the regional reaction to transgender people and their issues.

The way audiences receive information can vary. Stuart Hall developed a model of encoding and decoding (1973). The message that is designed (encoded) is not always the one that is received (decoded). People may interpret the message strictly as it is intended (dominant), except elements of it (negotiated), or reject it (oppositional). George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) coined the term “symbolic annihilation,” which refers to an absence in popular culture. Soon after, Gaye Tuchman (1979) further defined symbolic annihilation as having three components: omission, trivialization, and condemnation. The omission is the absence of a group. Trivialization involves making the group a punchline or belittling them when they appear.

Condemnation is portraying the specific population only to shame and portray it as deviant. Trans people in the media have a long history of experiencing symbolic annihilation.

When a marginalized group often experiences symbolic annihilation, people within it have found ways to interrupt the media that involve different ways to negotiate or oppose them. Jose Estaban Munoz's (1999) theory of disidentification is one of those. People can find identities in differences when their identity is not explicitly available or only available as an undesirable one. By taking elements of characters, they can begin to see themselves. It involves a piecemealing of identity and serves as a survival tactic.

Jacqueline Bobo's (1988) piece "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Reader" is an example. Bobo notes that many black women identified with the book's film adaptation despite being a white, male Hollywood product. The film producers encoded it with a dominant ideology, which provided a mixed reaction but a relatively positive one from black female viewers. Bobo posits that Black people are so accustomed to racists' depiction that they could filter those, gathering parts from the film to which they could relate.

Audience studies can and have been used to promote other people's voices and provide insight into group identity, particularly marginalized populations (Radway, 1991; Hooks, 1992; Alwood, 1998; D'Acci, 1994; Jhally & Lewis, 2003; Butsch, 2015; et al.). This literature illustrates some interesting findings for queers and many other subaltern groups.

Using the platform of 90s daytime talk shows, Sociologist Joshua Gamson (1998) examines how talk shows provide a platform for exploitation and democratization. Daytime talk shows gave queer people – trans, drag, lesbian, bi, gay – the means to speak for themselves. Gamson steeps this in the often-seedy history of daytime talk shows. He uses the queer people in front of the audience and the shows' live audiences to create a more considerable societal

understanding of queer people. The shows' audiences were okay with people who stuck to binaries, but those who didn't were scorned. Nongender-conforming, trans people who didn't appear as cisgender, and bisexuals met the audiences' wrath. Audience members asked them to pick a side or/and make up their minds. The piece shows how little society accepts liminal identities. This mindset has particular implications for trans people who do not go stealth, are non-gender conforming, are non-binary, or can't afford to pass.

The British organization Trans Media Watch may have produced the most extensive study of transgender audience reception in 2010. The organization interviewed 256 transgender people about how they view their representation in the media. Of the participants, 93 percent felt better about the world when they saw positive representation, and 95 percent felt the media was indifferent to them. The portrayals that did occur were primarily viewed as negative (Kermode and Transgender Media Watch, 2010). The landscape of digital and screen cultures has shifted dramatically, and the focus on transgender people within those domains.

There is little doubt that recognizing oneself on the screen helps shape who we are. As Cultural Studies Founder Stuart Hall (1996) says, identity grows from "what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves". Transgender people are no different. This point is made salient in transgender audience reception.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, studies connected trans identity and media representation (Ringo 2002; Gagne & Tewksbury 1999). According to one survey by Patricia Gagne and Richard Tewksbury (1999), people acquired the language and knowledge to articulate their transgender identity because of media representation or encountering a transgender person in real life. Transwomen such as celebrity Christine Jorgensen and tennis player Renee Richards

provided impetuses for identification. These studies show a correlation between representation and self-understanding. The language used in the works (somewhat outdated terms like transexual and transvestite) shifted. Yet, that language still serves as a way to locate trans identity in academia and outside of it. The studies are helpful, even if older terminology cannot be seamlessly grafted into our contemporary culture.

Positive representation and sometimes any representation makes an impact. Rebecca Kern used *The L Word* to understand how representation provided positive identity reinforcement (Kern, 2014). While most of the show's characters were cisgender, Max was the first recurring transman on television. In this study, one trans man says he is grateful for the portrayal, seeing a reflection of his identity in a show that's more than a special episode.

Similar results (Cavalcante, 2017) emerged from a transgender audience in response to group viewings of the films *Boys Don't Cry* and *TransAmerica*. Participants said they were surprised the films were made. They noted how progressive the movies were when they were released. With the rise in trans representation, these attitudes may have shifted.

Continuing with audience reception methods, Media Studies and Gender Studies scholar Andre Cavalcante (2018) bounced between the Midwest and San Francisco for an ethnographic and audience studies piece about how transgender people, who like to be seen, are portrayed. Most of the book focuses on the Midwest where he attended a trans support group. He ultimately found that most trans people would like to be "queerly ordinary." This involves having their queerness recognized while being able to easily use the bathroom, have a credit card with their dead name on it, and engage in other day-to-day functions. They would also love to see this portrayal on the screen. While the study is insightful and needed, transgender people are focused



on as individuals or as a larger group. There is space for more regionally specific examinations. Audience studies can provide an extra layer of insight into a group and make a study richer.

In 2021, Transgender Media Scholar Beck Banks performed focus groups with transmasculine-identifying people about transmasculine characters in screen cultures. They discovered that few transmac people sought out their representation because the representation was not made for them and did not represent who they are. Along with transmasculine, the majority of the participants also identified as genderqueer. Instead of identifying with trans characters, the participants saw pieces of themselves in other fictional screen characters that were grouped into three categories: transformational figures, warrior women, and effeminate and androgynous men (Banks, 2021). It is not a stretch to assume transwomen and nonbinary people have the same experiences when seeking screen representation. The categories won't be the same, but the identity extraction likely is.

On the other hand, all kinds of trans readings could be everywhere for trans people. According to Cael Keegan (2016), trans can be omnipresent and all people can read as such. Because transness can be unnoticeable, it can be read into any representation. The idea is very much in line with Alexander Doty's (1993) concept of queer readings and adapted for transgender people. As Doty says, if sexuality is not explicitly stated, queer readings are available.

In this dissertation, I speak with trans-media producers and talk to them about their work. This will involve understanding the production angle, much like Women and Gender Studies Professor Julie D'Acci (1994) did with the coverage and production of *Cagney and Lacey* and sociologist Richard Butsch (2015) did with television to gather common working-class tropes. Gamson (1998) also made the platform of his daytime work clear, showing how the shows and

their history impacted the audiences attracted to watch and the people who would appear on it. This level of transparency is important, as is understanding the background of the producers and their cultural context and surrounding discourse.

## **Objective and Goals**

By using audience studies, queer migration, and queer rurality for guidance, I aim to - develop a new type of transgender migration theory new theoretical and aid in the development of trans rurality as a field. I also plan to provide insight to the lives of transgender people in Central Appalachia and provide solutions. To address the core questions guiding this study - *What does the production and reception of trans-produced media say about transgender lives in Central Appalachia? and How can these findings support this population?* - this dissertation explores the following specific questions:

### **R1: What compels trans-media producers to do their work?**

Trans-media producers are the first audience. Understanding their drive and motivations, it provides a means to examine the issues they see. It also shows their obstacles. These trans media producers experience migrations and rurality in their work. By putting those two closely related fields together, it allows for an examination of what trans-media producers do, why they do it, and what might prevent them from achieving this work.

### **R2: Who are their audiences, and what is the reception of this work?**

The audience and reception of this work speak to its importance. Through the audience feedback, it is possible to understand the needs of the community and ways to potentially provide for those needs.

**R3: What insight do transgender media productions and receptions provide about transgender lives in Central Appalachia and possibly beyond?**

This question takes the work one step further. It seeks to apply transgender migration and rurality to the audience response – both maker and consumer. It asks directly for solutions and a wider application of those findings.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

This work uses ethnography as its primary research tool. I spent two months physically in the field and over a year remotely working with the groups Queer Appalachia and Transilient, attending several queer-oriented functions and interviewing other individuals involved. I employed observations, field notes, textual analysis, a personal journal, and semi-structured interviews within this framework. I obtained the University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board approval for the study.

I occupied a participant-observer role. I became comfortable with this role after a lot of initial debate about boundaries and interference. For the first time, I worked primarily with transgender people in Appalachia who are deeply invested in media and activism. This population reflects my identity, even though I moved away years ago. At the start of fieldwork, I took more of an observer role before I began to realize those actions might be harmful to myself and create unnecessary estrangement with others. I had pangs of alienation, similar to what I experienced as an often-silent person in that region. I was recreating past experiences while being with groups where I should feel belonging. As I became more of a participant, it wasn't just a practical action or a means to have more involvement and give back to "my subjects." I included myself in my life and, hopefully, shared it with people by offering more of myself.

I occupied this role as a participant-observer by assisting Queer Appalachia in writing two book chapters and a blog post. I offered advice on navigating the group's cancellation in the wake of a *Washington Post* article about them. I received texts from them the night before they learned of the article's release and the steps they took in the days that followed, leading up to their deplatforming on Instagram. We continued to converse about the future as certified

professional accountants sort out their finances. When I adopted a kitten during COVID and referred to her as a noodle, they sent me pasta-shaped cat toys in the mail. As times got darker - cancellation along with COVID and precarious housing -I spoke with the two primary members by phone, often just listening and respecting their privacy. As I immersed myself, I questioned if I saw the situation clearly. Writing about it helped me sort through the situation and see it with more clarity.

With the group Transilient, I spent 15 days on a documentary tour that traveled to West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. I began planning with the director, James Heatherly, in the summer of 2019, reaching out to him because of an Instagram post-Queer Appalachia shared about the documentary crew's need for housing. After discussing the project with him, he said I could observe the filming and stay with the crew when space was available. Once I budgeted my rooms in the peak tourism time that is an Appalachian fall, I offered to get cheap AirBNBs for the production when the group didn't secure housing; the costs were similar to staying by myself. I said that if the living situation was ever uncomfortable or they wanted me to leave, I could step away without threatening their housing or any ill will. Luckily, the crew dynamics were excellent.

At times, we slept a foot apart. We ate together every meal. The producer, Jayce Jefferson, didn't like it when I drove in another car, so I rode with them on the shoots, waking up at 4:00 or 5:00 am to get well-lit shots in mid-November. I followed them with equipment in tow between towns. We spent hours upon hours together. Soon, I was setting up lighting, prepping interview questions with the crew's journalist, Mo Bell, and offering suggestions for ways to frame shots. Having recently taught a media production class, I effortlessly slipped into instructor/coaching mode with the young crew. I found myself being present, doing my work holistically as a person. Because the project was underfinanced, I continue to help them with

grant writing to further work on the docu-series *Climbing Every Mountain* about transgender mental and physical healthcare in Appalachia.

## **Gathering Data**

I used semi-structured, open-ended interviews in this study, integrated transcribed interviews from the docu-series, kept field notes, and wrote daily self-reflections about the experience. During fieldwork, I spent at least one to two hours a day writing notes and a personal reflection. Those documents started separately before naturally merging into one. Taking from the idea that writing is a form of thinking, I composed multiple drafts while looking for patterns in the information.

When I was on the road with Transilient, the note writing increased, often keeping me awake for a couple of hours once the crew fell asleep. I found myself constantly typing during evening movie viewings and any downtime. There were a couple of events that I did not attend to catch up on notes. I averaged around three to four hours a day of note-taking. As Wolcott (2008) and many others stress, write early and often. I've found that I could use my cellphone to take light notes to write up later in some events.

Campbell and Lassiter's (2014) idea of emergent design proved integral to my process. According to emergent design, you shift your approach to and view of your work based on your relationships. Their work also addresses allowing the participants the opportunity for input/feedback, a co-construction. This collaboration enables the participant to be even more involved, shaping their portrayal with the ethnographer. The primary participants are getting the opportunity to review the work if they want. Members of Transilient have received their respective chapters at this juncture.

Additionally, participants were asked for photography and art to be included in exchange for payment. The University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication's Lori I. Lokey Scholarship provided funding. Through these steps, I hope to break a perpetuation of mishandling the representation of Appalachians, give voice to the population, and avoid exploiting the participants' labor. In short, I utilized Author and Sex Columnist Dan Savage's campsite rule: "You must leave them in at least as good a state (physically and emotionally) as you found them in." While Savage created this guideline for older people dating younger people, I find it works well as just a general rule of thumb, even more so in fieldwork. I aimed to leave people in better shape than I found them. As you will see, I realized I could only do so much on my own.

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is vital to understanding your position and voice. For ethnographers, this reflexivity finds its way to the page often. I want to make it a strong secondary focus to the people I worked with by having autoethnographic elements in which I reflect on my past and current experiences.

I knew I would incorporate reflexivity going into fieldwork; the experience of it affirmed that I should. For *Queer Appalachia*, it allows me to address and reflect on what I saw occur leading up to and during its cancellation. With *Transilient*, the method provides a means of exploring my positionality while gathering the stories of the crew and the couple dozen people they interviewed. My position allowed me further to examine Appalachian culture and context during the three times I met with filmmaker Oakley Fugate.

Ideally, reflexive ethnographies can establish the author's character for the reader (Goodall, 2000). By letting the reader see your voice and vulnerability, they can understand you as a person, flaws and all. It can also aid in addressing bias and building relationships with readers. According to Goodall (2000), by sharing ourselves, we create a relationship with the reader that allows for a co-construction of the text and its meaning. Co-construction is a vital element of this work and a recurring theme.

This type of reflexivity can carry into relationships with the participants and aid in understanding yourself better. It allows for the researcher to be present. For many people with marginalized identities, this is important for the text, their wellbeing, and the audience's understanding. It fosters greater understanding and naturally creates new knowledge. There is a reason the word "marginalized" is used. This approach reorients those too often on the sidelines toward the center.

Ghodosee (2016) sees the "I" as a way to stitch the narrative together. This tool makes a person the story's weaver instead of hiding that role, which happens in third-person ethnographies. Ethnographies that forgo the first person can sound authoritative and categorical in their knowledge (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). There is no reason people should think that objectivity is integral to ethnography.

Because this is a highly reflective ethnography, I should mention that, outside of a short, three-day trip, I haven't spent time with my family in Eastern Tennessee - or Central Appalachia on the whole - since I started hormones two years prior. I look different, and people interact with me differently. This change added another layer to my experience. Due to my positionality as a trans-media producer, I hope to enhance the storytelling and produce well-rounded, transparent, authentic, and credible research.



## Chapter 5: A Documentarian of Transgender Lives in Eastern Kentucky

### Pikeville Pride

“Do I really need to go to another Pride,” I find myself debating as I drive toward Pikeville Pride in Eastern Kentucky. Don’t get me wrong; I like myself and am proud of other LGBTQ people working toward self-respect and celebrating who they are, and all Pride represents. I just got bored of Pride events - the commercialized type I knew in big cities, the kind that feels like permits for gentrification - and somehow thought this would be similar. Plus, there’s fog blanketing the ground, and it’s storming sheets of rain as I stare out of my motel room on the outskirts of Morgantown, WV. I pack up and start driving, then pull over to the side of the road to contact filmmaker Oakley Fugate whom I planned to meet at Pikeville Pride today.

As I am typing to cancel, I receive a text from him.

“Catch you later today. I’m excited about this event,” he says.

I sigh internally, if not externally, too.

I reply, “Great! Looking forward to it.”

I tell myself, this probably won’t be like the Prides I’ve been to in the past. That doesn’t matter today, I repeat. Oakley is younger; it means a lot to him. This event will be a great way to get an idea of the transgender and queer population in Eastern Kentucky. I keep driving.

After a couple of hours of navigating the patchwork-colored fall mountains, the sun pops out. Soon, I find myself parking in downtown Pikeville, Kentucky, a remarkably thriving city for a town shy of 8,000 people situated on the border of West Virginia and Virginia. Pikeville

College, a theater, an artisanal distillery, and boutique stores bundle together to create the downtown and lead to a park where Pikeville Pride is in full swing.

It is the second Pride for Pikeville or Eastern Kentucky, with approximately 2,000 people in attendance. The event, it turns out, started as a local LGBTQ response to a white nationalist rally in downtown Pikeville in 2017. Neither the white nationalists nor the protesters involved in the 2017 rally were from Pikeville. Some of the same white nationalists participated in the deadly riot in Charlottesville, VA, soon after this rally. According to one of the Pikeville Pride founders (Banks, 2021), Tonya Jones, only two protesters attended the first Pride, and none were at the second. I certainly didn't see any conflict or opposition.

While some other Pikeville Pride organizers consider the event a response to the rally, Jones doesn't recognize the rally as part of her reasoning or drive for pride. She wanted to create a more welcoming space in the city.

"Me and my wife have been together for 27 years. She never felt comfortable here until Pride. She never felt that she could be open," Jones recalls (Banks, 2021). "We foster children, too, and a lot of these kids are in foster care because of coming out. We want to show them that they can have a family, and it doesn't have to be a blood connection."

As I approach the park, I see booths of organizations I long fanboyed over - the multimedia outfit Appalshop from Whitesburg, KY; the Knoxville-based youth organization The Stay Project; and Jonesborough's International Storytelling Center. I move from stand to stand to talk to the organizers and see what they offer. I emerge loaded with business cards, future laptop stickers (which I never had before), pens, and a funded entry to the Appalachian Young Storytellers event. After turning down multiple offers for hugs from the Free Mom Hugs booth, I

surrender to one. Live music from an array of local performers, mostly bluegrass and folk music, plays in the background.

Plenty of people are milling around the Pikeville city park, primarily young adults and teenagers. The event grew in its second year when I attended. In a 2021 interview (Banks), Jones says businesses approach her about involvement in Pride and how to be more inclusive. She and her wife have felt more welcome since the events started, even with recent cancellations because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the 2019 Pride, support systems and ways to get involved in the region - explicitly queer or not - are all over the park.

The International Storyteller Center stand's attendees offer free accommodations and ask about transportation for people to its Appalachian Young Storytellers event. When I say I don't need either, the program's coordinator pulls out a mileage reimbursement form and hands it to me. I never fill it out.

The Stay Project has rainbow and trans flag stickers at its booth.

"Is the Stay Project queer-based," I ask, surprised I didn't already know that.

"No, we just happen to be about 85 percent or so queer for our membership," the booth attendee said. "Just kinda happened that way."

The group's slogan does seem like a call for queer participation: "Making Our Communities a Place We Can and Want to Stay."

While the booths primarily focused on those represented by the LGBTQ rainbow with little emphasis on transgender, the sidewalks and flags present told a different story. Young people sport the trans flag on backpacks, t-shirts, face paintings, with one using it as a cape. Buckets of chalk are available to attendees and in use. The pink, blue, and white colors of the

trans flag cover the sidewalks with caring messages, such as “I’m glad you are alive” and “YOU ARE LOVED.”

Under the roofed picnic area in the park, tables are full of free pizza, rainbow-colored cupcakes, cake, soda, and water. I down a colorful cupcake and start to look for Oakley, wanting to say hi and schedule a day to interview him in Whitesburg, KY. I spent the night before rewatching some of his films, which he makes out of Appalshop. Two documentaries - *Not Your Daughter* and *This is Me* - both focus on the story of a trans person and their experience in Eastern Kentucky. Oakley has another trans-centered project in the making.

I text him, hang out at the Appalshop stand, and talk to the booth’s attendee. The person is wearing pearls and sports a lush beard. I’m too excited to see someone who is genderqueer parked at the Appalshop booth, and I know it. Oakley approaches with his camera in hand and a huge grin. He starts talking about how great the day has been. I am struggling to read him, his eye movement, voice, and gestures. I am missing a piece of information. Oakley is autistic or has Asperger's. I’m not quite sure I’m placing it.

I start panicking because I don’t know what degree he’s on the spectrum, and I’m always worried about doing something wrong. Socially, I am definitely doing something wrong right now. Is it unethical for me to interview Oakley? We set a time, date, and place for an interview. I am brisk when doing this. I’m clearly dropping balls here. I start walking back to my car to drive to my parents’ home in East Tennessee. As I exit the park, I see drag queens walking toward the stage.

## **Young Appalachian Storytelling Summit**

Jonesborough, Tennessee, is about a 20-minute drive from where I grew up in East Tennessee. As I drive into town, I realize I can't remember the last time I was here. The downtown maintains its history - a lowkey colonial style - with lots of small shops and historical placards. The Internal Storytelling Center maintains that vibe with a modern twist in its architecture with plenty of windows and nestled in the middle of downtown. I step inside for registration and grab a cup of coffee before heading into the main auditorium, packed with young adults, all 14 to 30-year-olds, and a crowd that's more fashionably trendy than average in the region.

When I signed up for the event, I mentioned I am not under 30 and am researching trans-media productions in Appalachia as part of an ethnographic project. I am curious about trans and queer youth culture, even if the event is not queer. Something about this event feels like a good way to learn about younger people and their attitudes. Knowing I won't be on the Transilient documentary tour until the following month, I want to use this time to check out other leads. The event doesn't disappoint.

After an introduction to the day's schedule, I pick a workshop to join: "How to Tell Your Story." The workshop leader, Hilarie Spangler, is under 30, too. From Kentucky, she lives in Brooklyn now. She gathers us in a circle on the stage in the auditorium, where we sit cross-legged and craft out six-word autobiographical stories.

Soon into the session, I start to pull off a subtle floor routine. Yesterday was leg day at the gym. I am sore, and, honestly, I'm too old to sit on the floor with the same comfort as those around me. I'm trying not to give that away or distract from the session.

Hilarie shares her six-word story: "Vowels too long to sing opera." She describes the code-switching process she endured as a singer, a process so many who leave the South and

Central Appalachia undergo. People told her that her accent held her back as a performer. I'm familiar with the problem. About a year into living in New York, I stopped having an accent to get steady work. Too many people would comment on it, and I know it impeded my ability to earn a good living. Later, I would reembrace it, but it's not the same voice; it's an echo of my past one.

My six-word story is up next. For some reason, I didn't think I'd have to share it.

"24 moves and still counting," I say, then I explain. I always need to defend how much I've moved as if I am the problem.

"I was hoping to find people like myself, and that's not really how it works. I mean, it sometimes does. I thought there would be a place. Some moves were chasing better rent, and a few came from a landlord or neighborhood harassment."

I avoid speaking of the degree of harassment with one landlord who saw my mail and realized my partner and I were getting married. He began moving items and furniture in our place when we were gone....at first. I don't address the neighborhood in New York where I was called a faggot every day and sometimes followed. People spit in my direction, and near the time I could move, I found myself spitting back. I don't talk about struggling with employment as I became more comfortable with my gender in the workplace and noticed others did not. I heard slurs within a purposeful ear's distance and even found pictures of Justin Bieber on my desk in the morning.

The person sitting next to me in the circle eagerly weighs in as I fumble through my reasonings. They (as shown on their name tag) mention Kath Weston's (1995) idea of an imagined queer community, one we envision and can never really live up to reality. The idea that we will find our people when we make it to a city, the right place.

I'm pleasantly surprised to have some queer rurality theory tossed my way and to be affirmed. Perhaps I shouldn't be startled. I'm beginning to understand the group better.

Approximately a third of the attendees identify their pronouns as "they/them/theirs." I see people from activist organizations. An undergraduate qualitative studies class from East Tennessee State University is in attendance, too. One attendee says he is involved in Black Appalachians Young and Rising, a caucus of the Stay Project. He speaks of how his involvement in that group has formed him into a leader. We continue with the six-word stories.

One young woman shares her story, "I can't believe you're from Tennessee." I'm envious of her use of contractions.

She explains the six-word story more. She says she once saw this oft-received phrase as a compliment. Now, it's is an insult. The group is starting to speak of the stereotypes they encounter. Hilarie says storytelling is one way to combat stereotypes, and Appalachia has a rich legacy of other people telling their stories. It can catalyze change if we stop being ashamed and own our stories.

The following exercise involves considering an obstacle you overcame by looking at one element - an object, day, part of yourself. During the story circle, obstacles ranged from learning to play the fiddle to claiming one's gender.

"I grew my hair out in high school to fit in better, shaved it off when I went to college, and then grew it back to get a job as a reporter when I graduated," I say. "It's not that long hair is inherently feminine or negates masculinity. It just did for me."

I am caught off guard by how open I am and receptive the group is. I'm beginning to see a significant generational difference in approaching emotions.

After my story, some start talking about how they understand their gender. One woman speaks about claiming her Amazonian feminine self because she is about six feet tall. Another woman says she had to negotiate her femininity with her drive for leadership. Too often, she learned from society that those were incompatible. Now, she is comfortable with being outspoken, in charge, and a feminine person.

Hilarie directs the participants to break into groups of four, gathering with those near them. The woman who spoke about leadership and femininity asks to switch it up within the group and points at me to join. That woman and her friend tell me they want to be communication professors. I share the work I'm doing and hear about the future professors' projects. Our conversation about methodology would have been welcomed and appreciated in my doctoral coursework. The two speak of how you can be from here, work here, and be intellectually fierce. They talk as if they had heard otherwise on many occasions, and I am sure they have.

One of them relays advice on obtaining funding to do work in Appalachia.

"A professor told me you have to exploit Appalachia to get the funding to research it," she says. We find ourselves nodding in agreement. I wonder how much I've done that. It is not my first time dwelling on it. It is just the narrative people respect in other parts of the country, one that draws attention.

I mention how many local churches still aren't accepting of LGBTQ people. That's a consistent issue the region has and continues to create an unwelcoming environment.

"That's not Christianity," one woman responds quickly. She says her religious life is hers and will not be played out within the confines of the church. The church she grew up in, she adds, is pushing for more inclusion and losing members as a result. She says the church's



practices and power are “hegemonic,” thus continuing white patriarchy. Later she notes that the concept of intersectionality revolutionized her life.

As we talk, I realize I grew up with her family’s church minister. The minister and I went to the same church. Our parents attended and worked for a non-affirming Christian college together.

The other openly queer person in the small group addresses something I almost forgot about: hell houses. These events just became highly popular when I was in high school in the 1990s. Hell houses are Halloween events that show the consequences of sin to scare people to Jesus. The small group’s other queer person attended a hell house where one room had a man dying alone from AIDs. The hell house framed this as a consequence of his lifestyle choices. That was ten years ago, she says. They say there seems to be a better community for queer people now, but it was not like that then.

“That’s just hateful,” one of the other women says.

I mention how that was what I was taught in high school, too (more than 20 years ago). Gay people die of AIDS, and they die alone. It played a role in my curiosity about how it is now for transgender people as that discussion has grown in the United States. If that person experienced this hate speech 10 years ago, and I saw it 20 years ago, I wonder what teenagers are hearing now.

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When I was 17, a Sunday School teacher told me that AIDS was a God-given plague that primarily targets gay men for a reason. After that disturbing Sunday School lecture, I went to the standard service where the preacher spoke about sexual impurity, including the sin of the homosexual. After church, I told my parents I would not be attending again. Instead of the

normal, “You will be grounded for a week after missing church” or “Your spiritual life is more important than your education,” they said I was close enough to 18, a couple of months away, that I could make my own decisions about this. It was truly the first time I felt my ethics were heard. It’s still odd to me that I developed them, even to such a basic degree.

I would attend the church one more time in five years, having graduated from college and returning to another part of East Tennessee as a reporter. After a breakup with someone who was closeted and pretended we were never together, I visited my parents. They asked me to attend a special Sunday evening service about whether the church should welcome LGBTQ people. It was a mistake to go; I failed to protect myself. I sobbed in a pew for over two hours instead of hoping to speak up. It was not a large group of people, 30 or so. I heard people I grew up with say horrifying things, knowing I was right there. Others held my hand, touched my shoulder, and spoke words of support. That church is still nonaffirming and “in talks.” Now, the many of the people who were trying to comfort me are elders and deacons, leaders within that congregation.

I was already in a deep depression; one I would not emerge from for a few years. The world I built as an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts college felt fictitious. This life was the real world now. If I were not a workaholic, I would not have left my bed for the next few years. Multiple times a day, I thought about suicide. Do I wish I had sought mental help? Yes, but also, there was no reason to think people would help me, especially in the medical field. I expected and had become accustomed to the opposite. My family’s doctor recommended institutionalizing me for what turned out to be strep throat that need a tonsillectomy. Looking back, I start to see how queer of a child I was and how much that played a role in my treatment by adults.

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We take a break before the keynote speaker session. The speaker is Oakley Fugate, which I was not expecting. We are scheduled for an interview next week. I'm excited to see Oakley will be here to get to know him better, maybe make up for my fumbled last interaction. I walk by the restroom before heading back to the auditorium. Attendees have placed signs that say "Restroom" over the women's restroom and "Restroom with Urinals" over the men's restroom sign. While I love this signage, I does make one option seems better than the other.

During the keynote address, Oakley talks about his struggles with Asperger's, but it is more like how people struggle with his Asperger's. Oakley is from Blackey, Kentucky, a town of 139 people. He says he was four or five when he started speaking, putting his life into context for the audience. When he was diagnosed in junior high school, the school assigned Oakley assistants who proved toxic and actively diverted people away from him. In high school, administrators recommended Oakley attend the alternative education building of the high school. Because he was not enjoying high school, Oakley agreed with the assurance he could return to the regular high school in 10 days.

"And so ten days went, I didn't like it, and then they denied me to come back based on what the aide had written about me, that I was having trouble making friends, and it's kind of like kids don't want to go around someone who has basically a teacher being their shadow everywhere they go."

After his freshman year, Oakley was able to return to the primary high school, but he continued to have troubling support from the teachers' aides, who insulted him and even called him the "r-word" on one occasion. Oakley says it got to a point where he was too ashamed to tell anyone he had Asperger's. People would respond to him with slower speech and short sentences. "I assure you; I can understand you just fine."

In the mess of high school, he found his drama and fantasy literature class to be a welcome relief. At one point, people from the multimedia outfit Appalshop visited his school to promote its Appalachia Media Institute, a summer course for young aspiring documentary makers. Oakley jumped at the opportunity. He did the workshop and fell in love with it.

As a filmmaker and life-long resident, Oakley fully understands the issues people in the region have with being documented. The country he grew up in is where the documentary *Stranger with a Camera* (Barret, 2000) is based. *Stranger with a Camera* explores the story surrounding the murder of a Canadian documentary maker in the 1960s in Eastern Kentucky. In the film, Barret recalls how the murderer – Hobart Ison – was revered as a local hero in Eastern Kentucky. Ison was not convicted for killing the Canadian documentarian for interviewing someone on his land. Ison shot the filmmaker in the chest. There was no argument leading to the murder. In the documentary, people who knew Ison said he never showed remorse. One neighbor quotes him in the film: “Girl, I had to do that. I had to do that. What would he have done to me? Picture-wise, I mean” (Barret, 2000).

The murder of the filmmaker occurred at the end of the 1960s. In the 1960s, Appalachia garnered national attention due to President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty (Drake, 2001). Media outlets flooded the region, and the often-ignored people of Appalachia were in the spotlight. There are many instances of poor journalistic practices taking place during that period. The same story of poverty was being told repeatedly and in small communities. Residents were embarrassed and ashamed of the portrayal on a national level. The ripple effects of that era are still felt.

Oakley’s family has friends who require you to leave your phone outside when visiting. Because of this legacy of visual humiliation, he doesn’t have many photos of his family growing

up. Oakley pauses and says he is going to fast forward in time while he pulls up a presentation on the screen behind him. The themes from *Stranger with a Camera* continue to permeate the lecture and his life, even though it's not explicitly linked as he talks about navigating his work on LGBTQ productions and his family's views on the topic.

“So my first LGBT film I did was in 2013, and it was something I'd never... That's one of the hardest parts about growing up in the South is sometimes you got to admit the way you grew up was extremely bigoted. And that's a really hard thing, being able to separate treasured memories from stuff that's just not okay. Not okay,” Oakley says. He says he has anti-LGBTQ family members. When they asked about his project, he just told them it's about “my art.”

Around this time, Oakley became good friends with Dustin, a queer person in the region who was getting a lot of national press. After knowing each other for a few years, Dustin shared his opinion of the work in which he appeared during a three-hour car ride.

“I hate every single piece of media I'm in,” Dustin confided. “They just use me as a punchline. It's like they get me to say a few quirky things, and that's just who I am. They don't tell the story I want to tell them.”

Oakley responded by telling his friend that they could create the story together.

The summer ahead proved to be too busy for the two to make a short. Oakley continued to work at AMI. He noticed the summer intern, Oliver Baker, had a “real heart-wrenching, bittersweet story.” The two collaborated on the short documentary “Not Your Daughter.” The film is about Oliver and his struggle with gender dysphoria. Oakley says the film generated a lot of attention quickly. He gets responses like “This inspired me to come out” from people who watched it.

About a year later, his boss at Appalshop recommended Oakley apply for a fellowship for the Open Society Institute, a human rights organization run by George Soros. He got the fellowship, one of six awardees out of approximately 3,500 applications. The room applauds as he says this. The lengthy stillness in the air speaks to the audience's captivation. It took me a while to notice other people's responses to him because I had the same experience.

Oakley knew what he would do with the grant money: make more LGBTQ media based in Eastern Kentucky and create a safe space at Appalshop. Showing his documentaries took Oakley across the United States, allowing him to visit Detroit, Denver, and New York.

"And it's all just because I wanted to document these stories about people who want to have their stories told, and I wanted these documentaries where people tell their own stories," he says. "And so here I am. I've got two films that just got recently accepted into Amazon, I've got a third one that's about 80% done, and then I start working on the fourth one."

Oakley pulls up his film *This Is Me* about Dominic Spangler, a transman in Eastern Kentucky. Dominic experienced severe bullying during high school, and the school permitted it to continue. At one point, he said he would bash someone's face if they didn't stop harassing him. As a result, Dominic was charged with terroristic threatening, expelled, and imprisoned. Oakley shows the first 10 minutes before the time for the keynote address is over. Oakley is in charge of the next breakout session. It looks like a large portion of the qualitative studies students are staying. I definitely am.

As his breakout session begins, it's clear that Oakley is a talker and can discuss media for days. We end up watching the rest of the documentary he started in the keynote. I streamed it the day before, so I watch how the audience of 16 people respond to it. Plenty of questions emerge after the screening. Dominick's well-being now is the primary concern.

Oakley collaborated with “Dom” on the documentary, showing it to him and editing it based on Dom’s feedback. Dom picked the B roll and asked that sections about his self-harm be added. That part made Oakley uncomfortable. He makes it clear before the screening that self-harm is in the documentary in case the topic is upsetting.

Oakley asks that we move from the theater seats to sit on the stage floor in a circle. I can already feel my legs hurting. He asks us about obstacles we’ve faced, using his documentary as a way to open people to more challenging conversations. Two stories stick out.

There is a white teenager, around 6’5, broad-bodied, classic blue eyes, and blonde hair. During lunch, he stared at my face while sitting across from me. It’s not a strange occurrence. It’s a curiosity about my features and trying to identify my gender. I do what I always do, continue conversations with other people while fully knowing that I’m being examined. Usually, the idea of the gaze and who gets to look crosses my mind. There is no malice in his looking. He barely talks during lunch and seems to want to hide, which will never work. I get the impression his growth spurt was recent. He’s adapting to his size.

He speaks in this session, though. He says he just moved to Asheville, North Carolina, from a tiny town in Illinois.

“We didn’t have much diversity there, so I’m adapting to all there is here.”

Racially, there is not much diversity in this room, though more than I see daily in this particular part of Appalachia. That’s not the case in other places in the region. For instance, as I checked into a hotel, I saw primarily black and Hispanic miners covered in soot in Neon, Ky.

This young person is not accustomed to the number of queer people here. Asheville is likely a shock on that front, too. Another young person speaks after him. She says she also recently relocated. Prior to this year, she went to school on the west coast and spent her summers

in Tennessee. She is now living in Tennessee, the Johnson City area, year-round. She is the last person to talk in the circle.

“I hate the South. The stupid, slow people and their stupid accents. I guess that’s the obstacle I’m trying to overcome.”

The last part feels tacked on. For whatever she was going through, which seemed like a giant upheaval, she wanted to make sure people in the room knew how she felt about being here. The room tensed like a person expecting to be hit.

The event is over. I grab an afternoon coffee, thank the organizers, and exchange information with some of my small group members from the first breakout session. I approach the person pulling up an article on their phone and talking to a volunteer about Queer Appalachia, a popular Instagram and mutual aid account. They are discussing a piece in *The Daily Dot* (Keith, 2019). One passage, in particular, is being discussed:

The organization said it has been beset by cyberbullying in recent months from individuals involved in some of West Virginia’s most powerful nonprofits, according to Mamone. Specifically, Appalshop, which aims to preserve “the lasting traditions of Appalachia,” and The Stay Project, which works to keep Appalachian youth in their home communities.

Queer Appalachia says they are suffering the effects of a sort of moral lens that ostracizes people with addiction histories. People in the West Virginia queer community who are involved with Appalshop and The Stay Project, Mamone told me, have taken to social media to disparage Queer Appalachia’s name and the work they do.

Mamone did not provide evidence of the cyberbullying they received.

While it isn’t clear where their information is coming from, or if their threats are valid at all, Mamone said they are feeling the weight of what’s being thrown against them.

“The way journalists come at us is crazy,” Mamone told me. “I’ve never seen journalism like this... the journalist supposedly working with this group of people sends emails, cold calling nonprofits in the region asking if they’ve worked with us... they’re looking for dirt. They want to shame and humiliate us so everyone knows what a piece of shit we are.”

A lot of what they have to say is about Mamone specifically. When they first moved home, they had a brief romantic relationship with another person in the queer community



that did not end well, which Queer Appalachia sees as the starting point for the discord. “I hurt their friend and I understand that,” Mamone said, “but I also know that The Stay Project and Appalshop, and the leadership there, is trying to villainize my addictive past and use it against me.”

They later added in an email, “we can’t handle it getting worse,” emphasizing they are trying to make peace and wave a white flag over the conflict.

“They’re all good people,” Mamone added. “They are good organizations.”

Neither Appalshop nor The Stay Project returned requests for comment.

I tell the person that Queer Appalachia is more than Mamone. I saw that recently in Morgantown. They tell me I am wrong. They cease making eye contact with me and talk only to the other person present. I am no longer a part of the conversation for reasons I would later learn.

### **Act III: Oakley at Appalshop**

For years, I’ve wanted to visit Whitesburg, KY, and see the multimedia outfit Appalshop. I watched so many of their films while I was a student and an administrative aide at NYU. I wasn’t able to get access to the films prior to that, and I couldn’t check out most of them, just reserve a viewing at the library. Whitesburg is small - approximately 1,791. According to the 2020 census, the town’s population dropped by 16 percent. There’s a downtown and the Appalshop building, which has a distinct look like a sizeable modern wood shack. It’s a strikingly beautiful design.

When I first arrive, I can’t find the Boone Building where I’m supposed to meet Oakley. I stop at Appalshop, and someone points me toward a building with a mural of Mario Kart on it.

I walk in and say hi to Oakley and Al. Oakley’s left cheek is stained red. Al points it out, then checks their fingers with a similar color.

“I was killed last night,” Al says, showing me their hands. There’s silence.

“Is this a film?” I ask, feeling the question move slowly out of my mouth.

It is. Oakley is making a trans-centric slasher film.

With some of the blood makeup still stuck to them, we walk to a downtown restaurant where everyone seems to know Oakley’s name. Hellos abound.

Al and Oakley are obviously good friends. They talk about going to karaoke that evening. Oakley just binged BoJack Horseman on Al’s recommendation, and Al is beaming at his joyful reaction to the show. As we eat, the two are debating their futures. Both are thinking about relocating. Al is thinking about moving back to Columbus, Ohio. Maybe Oakley will join them. He is looking at the possibility of moving back to his hometown, Blackey, KY. He notes that he could buy cheap land and put a trailer on it. He’s feeling a little restless.

Al asks me if I prefer rural or urban, based on the places I’ve lived.

I say it’s easier to do things and get involved in smaller spots, even mid-sized cities. While major cities offer a lot, you can get stuck in a situation where you are scraping by close to perpetually out-of-reach opportunities. Some people can make it work, but I did find I prefer mid-sized cities...for now.

Over lunch, Oakley speaks about the times the press reached out to him or his friends. One particular reporter likes to get groups of younger people drunk and take pictures of them doing things like tossing plates as frisbees. Oakley says he stays away from talking politics with any reporter, and it sounds like many reporters want to talk politics with them. If he even says a couple of sentences, it gets used in a story.

Reality television show casting is another media activity that occurs in the region. MTV looked to cast people for a reality tv show, too. Oakley noticed the type of people they were trying to recruit and the messages embedded in those choices.

We wrap up lunch, and Oakly and Al give me a tour of the Appalshop building. They introduce me to Dustin, who comfortably shares his relationship with the press, notably *The New York Times*. After a brief interview, the *Times* used a quotation out of context, darkened Hall's images, and framed him as violent. Hall reached out to correct this, and the reporter was fired.

After roaming through the building and seeing project after project, Al invites me to watch a movie in the Appalshop theater tonight with him and some friends. Needing a good night's rest, I decline, and we schedule a time to sit for an interview tomorrow. The next morning, I'm having a shaky day. While I have an occasional wave of nostalgia while driving around Appalachia, they are few and far between.

One experience I tend to have is a memory of past mental health issues, which in and of itself is disarming. After I came out, there was a push to move back to the region from my family and a negation of my experience within their social circles. No move was supported as strongly as the one from college to my hometown. Family showed up and helped me pack. I was seeing someone in the Knoxville area. The path seemed fine.

On many occasions, I was told there weren't any serious issues with LGBTQ people in my home area. Repeatedly, someone would bring up a happy queer couple they know. I could have that life, too, if I wanted, I would hear.

While I know the intent was good, the gaslighting proved detrimental. It would take me many more years to understand that people recognized my gender difference, not my sexuality. It would take even longer for me to name my gender.

I spent a few years as a reporter in other parts of East Tennessee. Sometimes I would be interviewing a person, and he/she would stop me in the middle of the interview to talk to me about my “lifestyle choices.” I grew my hair out to get a job. I began to wonder if I was developing schizophrenia.

I start interviewing Oakley, and I can feel that doubt of my validity and the instability of thought creep in. I haven’t felt this in years. There are occasional traces, but nothing this overwhelming. Oakley, thankfully, is not experiencing anything like this.

We’re sitting in a small office in the building I met him at the day before. Al is hanging out. I’ve met a few more people in the lobby to kick off the morning. I start with some basics. While I know Oakley is a trans-media producer, I don’t know how he identifies gender-wise; I just know he is making trans media with trans people.

“As far as gender things, I don’t really identify with anything,” Oakley says. “It’s just whatever people want to call me.”

In terms of why he makes these films, Oakley says everyone goes into filmmaking hoping to change the world, but he wasn’t expecting his work to make an impact. Soon after the first showing of *Not Your Daughter*, a man walked up to him and said, “Hey, I really love your film, and it gave me the strength to come out.” It was the first time Oakley saw his films could do good for other people. It gave him the motivation to keep making queer-positive documentaries. Soon after, he started getting invitations to speak about his film across the country. The work is compelling for people in different ways, Oakley explains.

“There is some humor in *Not Your Daughter*, and you really get to know this person very well, but also it doesn’t hold back on what it’s like growing up queer in the Appalachian region,” Oakley says.

Being in the Bible Belt adds another dimension as well. The confluence of factors puts a tremendous amount of pressure on queer people. It's different when a person tells their story versus when someone from outside the region does it. This issue is part of why he - even as a cultural insider - edits with the subject of the documentary and relies little on b roll.

Oakley pauses to gather his thoughts before continuing. He because he wants to speak about outsider versus insider representation in precisely the right way.

“Like, I’ve noticed whenever my friends in the LGBT community are interviewed by much bigger organizations, they’ll tell them that story. They won’t go as in-depth because you don’t really get to know this big film crew coming in, and then the film crew will cut it from the piece. So it’s like they’re scared to ... because it’s a real hard topic to talk about,” he says. An insider perspective can add nuance to the story.

It is easier, he says, to address queer storytelling in places with archives and long-spanning queer histories, like New York and San Francisco. Queer stories in Appalachia barely exist. This absence of story only increases the isolation. Add that to a media that believe people in Appalachia are stupid, and the problem is compounded. Oakley points to Taylor Swift’s music video “You Need to Calm Down” as one example. The video features queer versus stereotypical rednecks in a trailer park. The idea that a rural person and a queer person can be the same holds no space in the video.

Just telling the stories of Eastern Kentucky LGBTQ places social and cultural pressure on Oakley. People close to him have told him, “I love you, but I can’t really support your work,” he says. Those same people always ask him how his films are coming along. There is interest.

When I ask Oakley about his audience, it shows more of his drive to make the films. “For one, my hope is that I can definitely empower people here who are still having issues discovering

themselves,” he says. “But my dream hope is that it would really reach someone who is bigoted or doesn’t understand. Because there are a lot of people who don’t understand that could be my kid. And that’s the thing, just to show this is how it is, to preserve this time. This is what it is, and I’m hoping it really gives voice to a lot of people in the region who might struggle with these things.”

## Chapter 6: Transilient Documentary Tour: Part I

### West Virginia

As I walk toward the documentary crew, I see a restaurant worker leaning over their table with a tourism magazine, tracing his finger along the page. He's giving detailed directions, the kind that mentioned landmarks, drive times, and stop signs. I am pretty familiar with this type of direction and my inability to retain it. Instead of listening, I start to watch the other guys. We've just met in person for the first time after months of correspondence, and I'm falling trap to assessing the bodies of my trans peers. It's never a judgment, always a wonder and a relief.

Mid-direction, a snowball whacks against the window, causing everyone to jump. The restaurant worker laughs, points to the person outside, and says, "He's my boss." From behind the cafe counter, a woman shouts jokingly to the group, "I'm going to be in your documentary, right?"

I sit down. It's just the three-person crew and me eating deli sandwiches in a restaurant housed in a government building with yellow walls full of fishing pics and a giant taxidermy trout. We chat about how friendly people are in Charleston, WV, even though it's just our first few minutes in town.

"Do you think they would be so nice to us if they knew what we are working on?" Mo asks. Shrugs all around.

"What have you all been telling people that we're doing? What should we tell them when they ask?" Jayce asks.

"I just tell them it's about mental healthcare and healthcare in Appalachia; leave out the trans part," James replies.

I nod in agreement, adding I seem to be already doing that, having told cis/straight people in my hometown that's the documentary project I'm following as part of fieldwork. Explaining why the focus is on trans people - or even worse, potentially talking about being trans - felt exhausting. I can tell we all think it might be unsafe for us, too.

The documentary project is about transgender healthcare access in Central Appalachia - mental health included. While the documentary project focuses on healthcare, I plan to focus on these trans-media producers and their audiences, the trans people they interviewed during the 15-day tour, and the months after it as we continue to work together.

By the afternoon, we are on our way to the first interview with Alex in a suburb of Charleston. We walk into the home, and it feels like it came straight out of a fall issue of *Southern Living* magazine. The classic orange and brown tones are woven throughout the home's decor with a candy corn/woody fragrance to match. It's the start of November, and the leaves are starting to drop in droves outside. I keep remembering - while experiencing - how awe-inspiring this time of the year is here; even though I grew up five hours away, the mountains look and feel the same.

The team sets up while meeting some pets. Alex and his partner welcome us, offering coffee, giving off friendly vibes that match their cozy home. I notice some antiques around, feeling certain they are family heirlooms, the type people have an abundance of in Central Appalachia. Mo pauses. I can see a look of panic sweep his face. "We haven't introduced ourselves," he says aloud, immediately followed by a sense of awkwardness and formal greetings.

We prepare the lights, find a cozy spot, and start rolling. Mo begins to interview Alex. On the way to Alex's house, Mo was jittery, looking over a piece of paper and then staring out the



window again and repeating. He joined the crew not long before the tour as the journalist. He and the director, James, met each other as students at Northern Kentucky University.

Alex locks eyes with Mo throughout the interview. Mo asks questions about Alex's physical and mental healthcare and the barriers he faced as a transman in West Virginia. The documentary crew is close to the interview, crowded in the living room. I sit in the kitchen and watch from the doorway, trying to provide more space and pet a cat on the table next to me.

## **Alex**

Alex started identifying as trans before he had the words for it when he was around five or six. He didn't see people in his life or on the screen that helped articulate his identity until he was 16. At that time, Alex got internet access and found people who looked like himself.

“So, at that point,” Alex says, “that’s really when I first started thinking about it like, hey, this might be it, this might be what I was looking for, why I feel the way that I do.”

The realization led to more research. Alex met a transman, too, who helped guide him to understand transitioning and what it entails. The relationship made the reality of transitioning more tangible, not just allocated to the internet. When he was 22, he started seeing a therapist to get hormone approval. He speaks of his privilege for how smoothly the process went. He had supportive people in healthcare and in his life. While hormone replacement therapy proved to be a financial hardship, he experienced very few issues during his transition. Now, as he says, he passes 100 percent of the time, so he doesn't have to worry about correcting pronouns or encountering contentious issues because of his gender.

Alex says he tries to go to Pride events, but those typically occur during his working hours. For the most part, he isn't involved in a trans community.

“There are Facebook groups and stuff like that, and I am a part of those, but you don't see a lot of visible trans people in West Virginia,” he notes. “Honestly, I would like to be more involved, face-to-face with people, but it's so spread out here that it's hard to do, but it is affirming to know that I'm not alone in a rural area.”

Alex tends to insist that he's not that interesting. He works as a postman, plays darts, and hangs out with friends. The interview ends, and the crew inquiries about getting some footage of Alex on a typical day. I watch Alex go into the kitchen to discuss plans with his partner. He emerges with an excited vibe from the room, and we head to his local bar.

Alex continues to grin from ear to ear on the way to the bar and the whole time we're there. It's a better than usual local pub. The place is a neighborhood bar with video games, Skee-Ball, and darts. We play some rounds of darts, eat mozzarella sticks, and have some drinks in the afternoon. We are the customers - five transmasc identifying people, just chilling. Since we started with the interview, the level of openness has been high—one of the first topics we discuss is our newfound privilege.

“I'm treated much better than I was when people saw me as a lesbian,” Alex says, and Jayce and I agree.

The more we're perceived as male, the easier life is. People, we note, give us things. Men and women are kinder. More opportunities opened for us on the whole.

\* \* \*

Because I didn't go on testosterone until my mid-30s, I thought I could downplay the desire to be more masculine while still chest binding and wearing male-designated clothes. I didn't realize that I was notably nonbinary, still masculine, and exceedingly easy to identify as queer, as trans. I just didn't have the language or knowledge that seems so prevalent now. That said, I got a lot of this knowledge about myself and how to approach my gender in an Oregon college town. It might not have happened as easily in other places I lived, New York and Philadelphia included.

At one point, about three months into taking testosterone, I realized people were seeing me as male. Men started walking closely behind me. So close, too close. My fight or flight reaction would begin to kick in. While no part of me is violent, I wanted to fight because I didn't think I could run, given the proximity. Instead, I found myself stepping to the side and watching one guy after another mindlessly walk by me. Around this time, I was walking down the street about half a block behind a woman, and I noticed her starting to get nervous, looking back, seemingly tense. I realized we were walking from the bus stop to the same apartment complex.

"Hi, I'm not a creep! I'm just walking to the same apartments as you. Don't worry," I shouted ahead.

"Oh, thank god! You read my mind," she yelled back with audible relief.

My spatial distance to people had to change - along with some relationships. It didn't take long to learn that a good friend was scared to be alone in the room with a man, and I became one of those to her.

Mostly, the way people perceived me was positive. Within one week, a server gave me a free meal, and a man doubled what I bought with a gift card while calling me "buddy" multiple times. I started to get the cute nicknames men give each other. "Boss" appears to be the most

common. I keep asking people what it means to be called a boss. I still don't think I have a firm understanding.

\* \* \*

Alex and the crew are going around the table, telling each other where we're from and where we grew up. I'm last because I don't want to disrupt what I'm here to watch. I say East Tennessee and name some of the cities around my hometown. They don't know them. I mention the Bristol Motor Speedway, which works for a few.

"Woah, what was that like," Alex asks. "That's pretty far south."

"Not that great."

"I bet," he says. "That's pretty rural."

"The city next to mine is a good size now, like 70,000s. We got a highway that takes you there quickly in the 90s."

"But that far south...gets worse the further down you go," Alex notes.

"That's funny," I reply "Because a lot of people might believe that about West Virginia. All of it."

The documentary crew starts talking about tattoos. To commemorate the tour, they are thinking about getting a group tattoo. Maybe one of a threesome since there are three of them. I guess I mean it when I tell them that's a good idea.

After a couple of hours, everyone is hungry. The mozzarella cheese sticks didn't quite work as a meal; there are never enough. The crew asks me to give Alex a ride home while they go grocery shopping for the trip. Alex gets in the passenger seat, and his tenseness from the

interview earlier is long gone. Instead, there is a slight bounce, a holding grin, and lots of laughter. Perhaps he could even be called giddy.

“I’ve never hung out with a group of trans guys before,” he says almost as soon as he gets in the car. He continues to speak of how amazing it was. He tells me to come back and hang out anytime and let the crew know the same. Earlier, he said he asked his wife if it was ok to go to the bar with us in the afternoon because this was a significant first-time experience, to hang around people like yourself. That was the kitchen talk I saw. He offers to help me with my work any way he can while making direct eye contact with me. It’s the same seriousness and earnest look I saw while Mo was interviewing him. I feel like I’m getting a lesson in trans generosity, one that is exceeding what I experienced when I was identifying as queer in sexuality and not fully recognizing my gender. I somehow believed if I did not acknowledge my transness, neither could others.

That evening, I tell the crew about the conversation with Alex on the way to his house.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Jayce bursts out, pointing his finger to the floor as if to punctuate the air. “That’s exactly the reason we do this.”

“I’ll come back and hang out with him,” Mo says quietly. “I’ll drive out here.”

James wraps himself in a blanket with his lightly freckled face and long mountain-man beard peaking out. A sock hat completes his cocoon. He’s not feeling well, yet still all smiles. The crew woke up to drive three hours to Charleston at 4 am that day. Because it’s November, it’s getting dark early, and we’re slated for plenty of morning interviews and capturing b roll in the days ahead.

Today is James' birthday. He and I have been chatting for months, mostly texting with the occasional phone conversation. He's easy to talk with and quick to help. I'm so glad to get to know him in person.

We finish early and have some time to celebrate the birthday guy. We get take-out Thai food, keep the conversation rolling, and notice how slowly time is inching forward. We all feel like we've spent days together instead of hours. I am stunned when I learn James is turning 23, and Mo and Jayce are slightly older. Every bit of new knowledge seems surprising; it almost verges on feeling farcical - but isn't - given the few hours we've been together.

James and Jayce mention the previous tour for Transilient. Jayce wasn't there, but James was. The tour involved traveling through the United States' Midwest and the Pacific Northwest region for a photography project that documented trans lives and sought to find common threads. In Wyoming, a cisgender man showed up for one of the photoshoots and claimed that a trans man at the event had stolen his belongings. The accuser tracked down the man with a dating app. The situation escalated. James is visibly upset when talking about it and then abruptly stops discussing it. He's been a ball of anxiety, having issues eating. The nervousness stands in stark contrast to the easy-going personality I came to know in the previous months, though that is still somehow present.

The crew shares mental health struggles, emotions, and other issues with refreshing honesty. They talk of breaking relationship cycles and habits. The openness with which they recognize and address themselves is etched on their bodies. On one thigh, Mo has the word "Gender" tattooed on it, and the other thigh reads "Fuck." Jayce sports a t-shirt that says "self-made man" with a trans symbol in its center.

I wouldn't have had the nerve to do anything that drew attention to myself at their age. Plus, I didn't have the language to articulate my gender. I also wasn't unified enough to talk about emotions or address my mental health. I know some of this is generational and some of it social. I'm somewhat in awe of them, and their openness. It seems so healthy.

During this time, one of them will step away here and there to converse with family, particularly Jayce. Jayce talks to his nephew, niece, mom, and sister. There is Facetime with his pitty, Remington, too. He pops out his phone to show us pictures. He's a proud family guy. He's the shortest of the crew, but not by much, and has some bearish about him. He speaks his mind, and it took me a bit to adapt. He takes hard and fast stances where he isn't interested in changing his mind or ways.

Once Jayce locked eyes with me to tell me, "There is nothing feminine about me...at all." I say nothing terrible about being feminine or having some of those qualities. He's not interested in that conversation, though.

While lounging that evening, I mention my wife. The group is stunned. There are murmurs of, "You didn't tell us you were married."

"It's been ten years," I say, feeling a light chuckle from myself.

"How old are you?" comes from Jayce with a heavy dose of side-eye.

"I'm 39," I reply, feeling I need to tell them a secret about looking younger. "I didn't like going outside much for a few years. Otherwise, I don't have any anti-aging tips.

The age revelation does change the interactions. I already felt myself shifting into parent mode on my own accord, especially after discovering that none of them are older than 25.

Perhaps I should have guessed when I found out they had problems getting a rental car, but the memory of struggling to rent a car at that age has faded.

## **Roanoke Day 1**

At 6 am, Jayce's alarm goes off with a song:

"I'm a need some whiskey glasses

'Cause I don't wanna see the truth

She's probably making out on the couch right now

With someone new.

Yeah, I'm a need some whiskey glasssssssss

If I'm gonna make it thrououough."

Jayce slaps his phone. The song picks up nine minutes later. We all get up and move out in total silence.

Jayce and I share a room, which means I fall asleep to the episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* he watches at night. It's going well. Occasionally, I wake up to Meredith Gray's inspiring words or an emergency surgery. This morning I woke up too early. I'm having a type of research FOMO. James and Mo didn't sleep much either. They continued to talk most of the night, catching up on what's happening in their lives. James starts the morning by throwing up. When he stops, we leave, getting out the door by 6:30 and starting the three-hour drive to Roanoke, VA, for a day of b roll shooting.



Interviewing schedules start to be troublesome. People back out, back in, and emerge in ways that are wrecking James. I see a routine emerging between him and Jayce. They went to high school together and played on the same softball team. They live in the same town. James started transitioning in high school a few years before Jayce. When James says someone is having scheduling issues, Jayce quickly jumps in, calling the person names, mostly saying, “Fuck them. Fuck all of them.” Jayce has James’ back. Transilient’s executive director resigned from the group a couple of days before the tour began. I get the impression this change left them not knowing what would happen with the organization or future work.

To boot, most of the stops for b rolls shots flop today. A former intern researched them. The shots require such feats as hiking for 10 miles with equipment, visiting a long-closed gay bar, and going to a restricted train area. Jayce starts to get progressively irritated, yelling at the roads while he drives. The car rental is in his name, and he doesn’t want anyone else to drive because of that. It puts a lot of pressure on him to navigate these new locations, and they’re all new.

Eventually, James mentions that we should pull over in a parking lot, figure out what to do next. The lot is by an abandoned building. We get out of the car to stretch our legs. Mo tries to hug Jayce, who explains that he tolerates occasional hugs but does not enjoy them. Mo turns to James to hug him instead.

“I’m sending hug vibes your way, Jayce,” Mo says.

“I don’t want that,” Jayce snaps back, his white freckled face turning red to match his short hair and curly beard.

While the guys are talking, two large late teen/early 20s guys are walking across the far side of the lot. We all jump back in the car. No one seems to talk about how the guys were

yelling, “Those aren’t real men,” and the like. I assume we’re all accustomed to that or some version of it happening. I mention the heckling around dinner time. It turns out I’m the only one who noticed it. The crew was ready to go, not reacting or hearing the other people in the parking lot.

“Hey, you roll your eyes and sigh when Jayce speaks,” Mo says to me. “I don’t think others have seen it. I just want you to know.”

Mo is checking in with me. He constantly monitors people in the car to ensure they are ok. Mo is black with short hair, big brown eyes, a small amount of recently sprouted chin hair, and cherub-like dimples. Like Jayce and James, he always seems to be wearing a baseball cap. He is more prone to wearing a blazer or bright pink, often forgoing the flannel and t-shirts of the rest of the group.

Mo intends to connect deeply with everyone and seems to do just that. I start to review the interview questions he wrote, and we work on shifting them. I can’t seem to stop debating the degree to which I should get involved, but I’m not going to stop being a teacher while I’m here. I’ve decided that much. I coach him on ways to strengthen the interview process.

It’s been 20-plus years since I’ve been to Roanoke. Usually, I just drove by it as I visited my parents or when they would go on long drives and explore when I lived with them. On day one, there are a lot of large, abandoned buildings - boarded-up homes and closed businesses. The people we encounter are rude. We eat out twice during the day. We ask the waitress what a particular dish is like on both occasions. The response is “nasty” or “awful” because she doesn’t like the dish, be that salmon cakes or barbeque. One meal makes Jayce sick. He has blue cheese in a wrap. The cheese leaks out and appears green on his plate, so he tells the waitstaff. The

manager comes out and leans over Jayce's body, a hand directly on the back of the booth on which Jayce sits.

"We've been trying that blue cheese in the kitchen," the manager says loud enough for the surrounding table to hear with a menacing stance. "It's fine. You must be having some issues with your taste buds."

"It was green on my plate," Jayce responds. "I just wanted you to know."

"We haven't seen any of that," the manager says with an eyebrow raised, voice still loud. He leaves the table and makes the rounds to talk to regulars. We're somewhat surprised when the meal is removed from the bill. Jayce is nauseous for hours after.

After lunch, we find the Star Overlook, a prominent structure marking Roanoke's landscape, and grab some good footage. I ask the guys to take me back to my car when we wrap up the shoot. Earlier, I parked it in a lot near the tracks to ride with them. Jayce is starting to insist I ride with them whenever I can, and I'm happy it's working out like that. No other cars were in the lot, close to a bustling industrial park. We see other vehicles parked as we get closer.

I jump in my minivan (an unexpected "upgrade") and watch as the crew turns around in the lot. As they exit, a large white man with a strong jaw and buzzed hair comes stomping across the lot towards me. I can see his jaw and hands are clenched. I can see he is angry. I'm also fascinated by the cliché he is. I roll down my window to fix whatever issue I appear to have caused.

"Who told you, you could park here," he yells at me.

I calmly look at him and say, "Some friends showed me around town. Seemed like an ok place to park. Won't happen again," and roll back up the window. I pull out of the lot with the

man still standing and raging. I can see the crew's red Dodge Journey ahead of me, pulled to the side of the road. While I wasn't planning to trail them, only meet them at the following location, we drive ahead together. When I park at Roanoke College, I see I have a text that says, "Beck, is everything ok?" I reply, "Yeah, just had to talk to an asshole for a sec."

We grab equipment and walk into the history department to interview Professor Samantha Rosenthal, who looks at us with a question mark and says we're scheduled for tomorrow. In the awkwardness of the encounter, she says she has some time, and we can interview her now in her office. I stand in the lobby as the crew piles into her office and begins the interview.

### **Samantha Rosenthal**

Samantha teaches public history at Roanoke College and has taken it in a queer direction. She co-leads the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, collecting oral histories, providing walking tours, and maintaining a queer archive. The project started in 2015 when Rosenthal gathered about 18 people at the Roanoke Diversity Center, the city's LGBTQ center.

"I didn't know what existed here in Roanoke. I moved here from New York City. You've got to keep in mind I'm a New Yorker, and I moved down here, and I certainly had views about Appalachia that are based on stereotypes as people do, and I thought, 'Ok, we'll see what we find in this archival drive.' We very quickly got newsletters from 1971 within two years of Stonewall."

In addition to working with the larger community, she utilizes the classroom to help with the projects and develop this work. Through her course LGBTQ Storytelling, students are trained to collect oral histories, building an archive of experiences. In the spring, she's excited to teach a

trans history course she proposed this spring. Samantha carved a space for herself and her work while at Roanoke college. Having grown up and attended school in New York, her life changed and, in many ways, expanded when she moved to Roanoke for her professorship.

Curly hair, glasses, and tall, Rosenthal comes across as a trendy 30-something professor. She bounces in her seat as she talks through a litany of projects and then how her life shifted. There is a safe space sticker on her door from when a Richmond-based trainer came to campus. Last year, the school hired its first LGBTQ coordinator. A year-to-two years ago, the first all-gender bathroom was established; now, there are approximately 20 on campus. As for long-established initiatives, she says a campus LGBTQ group has been around since the 80s or 90s. It still used Lambda in its name, helping place its age since that movement seems to have disappeared mostly.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, after we checked into our rented, well-worn trailer home on the outskirts of town. I plop down on the couch and say, “I think that guy wanted to beat me up.” The other three quickly agree, head nods and agreements around.

“Yeah, we saw him walking toward you and were like, ‘No, Beck! Go, go,’” James says while waving his arms and hands in one direction.

“The three of us were going to jump out and take him on. We got your back, dude,” Jayce says.

I’m starting to feel bad about rolling my eyes, even if Jayce doesn’t notice, and I don’t know I’m doing it.

Last night we heard from the Instagram group, art collective, and zine-makers Queer Appalachia. Mamone, the founder, and Chelsea, a contributor, had to change the meeting time because of snow and road access. The crew and I were starting to doubt that the interview would happen.

“We can do this without them, right?” James says.

Of course, Jayce supports him.

James just got off the phone with his girlfriend, who said the documentary tour would be incomplete without interviewing the group.

I don’t say anything, but I tend to agree. Queer Appalachia is an unprecedentedly significant queer movement and group for the region. Their input could help shape the documentary.

After a few hours of will-this-or-won’t-this work, Queer Appalachia and the crew schedule a time to meet the following day. James and Jayce cheer. Mo is visibly panicked; it’s a last-minute adjustment for a big-name group. I pull up a piece I wrote about them and never published. I talk to the group about what Queer Appalachia, the zine and artistic collective, has done in the past and current projects. Mo and I start to work on interview questions. I show him news articles about the group. He continues to read and take notes late into the night.

## **Roanoke Day 2**

While the guys are excited about meeting and interviewing QA that evening, I’m also thrilled. This interview allows me to get to know the people who work on Queer Appalachia and make more of a connection. The day looks different, and our views of Roanoke start to make a

hard shift. Another perspective of Roanoke emerges from the parking lot insults, rude waitress, and dilapidated buildings. The sun is shining today. Fall leaves blanket the mountains. It's beautiful here.

We start our day by interviewing Shannon and getting to know one of her partners in a colonial-style house by a creek. Again, we find ourselves hanging out and chatting well after the interview. Shannon is one of many shorter interviews with trans people and an occasional trans-related health specialist throughout the tour.

Some of the b roll spots we pulled up last night are starting to pan out, providing another shifting view. There is an exception. We arrived at the Virginia Museum of Transportation in the early afternoon. I suggested we give it a shot, see if we can film the trains outside. Mo and I speak to the front desk, explaining the documentary is a PFLAG-funded project from the organization Transilient, and I'm the doctoral student in tow. The women at the front desk are quick to help. They make a call and tell us an administrator is coming to chat. He looks friendly and in his late 60s/early 70s. As he gets closer and sees us, his facial expressions harden.

"What group are you with," he asks, the first thing he says, and the tone is accusatory.

We talk him through what we're doing and mention that we are only interested in the public view on the other side of the building for the city's footage.

"That's not going to happen," he says after finishing our pitch. "These pieces are copyrighted. There are families and children here."

How the administrator delivers this is chilling and smacks of distant familiarity. It's been a while since someone so openly didn't want me around "the children." I am not misinterpreting this; I know the tone. It comes from a specific type of person. He hands over his card in a move that is insincere and says we can apply for footage another time when we are in town.

Mo doesn't miss a beat. He says thank you and happily walks away. I decide not to talk to Mo about this, maybe he doesn't need every bigot pointed out, and if he hasn't fully learned to identify them, perhaps that's ok, too. Even better, maybe he encounters them less frequently than I did at his age? Is this what happened with those guys shouting at us in the parking lot, too? We drive on the public street nearby while James leans out the window and grabs footage of the trains. It's a public view. We aren't doing anything wrong. Why do I even feel I need to write that?

Mo and I split from Jayce and James to grab coffee and practice for the interview. Mo is getting better quickly. He has only done a handful of interviews at this point. Queer Appalachia's notoriety has him flustered. I give him high points from my lectures about interviewing and how to shape the questions to get the most pertinent information and put people at ease. It's a guided conversation, I say, and he's a great conversationalist. I also tell him that Mamone, Queer Appalachia's founder, is a talker. Five thoughtful questions, I tell him, will take at least 30 minutes. Mo starts to say how thankful he is for me while avoiding eye contact. I avoid eye contact, too. He's just so earnest and kind all the time. It's hard for me to fathom how he, how this crew became so emotionally open and warm.

We head out for the interview, meeting Jayce and James at the Virginia Harm Reduction Center location. Mamone and Chelsea have been working with the organization and want to show us its new location in a rundown part of town. When we arrive at the center and meet the executive director, he tells us about the space and what the center offers before giving us a 10-minute tutorial on how to use Narcan. Afterward, he quizzes us and hands each of us two Narcan packets with three doses. I stash them in my bag and carry them with me for the next two years. I've seen more open drug use in Eugene, Oregon, than in Central Appalachia.



Chelsea and Mamone arrive a little late. They are so easy to talk to. I feel we're picking up exactly where we left off when I met them in Morgantown, WV. We set up for their interview, starting with Mamone first.

## Chapter 7: Rise of Queer Appalachia

“We started as a zine. When I took those handles a couple of years ago, the whole country was talking about Queer Appalachia, but they didn’t call it that,” say Mamone, founder of Queer Appalachia in an interview with Transilient’s Journalist Mo. “It was called Kim Davis. It was called bathroom bills that were coming out of West Virginia or North Carolina. I didn’t anticipate the response that we would have. I thought I was going to make a zine with a glue stick and a stapler.”

We’re sitting in a large room at the Virginia Harm Reduction Center. Mamone, Queer Appalachia’s founder, is behind a table with Narcan and safe sex supplies in front of them. The rest of us sit in folding chairs while James runs the camera. This interview is a big deal for the documentary crew. To understand why, more context is needed.

### Queer Appalachia’s Growth

The popularity of the project Queer Appalachia (QA) rose quickly. According to Mamone, one open call for zine material led to an influx of submissions. The overflow of contributions for QA’s zine - *Electric Dirt* - found its way to an Instagram account. The submission process proved to be as simple as using the hashtag #queerappalachia. Instagram provided a means to share content and garner involvement.

Queer Appalachia’s name became a moniker, occupying a place between playful regional humor, homemade art, political response, and community organizing. As stated on its website, it’s a place for Fag Hillbilly, Dirt Femme, Undocumented, Affrilachian, Farm Femme, Granny

Witch, Muslims, Feral, and more established and made-up titles. QA deeply engaged in queer place-making and found itself in a position of addressing a regional - and socially compounded - news desert.

Much like the LGBTQ newspapers and magazines, Queer Appalachia tried to fill a void left by mainstream publications. The conservative politics of the state compound this along with the decline of small-town newspapers. Many existing papers keep LGBTQ news to a minimum if even addressed. Most early LGBTQ (but predominately G) publications failed because of finances and the mental health of their founders and employees (Banks, 2019). Early prohibitive legislation of these publications certainly didn't help.

The project quickly established itself as a place for creating and sharing, be it arts or social justice initiatives. It made a digital space. It led with the stance that everyone should be welcome (later a point of contention). As its founder, Mamone, often said in posts, "No one is disposable." The mission included everyone who felt a connection to the name and the content:

Queer Appalachia is an artist collective. Anyone is welcome at our table regardless of addiction status, mental health, socioeconomic status, identity, race or how "out" you are. When we use hashtags like #nooneisdisposable, it's not marketing or branding. We invite anyone to work alongside us. For far too long, depictions of these regions have been white-washed and have made invisible the communities of color that live and struggle alongside us. We acknowledge the necessity for our work to not emulate these patterns and seek that both the project and its contributors accurately and appropriately reflect our diverse community.

The project expanded its scope to encompass Appalachia's porous relationship with the greater South. In 2018, I saw a presentation about Queer Appalachia at a cultural studies conference by someone who identified as queer but was from the rural Midwest. Another person at the table said she had a similar relationship with the group even though she wasn't from Appalachia, just another remote area in the US. The project struck a chord with many people because of the lack of rural queer celebration available to the masses.

The first collection of Appalachian queer voices is perhaps Queer Appalachia's zine *Electric Dirt: A Celebration of Queer Voices from Appalachia and the South*, Mamone says, leaving the possibility open for a lesser-known zine or a similar publication. The zine contains a hodgepodge of entries in a glossy 200-plus page format. There are essays, a dress-up paper doll Mothman, and an overall visually stunning content display like the Instagram account. Chelsea and Mamone brought a copy of the zine and plenty of QA stickers for the documentary crew.

Outside of the zine, merchandise, and Instagram, QA grew to encompass projects like a coat drive for transwomen of color and start a cannon of academic work about queer people in Appalachia. I know this because I partnered with Mamone, the founder and tent pole of QA, and Chelsea, who collaborated with the project on three works - two book chapters and a journal article. None would be published, at least in full. Elements of that work are present throughout this chapter.

By 2020, the Instagram account had approximately 300,000 followers and plenty of shared content. Several factors played into its rise: US politics, expansion of the project to the greater South, the space the project created, and its audience's needs. The history of the project and its creation paved the way for Queer Appalachia's success, and the management played a role in its 2020 run-in with cancellation culture (see Chapter 9). The growth of Queer Appalachia led to an increase in queer-oriented studies about the region. It started to get news coverage in *NBC News*, *Bitch Magazine*, *Mashable*, and *The Advocate*. The project became something Mamone did not originally envision.

## **Origin Story**

Queer Appalachia started as a memorial zine for Mamone's friend Bryn Kelly. As an undergraduate student, Mamone met Bryn while working at the LGBTQ center at Marshall University in Huntington, WV. Bryn, who was 16 at the time, saw the center existed, and as many college centers have experienced, she reached out for help, not knowing she wouldn't be counted among the people the university LGBTQ center serves. Off the books, Mamone and other students provided mentorship and help for Bryn, providing a place for her to live after being kicked out of her family's house for being a trans woman. The two continued to stay in touch over the years and eventually resided in Brooklyn at the same time and reignited the friendship.

Fast forward a decade, Mamone says they became too sick to live in the city and moved back to rural West Virginia to live with a less-than-welcoming family. While in their early 30s, Mamone developed an autoimmune disorder, one they say is relatively common for people who grew up close to coal slurry. Doctors told Mamone to get used to a chronically sick life with consistent pain management.

Mamone said that it was harder to understand they were abusing pills because pain management was supposed to be a permanent part of their life. They thought they were getting sick, focusing on the autoimmune disorder, but Bryn knew better, Mamone says. Bryn told Mamone to "Get some buckets. It's about to get trainspotting." Mamone detoxed alone in their bedroom for a week, lacking access to medical care.

While looking for ways to provide support from a distance, Bryn found and sent Mamone an article about Kim Deal of the band The Breeders. Kim and her sister, Kelly, grew up in Ohio, just over the West Virginia border. They spent summers at their grandparent's farm in northern West Virginia. The article explored Kim's sobriety and methods for staying that way. Because

Kim had issues going to 12-step meetings on the road, she knitted scarves; her grandmother taught her how all those summers ago. She made scarf after scarf, and when she had a trash bag full, she dropped them off at a women's shelter or homeless shelter on the road. Keeping her hands busy helped her stay sober.

Drawing from the article, Bryn began giving Mamone homework, telling them to make her things, regardless of previous experience or know-how. Mamone would have to watch tutorials and research methods. As a result, Mamone taught themselves how to make guitar pedals, embroidery, printmaker, and elaborate paper-mache piñatas - all from YouTube tutorials. Those works made their way to the QA Instagram and inspired merchandise.

In January 2016, Bryn took her life. A memorial zine project to her took the place of the nightly check-ins. Mamone started to post their creations and zine content on the Instagram feed, thus creating Queer Appalachia. The overflow of submissions to *Electric Dirt* accompanied these posts. Through this process, they feel like Bryn is seeing it. According to Mamone, the way that Queer Appalachia's Instagram feed curates maker culture, queer politics, and the opioid epidemic is effortless.

Mamone's relationship to making and creating as a coping method became increasingly apparent while we worked together. It's one thing to hear the story and another to watch it in action. Mamone stayed too busy, taking on project after project, missing deadlines, and sometimes becoming confused. The growing number of followers and those looking for support systems fueled the urgency to attempt to provide more resources with varying degrees of success.

For the first couple of years of the project, Queer Appalachia only focused on online community building, an element it did not lose during its initial 4-year run. The need for this community was apparent, even dire.

“I did not anticipate the community response that came from it,” Mamone says. “The community has always been very verbal about what they needed, what wasn’t there, what was killing them, what’s making their days hard, And that’s really shaped the ways that we’ve grown outside of a zine project. Whether it’s our harm reduction work or our mutual aid, it’s very much driven by our community demanding it of us.”

Sitting beside Mamone on a Friday evening, I watch them post some of the project’s most popular content, “Friday Night in the Country.” This weekly post celebrates rural life with a queer twist, think warning signs in the yard that say “NOTICE: IF YOU COME ON MY PROPERTY, I WILL BEAT YOU OFF,” and the like. While sitting there, Mamone mumbles that they can’t delete people fast enough. They block people who veer into harassment and who troll the site. I don’t see Mamone spending time looking into the people they are blocking. They are quickly scrolling while still conversing with the people around them.

Using the word “us” to talk about Queer Appalachia turned out to be a problem for Mamone. It implies that several people are running Queer Appalachia. As I heard Mamone once discussing with Chelsea when I first met them, “Maybe we should clarify what we mean by collaboration and involvement.” Mamone was in charge, and other people could and did contribute. Other people worked on the project, such as a couple of previously paid interns. Mamone said the number of people wanting to collaborate in the region dropped as the freelancer for the *The Washington Post* began contacting them. When I first met the group, the

reporter reached out to several people they knew. So often, when I heard them talking, the conversations foreshadowed what would go wrong with the project.

## **Meeting Queer Appalachia**

Somewhere in the reportedly hundreds of social media messages and emails the project receives daily, my four emails were lost, never making it to Mamone or the few other people who were paid to work with QA in the past. I start to understand why I might not be hearing back when I see their Instagram post in the fall of 2019, the start of my fieldwork:

This is a hard gig, over the past 3 years, I have learned to navigate daily death threats, people telling me I'm going to hell, and strangers encouraging me to kill myself. On the slowest day I block 100 people & on an average one 500. I acknowledge that the work I am choosing to do & where I'm choosing to do it is not always welcome, quite the opposite actually. I don't post very much about my personal life and I'm very mindful to not show you too much about where I live. QA has a POB in town, I do not use my home address for anything. Thursday night at my home a bush attached to the porch was set on fire, below my bedroom window. A neighbor saw & the fire dept came, everyone & all property is fine. Not everyone I encounter through this platform thinks I'm the bee's knees, I get that. A fair amount of Appalachia doesn't embrace the queer part of itself. It doesn't make my experience as a trans / GNC disabled queer living in the coalfields any less real.

I also want to acknowledge. that I've attempted to use this platform to be transparent and accountable for a time in that I was addicted & navigating opioid neurotoxicity. I am trying to build something in a place that I have burned bridges. That being said DAMN Y'ALL! That's some BS that's not long for this world. I'll go dark before that's my standard of living. It's been my pleasure to make a zine & curare this shitshow, but I'm not down for that. We are way behind on emails, and it doesn't look like that's going to change anytime soon. It's important to take time when I need it & I need it.

\* \* \*

In a couple of days, I knew there would be a Queer Appalachia table at an event in Morgantown, WV, so I took the five-hour drive from Tennessee to see if I could connect to the group at the Harm Reduction Queer Hoedown.



Morgantown proved to be one of those places that stick out like a sore thumb among the stereotypes of Appalachia. The town is in the mountains, with Victorian houses in abundance. The downtown boutiques ranged from a bakery/art gallery to a burrito establishment with a pan-flute-led jam band. It has an upscale hippy vibe in a college town. The venue, 123 Pleasant, is between a co-op and a sourdough bakery/art gallery. I walk up and down the hilly streets, attempting to stretch my legs after the long car ride, hoping this gamble pays off. It's easy to spot the queer/punk venue as you drive into town. The rainbow colors peek out from the downtown buildings.

An hour before the hoedown starts, I spot Mamone across the street, and they clock me as a fellow queer. People start setting up the event. The door is open. I begin to question how creepy I might come across by driving here, hoping to work with them. It'll be a matter of shifting from small talk to be-in-my-dissertation-please talk. I text my wife to ask if this whole scenario will make me a creepster. She assures me I'm inherently uncreepy. She then reminds me that I'm a Leo and should do what's natural for me: jump in and help.

I manage to talk to everyone in the next hour except for the Queer Appalachia table. I sign a canvas for independent reproductive care for people under 18. I stuff bags with event flyers and buttons with rainbow coon hats and "All Y'All" pride buttons for Morgantown Pride. I am making the rounds. The kind I don't really need to. I go outside with all the young people - mainly college-aged and possibly below - and wait to get back in with my ticket because why not. The line sports hoedown-appropriate clothes for the most part. One guy wore skinny gray jeans with big brown, ornate cowboy boots. There are a lot of flannel shirts and cowboy hats with a trendy twist. The event could have just as easily been in Portland or Brooklyn.

I had to explain to a couple of people that I did need a ticket, and I was not an organizer. Then I got a beer I didn't want to have something to move around in my hands or to do. I suck it up and interrupt the non-stop conversation at the Queer Appalachia table. I start with the person managing the table, Chelsea, not knowing who they are. I scan the merchandise that I'd followed so closely online. Eventually, I walk away with a "Decolonize Your Holler" sticker and two cozies with a vague image of the Steel Magnolia's cast and the words "Drink your juice, Shelby" under them.

Chelsea and I hit it off and chat for a while. Eventually, I park behind the Queer Appalachia table to talk more. Chelsea is an artist, and I quickly discovered that I'm very familiar with their work. They make digital collages of Appalachian and Southern culture with an image of a prosthetic fist in them somewhere. Their style plays an integral role in the QA brand. Chelsea's bangs stick straight up in the air. I wonder if it's purposeful. If not, I feel that; I struggle with similar hair. They claim to have created the largest archive of Appalachian fisting art. I believe them.

Chelsea points out the Mutual Aid fisting lube on the table. They started making this lube that is not compatible with internal or external condoms but meant for fisting. A dollar from each sale buys the medical debt of people who make two times below the poverty level. The dollar goes far because Appalachian medical debt can be purchased at a discount. The lube began sales in August and has produced \$50,000 in medical debt relief so far. Mamone says they think an Appalachian fisting lube making all this money is hilarious. They've started to take an interest in the conversation between Chelsea and me.

Then I began to talk to Mamone more. Mamone's arms are covered in tattoo sleeves. They wear bib overalls with a quilt trucker cap. It's like a nouveau coal miner style. Their cane

rests against the wall. We both lived in New York for a while and talk about how the city lacks a decent level of livability, the code-switching we underwent, and how we saw our culture both demonized and capitalized upon. We talk about regional politics. Several months later, Mamone posts a picture showing how they've changed over ten years. It was a short-lived social media trend at the time. I recognize them from a party I attended in Brooklyn years earlier.

I tell Mamone I respect how they've been able to stick with this project. I explain a project that I did years ago, one that hoped to gather queer Appalachians and build community. I only made it six months as the organizer. I put in so much effort, I started to get community feedback and followers, and then I stopped. When I left it - depressed and somewhat defeated - I thought about how I could have done it better. Queer Appalachia nailed it; it did everything I should have: inserting comedy, providing levity, and collaborating. Instagram's platform works much better than the Facebook page and WordPress blog I was using.

"I have a lot of strong opinions, and then the internet was born, and now we're here," Mamone says while sitting behind the booth, surrounded by a rotating group of four or five people who wanted to contribute to the organization and discuss opportunities.

Before I leave, Mamone locks eyes, leans forward, and tells me I can be a part of Queer Appalachia if I want, and they would do anything they can to help me with my work. I say I'm totally on board to work with the group but ask that I do some work that others don't want to do and this group needs. I'll do administrative work for them, like mailings and basic excel sheets. Mamone appears puzzled. They tell me all the other ways people have engaged their projects and creativity. I say I want to see the everyday operations and help there. I never work on administration for the project, though.

Eventually, Mamone, Chelsea, and I find a collaborative situation where they send me outlines or rough drafts of invited book chapters. I fix them and do the academic work the editors' request. In return, I see how they work and stay in frequent contact. I learn Mamone doesn't have a computer. They've been running everything from their phone.

Before heading back to the West Coast, I ask if I can help with shipping or the like, wanting to see their work environment. They seem to be avoiding this every time I ask. Later, I find out it's because they live with family, and that family does not approve of Queer Appalachia or the people it serves. Mamone adjusted their sleeping hours, so they don't have to interact with them. Chelsea is living with them, too. The arrangement seems tense. At one point, Chelsea tells me they think Mamone started the project as a lifeline of their own, a way to feel connected to the world around them while being so trapped and isolated.

The relationship with QA evolves over the next few months as I enjoy the writing and working with them, which I do from across the country and with Chelsea. My communication with Mamone isn't as regular. I'm never directly in touch with the editors, and I sense widening gaps in my understanding of how the pieces should proceed at times. Some issues do start to emerge. I see a lot of delayed deadlines, more projects, and not enough administration.

All of this continues to build until August 3, 2020, when *The Washington Post* publishes the article "The Tale of Queer Appalachia: A popular Instagram account raises funds for LGBTQ people in Appalachia. But does the money really go where it's supposed to?"

## Chapter 8: Transient Part II: Roanoke to Atlanta

"We can wreck anyone's evening," Mamone says as the crew leaves the Virginia Harm Reduction Center about 5 hours after arriving.

None of us expected to spend the evening with the Queer Appalachia folks, especially conversations involving future hopes and dreams. I understand Chelsea and Mamone's drive to mentor and help the group. I'm chomping down hard mints for food.

As Chelsea and Mamone walk us to the exit, Mamone whispers, "I'm so glad you're traveling with them," having expressed concerns about violence in the region towards trans people earlier.

Mamone busts out a loud "I love you all!" while saying goodbye.

We head to a restaurant in the evening to eat some beautifully heavy-handed food at a restaurant downtown. The radio is playing in the car as we ride there on what feels to be an endless loop of Post Malone hits with some welcome interjections from Lizzo.

"Woah, one moment," Jayce says as he turns the volume up on a news announcement.

A manhunt is taking place in Roanoke. A former marine killed his mother's boyfriend in Hardy, VA, where we are staying. A shelter-in-place order was in effect earlier in the day with schools shuttered. We soon find out that the hunt is making national news. At the restaurant, we watch the coverage on NBC Nightly News on a screen above the bar.

When we pull into the Airbnb's driveway, the next-door neighbor approaches to let us know he is running his searchlight every 30 minutes to keep the murderer away.

"How often do you think stuff like this happens," Jayce says as we step inside. It's on everyone's mind.

Our door doesn't latch well at the rental. Jayce leads the efforts to barricade it with furniture from around the house - a bookshelf, a chair, and lots of filming equipment piled on the chair. Around the time we're going to bed, a car alarm goes off in our driveway. It's one of our two cars. Jayce tries to peer outside.

I ask for help to open the door and move all the furniture barricades, saying, "I'll take care of this."

"You're fearless, but I need you to have a little more fear, Beck."

I walked outside and around the car before yelling back, "It's safe."

I am worried. We semi-packed the van for an early shoot, and I'm nervous about a break-in. It's not because of the manhunt. Perhaps, I should have been more concerned; we would find out the search ended close to our rental trailer in a few days.

I booked the cheapest place I could find in Roanoke, which was pricier than any other accommodation on the trip, and I'm now regretting it. The door not locking kept us on edge. I wake to the searchlight, scanning the backyard and voices in the living room throughout the night, knowing no one is resting.

## **Roanoke Day 2**

The next morning, James looks wrecked. I head to the bathroom and see bloody tissues in the toilet and garbage. On the way back out, he tells me he started his period. Things have been going wrong with his hormones. He developed allergic reactions to the testosterone shots before

the trip, so he switched to the topical gel. It's causing small welts now. He whips off his shirt to show me three small marks on his back.

"Do you see these? They itch like hell," he says.

My heart goes out to the guy; I can't imagine dealing with that while we are constantly on the move.

The crew pulls it together quickly and heads to the following interview outside of Roanoke. While winding through the country roads, we see a more prominent Trump/Pence presence with signs posted in yards. We lose cell phone reception.

"AW, AW, AW," screams emit from the backseat, bodies sharply shifting to the other side of the car. After taking a moment to unify, James and Mo panic while explaining they saw a guy in cameo clothing moving through the dense woods with a large rifle in his hand and a hunting dog next to him.

While we question if we're in the right place, we see a driveway and pull up. There's a parked car with colorful queer-friendly bumper stickers splayed across it. While we're reading them aloud, a woman appears on the other side of the glass door. It's Mandy, the partner of Jesse, the next interviewee.

We set up while greeting the family - Jesse, Mandy, and their super observant and smiley two-year-old daughter. The house is a home, like so many we've seen. Pictures of the baby, the wedding, and friends are on the wall. I see a collage that pays homage to veganism with a signed and framed Andrea Gibbons poem next to it. A colorful wall of records on shelves lines one wall of the room. Jesse tells me he collects the records when he goes to antique dealerships with his dad. A typical Saturday, not this one, would involve working at an antique booth with his father. Soon, we discover his father is the man with the gun and dog. They live next to each other.

Jesse is 42 with floppy hair starting to gray and a trim beard, sporting large squarish glasses. He and Mandy act paternally toward the crew, offering seltzers and helping with equipment. They say a sitter will show up soon to take care of their daughter. We met their cats. I love how many pets, mostly rescues, I meet on the trip. Mandy's cats don't come from rescue organizations, though, we find out; Mandy is the rescuer. She hears stories of cats in danger and reaches out to people.

Della, for example, is a small calico cat and love bug with a rough past. Della greets me and eventually curls up in my arms to sleep briefly. She makes friends with all of the crew, wandering from one person to the next for back and head scratches. A few years prior, Mandy caught wind of a woman whose kid slammed the door on a kitten. Instead of taking the cat in for care, the woman put the kitten in the closet because she worried about her kid getting into trouble.

For three weeks, Mandy begged the woman to give her the cat. When Mandy picked up Della, she purred and rested her body against her new owner. Mandy immediately took her to the vet. One of Della's eyes was hanging out, and her jaw was broken. As a result, Della is a one-eyed, square-jawed beauty. There are five other cats in the spotless house and a mix of extreme rescue stories to accompany each one.

It's a sunny day, and the light fills up the house, making it easy to film Jesse. The crew and I have started to fall into a rhythm for setting up while conversing with the interviewees, partners, family, and friends. While waiting for the sitter, we spread throughout the house and chat. I sit with Jesse and his kid in front of the television. *Blue's Clues* is on. Jesse and I say a few words, then we just sit. His child leaves to hang out with the rest of the crew and Mandy. Jesse and I watch tv, kind of. Mostly, we sit in a pleasant silence. We're close in age and trans,



but there must be other similarities. I've only had this experience with a couple of other trans people near my age before. I feel so at ease that I don't need to perform socially; I just am. I unpack it later, imagining - or hoping - he must have had the same reaction. I am not surprised when I learn how tumultuous Jesse's path has been. His calm and collected presence takes a certain amount and type of practice.

### **Jesse's interview**

Jesse experienced such severe bullying as a kid that he developed PTSD. To cope with the bullying, he disassociated himself from his body. He didn't even consider it trauma until he began seeing a therapist in his 20s. The therapist started incorporating body-based mindfulness, which Jesse initially wrote off as hippie nonsense, until it started working.

"There were several experiences that I had where I had really big, what you would consider classic sort of flashback body memory experiences," he said of the therapy's impact. "Working on that trauma, working on that PTSD, brought me back into my body, which then I discovered was the wrong one."

Posture provides an example of how the trauma affected Jesse's body. For years, he hunched his body with the expectation of being hit, folding into himself to hide. Through the therapy, he began to stand up straight, and then he began hunching again. This time, he realized he was uncomfortable with his breast tissue, having been less aware of it from years of concealing himself.

"It took me a while to kind of make that connection," he said. "For me, there are some things that I'm dysphoric about, some things I'm not, but there was enough there that kind of all happened at one time, where I realized..."

Jesse had these realizations in the early 2000s. As he says, transgender representation or transgender discourse were rarely present. He didn't have the language to name what he was experiencing. The internet provided the tools to understand himself. It also helped that he had met a couple of trans men by this point in his life. He wonders if he had been born later, if he would have understood himself sooner, or would use different language to express himself.

The relationship with his therapist began to sour as Jesse started to articulate his identity.

"She characterized it as an internalization of the messages that I had been told as a child about being a different kind of girl, or that I wasn't the right kind of girl," he says. "And thought that it was more of a continuation of that traumatic experience and that it was a sign of needing to do more work to really understand myself and accept myself as female."

This identity articulation marked the beginning of a journey to get the mental and physical healthcare he needed to thrive. He said he obtained testosterone then "underground," having issues getting it from a doctor. At one point, he started it for six months and then stopped due to family pressure. That period allowed his voice to drop, so he wasn't outing himself every time he spoke. Fortunately, Jesse found an affirming therapist who worked with him to navigate the medical system and advocate for him when needed. Eventually, he learned how to advocate for himself and his well-being.

"I don't go into situations anymore expecting them to agree that I need healthcare; I just need healthcare."

\* \* \*

Mandy prepares vegan tuna sandwiches with the intent of feeding everyone when the interview wraps up. She offers food - a chickpea blend with a shockingly similar taste to its fish counterpart.

Jayce says he's never eaten anything vegan.

Kelsey (the babysitter and family friend) replies, "Sure you have. Have you eaten Fritos, Oreos, Skittles, Pasta?"

An educational talk about veganism follows with its benefits for the world and how it is an extension of social justice practice. Mo, in particular, seems to hang on to every word. He told me earlier that he's a sponge and down to learn as much as possible.

This talk segues into Kelsey speaking about her hero Leslie Feinberg and the time she met Kate Borenstein. Kelsey asks if any of the crew has a trans-male hero. There's a pause.

"No," says Jayce. "But I respect the fuck out of Laverne Cox."

Mo and I chow down on the sandwiches, putting spinach on top and some chips on the side. James isn't quite up for eating.

When asked about his dietary restrictions, Jayce replies, "chicken, mostly chicken." He declines the food and grabs snacks from the car.

Mandy starts to play a game during lunch. "I want to guess your ages and how long you've been on testosterone."

We're all down. I'm curious.

"You're all under 30 and have been on testosterone for at least five years."

We go around and say how much she got right or wrong. The crew is 23 to 25 years old, I'm 39, and only one of us has been on hormones for more than three years. We talk beards.

"I have a lot of facial hair, but I don't like this bald spot," I say, pointing to what would look like an inverted goatee if I grew my beard out. "Honestly, I just don't think I'm clean or aware enough for that."

Jesse says he has a bald spot and points it out. He grew out his beard and covered it up, though. Jayce mentions in the course of this talk that he has to fully pass as male because of where he lives, pulling on the red beard curls, which he recently noticed and loves to strum while driving.

Hugs and social media accounts are exchanged as we wrap up to leave. Jesse tells us about a Trump/Pence piece of "artwork" near their house. He tells us we can see it and offers to take us there. We follow him to a spot where two 18-wheeler trucks are parked in an open field next to the road. Pro-Trump rhetoric covers a truck. While walking around the trucks' perimeter, Jesse says the vehicles used to be covered in more derogatory statements like "Hillary Sucks but not as well as Monica." While that phrase is gone, the vibe still exists.

I fall into a deep sleep later that afternoon. Jayce wakes me up two hours later and asks if I'm going to the Transgender Day of Remembrance at the Unitarian Universalist Church. I don't want to, but I do need to. I'm ready five minutes later. We head to the church. When we enter, I smell the familiar wafts of church food - a combo of casseroles, ham, baked beans, and fried chicken. I'm not wrong.

We walk into the dining area; it's nicely linked to the church's sanctuary. I'm thrown off guard that I'm comfortable with this church's atmosphere, even before I see the people present. A large portion of the 20-plus people at the potluck is transgender. We see Dr. Rosenthal, who invites us to sit at her table with her friend. We load up on food and take a seat at the long-folding tables. When the event organizer, Erica, stops by to talk, James asks if it's okay to film

the evening's ceremony. Erica gets the room's attention and asks if there are any objections. Interestingly, there aren't.

After interviewing Dr. Rosenthal the day before, the crew went to the Roanoke Public Library to see the queer archives she and the community gathered. We have four large boxes and a repeated assurance that we could just locate these files on the internet. Physically going through the archives as a group is fascinating. We all gravitate to specific stories and shared elements that intrigue us. James and Jayce take turns with the camera, scrolling over the newspapers, posters, and pamphlets, capturing b roll to accompany Dr. Rosenthal's interview.

Now that we aren't surprising Dr. Rosenthal in her office, she's much more relaxed. We talk about how fascinating the archives are and what we saw. There are posters for a queer film fest from the 1990s, flyers for Pride events in the 1980s, and an assortment of news stories that paint a picture of a vibrant and long-standing queer scene. When the guys leave the table, I talk to her about her education at Stony Brook University and living in New York. She's working on a history of queer Roanoke and how being here helped her understand her gender.

Soon, Dr. Rosenthal starts to point out people in the room to me. Mary Banky, she says, is turning 90 today. Mary began her work as a trans activist in the early 1990s when her child became aware of their trans identity. At the time, the local PFLAG chapter focused on gays and lesbians. She wrote literature about trans allyship then, which I immediately recall seeing in the archive. In the church lobby later, Mary tells us she is named on the back of the PFLAG pamphlet Mo is reading. Dr. Rosenthal also points out Roanoke's first openly queer elected official, who happens to be the former pastor at the local Metropolitan Community Church. I'm in awe of the strong community of transwomen in their 60s and 70s who are present. The history of advocacy in this room is rich.

The crew sits on the side of the sanctuary and begins filming the evening's ceremony. A table at the front of the sanctuary is packed with candles to commemorate the 300-plus transgender people killed in the past year. Erica starts with the acknowledgment that these candles aren't enough to represent those whose deaths are known and that the number of trans people murdered is at least double, if not more. Because of the number of Latinx people listed in the death toll, she encourages those who speak Spanish to do so. The event progresses in an informal and honorable way. People volunteer to say the names of the victims and light candles at the front of the room. If anyone wants to learn more about those who died, the group created a scrapbook with photos and information in the lobby.

One of the first people to light a candle is Mary Banky. She seems like so many incredible older women I've known, primarily through the church I grew up in. I have not commonly seen LGBTQ activism as a part of that kindness. The ceremony lasts for over an hour with the rotation of candle lighters and readers moving from the pews to the pulpit to read or the communion table to light.

One trans woman who is blonde and tanned takes the stand to talk about a friend who died. She regularly attends the annual trans health conference in Philadelphia. As a result, she says she is privileged to have met thousands of trans people, which also has drawn her "closer to the flames" in front of her. She speaks fondly of a friend before revealing the friend's murder, who was killed by arson. The friend's name did not make the list because the arson couldn't be explicitly tied to a hate crime. She sobs before she even starts talking about it. Jayce and Mo are both crying. Jayce reaches over to touch Mo's leg gently.

As the event winds down, Erica stands up and encourages people to view the book of United States transgender women who are memorialized in this year's Trans Day of

Remembrance count. She says of the 24 people in the book, only one is white. She acknowledges her privilege as a white person and says she cannot understand what these POC women endured, and these lives need to be respected.

To conclude the ceremony, Erica notes that it is Mary Banksy's 90 birthday today and speaks of Mary's work as a trans activist pioneer in this town. Mary jokingly asks if they planned to hold this event because it is her birthday. The room, the crew, and I sing happy birthday to her.

On the drive back, Mo says he knows we've shared pronouns, but what are people's gender identities. James and Jayce say trans male. Mo is genderqueer. I don't know exactly, but genderqueer, trans-masculine covers it. Mo and I talk about how language is imperfect as we finally run through the drive-thru at Arby's to eat. That night, I decide not to wake up at 5 am to drive to Asheville but to get a little more sleep and meet the crew in downtown Asheville. It's almost the end of Roanoke.

\* \* \*

The drive to Asheville takes me close to my hometown region. Growing up, Asheville was an hour and a half drive, but with the extension of an interstate in the 90s, the drive shifted to 45 or so minutes. In high school, I would drive around a part of my town to get broken reception to Asheville radio stations. Those stations introduced me to queer bands like Sleater Kinney and Pansy Division.

On the drive, I see the restaurant Clarence's that I would occasionally eat at on short road trips with my family. I grab a cheeseburger and shake, the classic pairing. This leg of the journey is starting to provoke nostalgia. I worried I had become too disaffected. Mamone spoke about

disassociation in person and on QA's Instagram, so I looked into it, knowing I've used this coping method for most of my life, less so in recent years.

I spend most of the drive reflecting on where I grew up and the difference between myself and the crew. I think a lot about the memoir writers I've been listening to on audiobooks - how you never really leave your past and how your memories can change with time. And especially what it means to be an educated person. I hear a John Dewey quotation that sticks with me:

"Education is not preparation for life: education is life itself."

## **Asheville**

I arrive in Asheville at 3 pm. I feel more human - hydrated, rested, and caffeinated. The guys made appointments for a tattoo parlor at 4:30. They've been talking about getting matching ones. Calvin joins us. He drove in from a remote town in North Carolina. He says he moved back to stay with his parents when he and his ex-partner broke up. He doesn't feel like he has a sense of community where he lives. When Transilient put out a call for documentary participants, he volunteered. A few days later, the group posted an opening for a social media person, and he thought that might be a better fit, so he jumped on board.

The crew picked up snacks for themselves and me. They tell me to check the fridge for them. I start to acquaint myself with our new surroundings. When Transilient was trying to organize the documentary series, the organization put out a call for housing. Some people offered couches and floor space. Some spots didn't have any volunteer housing. When I asked to join the production, I offered to find Airbnb rentals to contribute to the project. I noticed those would cost less or about the same as getting a hotel room by myself, allowing us time to hang out. I also



added that there are no strings attached. If the crew is uncomfortable with me, I could find other arrangements, and they would still get the AirBNBs. Because they were so short on housing options, the arrangement worked well for us. The crew did have one great offer for housing, and we are standing in it.

The house is enormous, like four-bedrooms-and-three-bathrooms big. The owner, Heather, is just a couple of years older than I am.

"I've just been trying to figure out a way to support your people," she tells me at the end of the trip. It's the only time I think of a distinction between Heather and the group. When she saw a call for housing from PFLAG, she immediately reached out to offer her place. As I look around for the first time, I see the guys relaxing on the couches, eating, and watching television. They've already made themselves at home.

While we were apart for a few hours, the crew's day did not go well. The locations for the b roll didn't pan out again. For example, they went to Craggy Correctional Center, which didn't look like the pictures and is in operation. They found that they were able to drive into the functioning prison. Once they found themselves inside the place, they saw prisoners standing beside them. They put the car in reverse and left. Pivoting, they grabbed some b roll from various spots around town.

"Wanna go to the tattoo parlor with us, get a tattoo?" James asks.

I freeze in response. Do I want to go to the tattoo parlor to get a tattoo with them?

Kalvin is on board for the tattoo; it's his first one. He is visibly panicked, with red cheeks and sweat on his brow. The rest of the crew sports plenty of tattoos.

I only have one from when I was 18, which says Mattel Incorporated © 1998 on my lower back. It was Barbie-inspired. I forget it's there.

I want to be involved on the way there, but I keep debating if I should. I even text my wife and advisor about the ethics. While sorting out the "right" course of action, I start to uninvite myself from the group. Maybe this is just their activity now? I don't want to get in the way. Maybe I want to get in the way?

I ask, "Can I get one, too?"

Yes, of course, came rippling from the group.

"I'm so happy you're going to be a part of this," Jayce says while beaming.

"You are part of the crew," James adds while making eye contact that punctuates words.

Jayce asks if he could help center Calvin's nervous system in the lobby. Calvin agrees. He and James hug him from side to side for several minutes. Jayce says he learned this grounding technique from *Grey's Anatomy*. He and Mo used it on James yesterday.

One of the tattoo artists greets us, and we fill out forms. The artist made a design of the mountains. To keep my slight distance, I leave off the initials of the tour. For me, that will be implied. The forms we fill out ask us our preferred name, legal name, and pronouns in addition to a run-of-the-mill agreement statement.

A tattoo artist pulls up a variety of mountain ranges. We pick a style, and she changes it, so the design is uniquely ours. The crew divides between two artists who manage to get each of us inked in under 15 minutes each. We all discuss the documentary series, and the parlor's employees seem genuinely interested. We're added on social media before we leave.

The receptionist takes a group photo of us as we show off our tattoos together. Jayce buys us matching bracelets before we roll out. As we head back to the car, James says it's his first group tattoo, clearly putting out feelers to see if that's true for the rest of us. It is.

We return to the house and get to know its owner, Heather. She's an artist and extra busy with the holiday season. She's also just an active person in general. For instance, the day we left, she departed to work on Johnathan Van Ness' tour stop in Charlotte. She tells us her daughter is a double major in women and gender studies and psychology. She wants to work with LGBTQ middle schoolers in the future. My heart melts a little when I hear this.

She says her daughter coached her on how to introduce herself: state her pronouns and ask for them.

"I'm not going to do that, though," she says, "It sounds weird. Tell me if I get anything wrong. We're just going to hang."

We are to help ourselves to whatever is in the fridge and relax.

In the room where Moe, James, and I sleep, there are travel pamphlets, maps, and the most recent issues of Edible Asheville and Asheville Magazine. The house pops with color and friends' art pieces. Heather placed post-it notes around, telling us little things about the house. We spend the evening hanging out with Heather and her two dogs on the back porch.

\* \* \*

The next morning, we have an 8:30 interview with a mental health professional. Mo didn't know about it until the night before. He starts crying in the morning as we rotate in and out of the bathroom. He is sitting on the bed in pants and his binder while doubled over. He is such a caring person. I decide to mimic what I think he would say.

"Can I get you water, Tylenol, a hug?" After trying many options, I ask if he wants some space.

"I just need to cry," he says.

I step out and close the door. I can hear their sobs getting harder from the other side.

On Saturday, Mo found out his aunt had died. While he spoke to his dad that morning, his dad didn't tell him. He heard it from someone else. The cumulation of the interviews is starting to stress them, yet he keeps improving. He creates deep attachments to the people he interviews; their eyes often well up with tears. He's told me he is tired a few times afterward. The way he and James sleep might be catching up to them, too. Both are dealing with a lot.

That morning's interview takes place in a small office. Calvin and I hang out outside of the room. The interviewee is speaking at such a low volume we can't hear. It's in a medical center, so there is plenty of background noise. Calvin is just a joyful and thoughtful person to be around. Earlier, he apologized to me for boxing me out of the conversation; he worried his body positioning kept me from interacting fully with the group. He makes sure to open the door and watches out for people's well-being. We hang back and chat in the hallway. He's thinking about moving in the future but saving money and enjoying time with his grandma for now.

Afterward, we stroll through downtown Asheville, gathering b roll again. We stop at a queer-friendly coffee shop Calvin heard about: Trade and Lore. White lights are strung across the ceiling with a wooden and stone interior. Mo and I get sweet potato lattes that are on point. I pass mine around., Jayce declines with a sour face, as I knew he would when I offered a sip. It tastes eerily like a sweet potato. I gulp it down. Heather texts us to ask if she can take us out to dinner and offers some options. We scroll through the list and pick Buxton Hall BBQ, a locavore restaurant.

After the interview, we have the rest of the day off and head back to Heather's place. Jayce, who has some interesting tastes in film, puts on *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* to show us the versatility of Melissa McCarthy, not that anyone is debating it. I find myself singing along to Lou Reed's *Transformer*. It's the first time I've pulled out that album in over 10 years. It used to be on constant rotation. There has been singing here and there. Jayce was particularly upset on the first day of driving around in Roanoke. He ranted for a long time with a red face about getting lost, then he yelled "Landslide" and turned up the radio. He and Mo sang along for what was the most peaceful few minutes in hours. Will Smith's "Get Jiggy with It" also appears to have made a comeback in the crew's red Dodge Journey, complete with front seat dancing that involves a lot of ass wiggling.

I take a long, hot shower with running, heated water. It's the first hot shower I've had in 5 days. It's transformative. Afterward, I emerge from the bathroom recommending hot water showers to everyone. "You should try the water," I mention. This evening, when we go out, I don't wear a sock hat to cover my dirty hair. This place is a massive improvement from where we were staying in Roanoke.

We head to the BBQ place. The guys and Heather are hungry. Before we order, Mo goes around the table and quickly tells each of us he loves us and then averts their eyes while blushing. Conversation abounds with the drinks, fried chicken sandwiches, pulled pork sandwiches with creamy mac and cheese, and spicy collard greens with bacon. There's no way the greens were made the same day; they're too good for that. I cry when I eat them. I'm not someone who cries much, but it's usually for excellent food when I do. It's eating art.

Kalvin and I are already on food-splitting terms. I suggest one dessert between us. He suggests two desserts split between two people so that we can have a whole dessert with variety.

I tell him he's brilliant. The leftover banana pudding is even better the following day. The pecan pie doesn't make it to the next day.

## **Asheville Day 2**

Refreshed, we do a fantastic job of getting out the door this morning. James is feeling better. There's a lot of family talk. It is clear people are starting to get a little homesick. Jayce says his nephew got written up for misbehaving during lunch at school. He told his mom it is because Jayce is gone.

We arrive at what looks like a run-down building, and Aurora, our next interviewee, is walking toward it. They wave hi. They bounce with energy and a mind that runs a mile a minute. Aurora invites us into their place, a concrete apartment full of plants, books, and art. A wire sculpture of a life-sized person sits in the corner. The place pops with color and character.

Aurora starts telling us about Pur'ar tea, pulling out a giant wheel of it and asking us to smell it and hold it. They tell us to grab a cup of choice hanging in the kitchen and start making small batches, breaking the tea off the wheel and steeping it briefly in a pot. We begin to learn about brewing times, histories, and tea trees. They are animated, like cartoon character level, bouncing from foot to foot at times as they revel in hosting us. It doesn't take long before they offer us apples and peanut butter. We set up in their living room and start to film.

## **Aurora's Interview**

Aurora is 24 years old and identifies as queer or non-binary. They moved to Asheville three years ago, transplanting from Colorado. They work at a tea place in town with an almost

entirely queer and trans staff. They are also an artist, which is made abundantly apparent in the home's decor.

Growing up, Aurora was surrounded by queer women. Understanding their identity was still hard, but they say they're lucky to have a support system, even if that system had a learning curve. Like many others, they didn't know the language to identify themselves. In their later teens, they caught brief moments on television that helped them understand their trans identity.

"I would see these tiny little blips when the TV was on, and there was those real-life, here's a trans-person who is transitioning in some sort of way, and I just found myself in whatever representation there was being very, very interested," they say. "I was like, I must watch everything that I can, but I don't have access to a ton of it."

At age 18, Aurora cut off their long hair and started binding their chest. After the haircut, they started coming out as trans to people. They say the initial enactment of trans involved following a binary. This embodiment caused them to go from one binary extreme to another, both proving to be toxic and failing to reflect who they are.

Aurora watched any trans-related material they could at school, especially on YouTube, turning the computer screen away from other people to learn more. Eventually, they understood nonbinary and gender queerness and how that better reflects who they are. They pursued top surgery and spent five years on testosterone. The surgery took place after they moved to Asheville. Aurora says they are thankful for the time spent on testosterone, having recently stopped it.

"Once I got top surgery, there was a huge release because I think I just felt much more congruent with my body and what I could wear and how I could express myself," they say.

"There wasn't this societal thing coming down on me of what it meant to be feminine or masculine, and I could just be myself. For me, I usually identify as a butchy femme."

Mo has been asking a question I find leading, but I haven't corrected it, mostly because I enjoy watching the reactions. Mo asks what people love about living in the South. As per usual, there is a pause and a grimace.

Aurora recoils at the question, then leans forward again. They aren't sure about loving the South...if that's something they do. While they find the Appalachians magical, the South is a scary place. They were unsure what moving to the South would entail, but they reminded themselves it's a queer pocket of people in Asheville; they should be safe.

"I think... in the United States, you do have this very strict binary of what a man is supposed to be, what a woman is supposed to be," Aurora says. "But in the South, it tends to be exacerbated. This hypermasculinity is just ridiculous. I mean, it's so intense. And then also, this very structured way of how to be feminine and how to be a woman. Anything in between is ostracized hardcore."

They say that the way people interact in the South continues to complicate the situation. People place politeness as a priority in a way that removes it from kindness. People would rather be polite than "real." That realness can be messy, challenging, and cause growth. Instead, people in the South default to being polite instead of having the difficult conversations that spark change. This politeness permeates Southern society so much that it creates other taboos, such as good conversations around mental health care. Acknowledging mental health issues causes another vulnerability to be culturally avoided.



"Spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically. They are all super, super connected, and the more present I have become, the more excited I get," Aurora says. "The more connected I get with life, the more excited I get. The more I keep going, I keep growing."

They also talk about how religion is weaponized in the South. People use it as an excuse to harm and exclude others. The idea appears that because you love someone, you can hurt them, particularly when they aren't following religious guidelines and established social norms.

"That's just abuse. And I see that a lot in the South.... There's a lot that's tied around religion. And that's used a lot as an excuse to define what a person has to suppress, what they have to be, what's okay to be," they say. "And anybody who doesn't follow those rules, then it's okay to hurt them. And, it makes it really scary."

Aurora recalls a day when they felt particularly masculine and confident in it. A man yelled at them and called them a "faggot." Just seeming queer can cause situations like this and cause people to question their safety. The degree to which other people are "hurt" by your identity means they can hurt you.

"The worst crime I could commit is just simply being trans," Aurora says. "Because that's even worse than being gay. I mean, if you're gay, well, at least you're still in this binary of what I deem acceptable for the definition of a man. The definition of a woman. Body-wise, expression-wise, talking, standing, any kind of way."

Aurora says with all of the changes they've gone through, they are at a point in their life where they are starting to feel joy for the first time. They are happy and present in their skin. They weren't sure if that would ever happen for years. Aurora alludes to suicidal thoughts, self-harm in childhood, and shifting who they are in the world. They say they now hold space for themselves and are excited about the future. Aurora:

"I had no idea that this is what life could be like. I had no idea that I would even be alive at this point. I have never planned what it would look like to be 24 or to be 30 or 35 or anything past."

I watch the room as Aurora speaks of shifting from suicidal to joyful. James and Mo are almost expressionless, except Mo is hanging on every word Aurora says and digging deeper than usual for questions about identity. Through hugs and shoulder touches, Calvin and Jayce silently cry and check on one another. I'm noticing my face is starting to flush with a sense of rage as I realize how many people in this room considered committing suicide and how unacceptable a society that fosters those inclinations and actions is.

## Chapter 9: The Fall of Queer Appalachia

### Introduction

On Monday, August 3, 2020, my heart dropped into my stomach and stayed there as I read *The Washington Post* article “The Tale of Queer Appalachia” by Emma Copley Eisenberg. The subtitle didn’t help: “A popular Instagram account raises funds for LGBTQ people in Appalachia. But does the money really go where it’s supposed to?” At this juncture, I have spent ten months working with the group, primarily collaborating on book chapters with them. I’m questioning everything I know.

Queer Appalachia contributor Chelsea texted me the night before and said it would be released the following day. They told me how they and QA founder Mamone planned to address the article. Both expected the article would be about Mamone’s past addiction and mental health problems, not money. Also, that evening, Mamone announced a drive to raise money to buy land and give it back to Indigenous people and other people of color. I had not heard anything about that previously, but my involvement was limited to collaborating on writing projects and occasionally being a sounding board for some ideas.

Eight months earlier, Mamone and Chelsea spoke with me about how *The Washington Post* article seemed to be shaping into a smear piece about Mamone. I watched them worry over it for close to a year, eventually believing the article was abandoned and then watching it reappear. They said the reporter’s tactics tipped into harassment by calling everyone in their network, family members included. I would see an example of this after the story was released. One woman from the Appalachian Feminist Coalition said the reporter contacted her husband when she declined the interview. “Was it weird and greasy she contacted my husband,” she

asked? “Yeah. But I wouldn’t say she harassed us, and she clearly didn’t strong arm me into making a statement.”

My initial worries for QA and this piece were rooted in journalism ethics. I contacted a couple of editors at *The Washington Post* with my concerns. The power dynamics appeared harmful to an already vulnerable population. I am also working on the assumption that the piece would have a conflict of interest since the reporter is friends with Mamone’s ex-partner. Here is a segment of the email with the reporter:

Some of the rumors (perhaps founded ones) surrounding Queer Appalachia are fueled by a former romantic interest’s issues with the founder, Mamone, prior to their sobriety and well before Queer Appalachia launched.... Mamone’s addiction came from pills prescribed to treat pain due to an autoimmune disease resulting from growing up near coal mines slurry. They have apologized excessively for the behavior during this time. They helped create online support groups and started a harm reduction center because of this past. I could riff about what it means to be trans in Appalachia and the likelihood of addiction, community rejection/violence, and self-harm, but I value your time. I just hope that the article avoids doing any harm to Queer Appalachia and the community it supports.

My outreach was based on what I knew about Queer Appalachia, and what I. The collective was considered anyone who contributed. Mamone ran the operations. As Mamone told me, there used to be more people actively involved in the administration of the project. Still, the work was challenging, and they moved on. Additionally, some people distanced themselves when the reporter started to contact several people within the region, they said.

Around the time the reporter was conducting a large portion of the interviews, in fall 2019, someone set fire to the bushes outside of Mamone’s parent’s home. Earlier that day, a former employee posted on the QA Harm Reduction Instagram page that the group was getting blood money because of the \$300,000 Gilead Science grant it obtained with the Virginia Harm Reduction Coalition. Mamone became reluctant to bring more people on board. Submissions

were welcome and collaborations encouraged but hiring someone to help with the work wouldn't happen anytime soon.

## **The Article**

When I wake up, I see the article. It's not what Mamone and Chelsea thought it would be. The article insinuated that the money QA raises goes directly to them, not the projects. Recipients of QA projects like fundraisers and a coat drive for black trans women in the region proved too hard to find. The piece raised questions about Mamone's past project, Riot Grrrl Ink, an organization that wasn't registered as a business or nonprofit in any state. People who previously worked with QA cast doubts on what happens to the money and the tactics Mamone uses for raising it.

The finances behind the project deserve scrutiny. As my partner told them in a consultation meeting before the cancellation, if people are going to come for you, it will be through your money. This conversation was about how QA should go about forming a nonprofit. Chelsea and Mamone said they discussed this possibility daily, a prospect that would open its finances to the public and provide accountability. It would also mean the group couldn't do things it did in the past, like provide funding to Antifa or trans and queer people who need anonymity. I heard about this regularly for close to a year, leading up to *The Washington Post* article.

Many things happen in the days after the article's release. High drama abounds as the Instagram page fills with comments. Many followers ask for financial reports and then for Mamone to de-platforming. Several arguments take place in the comments section, too. At this juncture, COVID-19 quarantining is at a peak. The BLM movement is strong, with protests

sweeping the nation. The 2020 presidential campaigns are in full gear. While we can say Central Appalachia is more than Trump Country, the voter turnout and votes cast show the region's conservative political bend, and there is no denying that. The situation proved to be a pressure cooker for everyone, but more so for marginalized populations.

Queer Appalachia's initial response wasn't from a crisis communication expert; it was shaky at best and had a defensive tone. On the day of the article, I told Chelsea a crisis communication expert would be the best way to go, and those experts almost always call for immediate transparency. The project called the article a hack piece and spoke about their addiction and mental health issues. They didn't know how to handle scrutiny or accusations from a globally renowned news outlet.

Within a day of the QA article, many other regional organizations start to launch merchandise with the playful and spunky vibe of QA. Some organizations promote themselves in the QA Instagram comments section. Groups they work with denounce them. Several followers turn on the group, expressing shock at the lack of accountability. People air grievances that needed to be known, such as being dismissed or blocked, particularly queer and trans-BIPOC, which the article also discusses.

Past volunteers complain of getting underpaid, given that the article mentions Mamone's brand new truck and some fancy AirBNB's the group rented. Many concerns emerge about tracking the money and why recipients of some of the funds and donations aren't stepping forward. The next few days prove to be a rollercoaster.

Previously, I never questioned the money. I saw some people get upset by delayed merchandise deliveries or occasional people who didn't receive an item on their site. The second

zine had preorders, but it hadn't been released. I attributed it to poor organization and understaffing.

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Queer Appalachia accounted for chunks of money from the available bookkeeping, like a fundraiser with Atlanta's *Wussy Magazine* and Southern Fried Queer Pride or the grant and van they helped buy with the Virginia Harm Reduction Coalition. Those funds went directly to other groups, and the project played an integral role in the work.

Mamone lives with their parents and doesn't have a computer. I tried offering an old computer once, but Mamone dodged the offer. Because they are disabled, they get a Social Security check. In tandem with parental support, they help make payments for the new truck that appears in the story, according to Mamone's post on the Queer Appalachia website. They had a reason for everything; it's just that some reasons held up under scrutiny and others didn't.

Queer Appalachia hires a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) within two days of the article. Some followers ask for the name of the CPA. Other small, socially active groups in Appalachia start to post finances, volunteers, and additional information. They got the QA treatment on a smaller scale. Many people from these groups are also the ones who initially called for QA's transparency.

While I was uncomfortable with the reporter's approach to the money and the project's lack of records, the part about Mamone's past raised internal alarms. As noted above, before QA, Mamone ran Riot Grrrl Ink, which claimed to be the largest queer-owned record label in Brooklyn. *The Washington Post* article sought clients Mamone claimed to have on the label or collaborated with. Many of Mamone's claims were refuted. There is a Pitchfork article (Torres, 2015) about the act of solidarity the label displayed by handing its assets over to J. Mase III's organization AwQward, a trans and queer people of color-owned operation.

In the wake of *The Washington Post* article, black/trans/queer poet and educator J Mase III posts a video about how Mamone led him to believe he would get around \$100,000 in resources when he worked with them in New York. This information appears in the article, too. Mamone posts an apology for misleading him and other people they hurt when they had substance abuse and mental health issues. J Mase III posts in the Instagram comments a few times that his love language is reparations and asked for Venmo donations.

Mamone attempts to address the issues around Riot Grrrl Ink. The addiction and psychological issues caused them to exaggerate accomplishments to feel better about themselves; it was a survival strategy. I read over the apology and feel sympathetic. I reach for a copy of *Queer Storytelling in Appalachia: Imagining and Speaking the Unspeakable Other* (Glasby, Gradin, and Ryerson, 2020). Mamone collaborated on a piece with someone. I recall reading everyone's bios. The bio mentions Mamone producing some of the initial Riot Grrrl albums in the Pacific Northwest, saying they were the president of the world's largest queer record label until 2014. "In 2014 in an act of solidarity with the emerging #BLM movement and in an intentional act of reparations and redistribution of wealth, the record label was given to Awkward, the first poc and indigenous talent agency."



Within the next few days and after initial resistance, QA listens to community feedback. First, it aims to bring BIPOC on board and get its finances in order. By Thursday evening of that week, QA de-platforms, and an anonymous BIPOC administrator took the reign of the social media sites.

The Instagram account was “given” to a new and temporary administrator in the region. It is questionable if QA handed over the account or if there was a takeover. I received a text from Chelsea that they would deplatform and hand it over to another person. Perhaps that did happen, and it just did not go as planned. Like so many events around this situation, I don’t know.

The new moderator operates in secrecy, inadvertently feeding into QA’s lack of transparency and sketchy narrative. Under the new leadership, “Decolonize Queer Appalachia” becomes the phrase and the new name of the Instagram site, taking from the QA common saying and swag “Decolonize Your Holler.” The new moderator says a collective would help run QA. The site continues to be active with calls for Mamone’s accountability, saying the account was forcefully taken over. The person behind the account - later self-identifying as past QA employee Shane - is removed from the site within a week and a half.

On August 16, Mamone regains control of the Instagram site and continues to run the primary website. The controversy doesn’t stop, somehow managing to continue to spiral. Leo, a former employee, starts to post about Mamone moving to Durham, letting people know they should keep an eye out for them. A Trillbilly podcast host says, “I honestly am hesitant to get into this because we’re just making this dumb cunt more famous when they just need to be tossed off a bridge.” At one point, some people say the police should be called, and reports need to be made to the IRS.

I ask Mamone for another interview to address their situation now. I feel a stillness on the phone, perhaps even confusion. They decline because of the mounting legal tension and say it's probably not a good idea right now. I experience something similar in a conversation with Chelsea within a month after the article. The two chapters I collaborate with Queer Appalachia are pulled from a publication. I attend the meeting where the decision was made, having spent months writing and doing the revisions on the pieces. Chelsea tells me they and Mamone had the chapters removed from the anthology, seemingly forgetting I worked extensively on them.

After reviewing the QA controversy, I often thought about what *Gender Reveal* Podcast Host Tuck Woodstock said (2020): "I know it sucks when we feel like we can't have one nice thing." They also say if the project used racial and trans identities to raise money and didn't allocate it to the designated people, that is racist and anti-trans. For Woodstock and so many others, Queer Appalachia was a nice thing for a while until we knew more.

Eventually, QA's initial defensive posts and then apologies were deleted. Signs of the controversy were being erased. I was glad I took several screenshots, though a part of me never wanted to look at them again. Updates about finances and shipping could be found on the primary website several months after the article. As of May 2022, QA's Instagram remains stagnant, and its website is gone. The Queer Appalachia domain is for sale.

## Chapter 10: Transilient Part III: Atlanta

The Transilient documentary crew is standing by their car and smoking as I walk up to them outside an Atlanta apartment complex. The team – James, Jayce, and Mo – shifted into t-shirts and tank tops with the sunny, warm weather change. It's still in the prime of fall here; the leaves are colorful and in the middle of dropping from the trees. We've been chasing the seasonal changes south.

Kris comes outside to greet us. He's the profile interview today. He's tall, built, and has a full beard and a grin that takes up half his face. My legs are shaky from the drive, so I stand back while the greets occur. As I step forward to shake his hand, I wobble. He wobbles back. It's not a mocking gesture. He's just so socially in tune and caring that he followed suit.

“Can I take you to lunch? I think you could use a break from driving,” he says.

We stop at a taco joint, and Kris tells us all about the menu. Conversations about the neighborhood, Atlanta, and transportation jump all over. Mo is asking most of the questions. Later, I find out he's been looking up rent prices.

We haven't even gotten to Kris' interview yet, and he is asking if we want to hang out tonight and tomorrow. He's meeting some friends for a presidential debate and would love us to join him. We say yes, booking a back-to-back evening with him and Atlanta's Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony.

Just to be clear, we are not in Appalachia. The range passes through the northern part of Georgia, north of Atlanta. I've seen many queer people relocate from small towns to the city, and

I have several friends who migrated between Atlanta and New York. James says it's on the schedule because of the number of people who move to the region and its proximity to the mountain range.

Another factor: we've spoken predominantly with white trans people throughout the trip. That's the demographic who answered the call for participants, James notes. Jayce says they tried to get more trans people of color as interviewees. He believes the level of safety is lower for them, so they didn't volunteer to be interviewed outside of Atlanta. Kris, however, is a black man originally from Jamaica. I am struck by the similarities I see in his story compared to other participants.

That afternoon, we settle into his apartment and meet his big-eyed and extra small dachshund pup, Henley. Kris sits on the couch, and the interview begins.

## **Kris**

Kris can remember living in Jamaica when he was a kid. He had a good childhood, full of fun memories.

"It reminds me of how some middle-aged Americans talk about the time where you just left your door open, and you just ran rampant, and you didn't worry about getting kidnapped, or who's president," he says. "You just lived life, and that's kind of how it was. All of us were friends, playing freeze tag, making up games, and random stuff like that."

He can also recall having crushes on girls. There was something about calling himself a lesbian that didn't fit, even as he entered college and started dating women. In his early 20s, a good friend began to transition medically.

“...[H]e was the first person that actually gave being trans life, gave it some kind of reality,” Kris says. “Made me realize that I didn’t have to just live in this kind of ambiguous world. I could actually be and look like and live the life that I felt like I wanted to live.”

Getting to where he could recognize his transness came in steps - lesbian to queer to trans. It was a journey that involved living with a supportive group of friends in Grant Park in Atlanta. He felt he had a place where he could safely explore his identity. Additionally, Kris worked at a queer-friendly workplace, a Trader Joe’s in the city. He received support from coworkers and the health benefits to start transitioning.

Community proved to be vital in creating space for Kris to transition comfortably. Atlanta’s queer community, he says, is growing and becoming increasingly louder. There is always something to do in the queer community. He cites a queer potluck that’s happening tonight as an example. Within that queer community, more events are taking place for the trans community, too.

This support also helped compensate - or at least soften the blow - of the people he would lose during his transition. Having grown up in the church, Kris found that people from that part of his life started to distance themselves from him or, in some cases, question him, asking if he was departing from God’s plan.

“So it was eye-opening because I feel like I learned who some of my true friends were and the people who were willing to kind of roll with this with me and learned, even if they didn’t know what being trans meant or what this would mean for me and their relationship,” he says. “But I think probably the most traumatic thing was feeling alone, feeling like my family’s not really here, many of my friends are out of the picture.”

When he started transitioning, he would have coffee dates with friends and family to tell them about his identity and path. Because of the questioning and negation he received from the church he grew up in, he struggled to reconcile how he was treated with his Christian faith. Currently, he's taking an agnostic stance. He observed a "cutting and pasting of faith," which expected him to have a "cut and paste identity." It's a rigidity of being that is asked so often of people.

While Kris believes his relationship with his parents is getting better, coming out as trans proved to be a challenging experience. Kris is an only child, which he considers exacerbated the situation. In Jamacia, he says, LGBTQ is seen as deviance and taboo. While he is in steady contact with his mother, Kris and his father went nine months without talking. He tries to stay visible within the family, noticing he is left out of gatherings because of his parents. Aunts, uncles, and cousins have looped him in because they noted his absence and want to support him.

\* \* \*

We plan to meet later before heading to our gray cement and French-themed Airbnb. Everyone is exhausted. James does a thing when he's tired where he gets his gray, fuzzy blanket, then pulls it overhead and around his back. He is now fully wrapped and bent over in an upright fetal position.

"Hey buddy, are you doing ok," I ask.

He lifts his head, shines his usual smile, and replies slowly, "Yeah, I'm doing ok."

A minute later, James is face-planted and sleeping on the hard, polished cement floor. Jayce walks out of the bedroom, thinking no one is around. Instead, it's me staring at James. Jayce takes a pic and puts it on Instagram.

When James awakes, he is amazed he fell asleep and points to a puddle of drool on the floor and says, “I did that!” Soon after, we pile in the SUV and head downtown for the next event.

On the way, we delve deeper into a conversation than before. I can feel the end of the trip coming; it’s only three days away. We have so much more to discuss.

“This is the first time I’ve really explored my feminine side since I started transitioning,” Jayce says. “You all made me comfortable to do that. I’ve been thinking about it a lot on this trip.”

I’ve noticed the change. More than anything, Jayce has become more openly loving and appreciative of others. I have no doubt he had those feelings; he just wasn’t expressing them or owning that he still enjoys entertainment that might be considered feminine.

Mo is making a lot of noticeable changes, too. Mo says he has been rethinking his gender since he met Aurora.

“I don’t want to be a man,” he says. “I want to present in a way that reflects my gender better. I want to actively create myself.”

He recalls a college trip where he couldn’t quite articulate that. On the trip, he asked if transgender replicates binaries. The professor called him transphobic for asking that. In turn, Mo asked the professor who chided him if he adopted a black daughter because of his white guilt. He feels like this situation and exposure to other transgender people allows him to better understand his identity as non-binary.

“So... you’re non-binary and not trans?” Jayce asks.

Both Mo and I clamor to say he is still trans, and nonbinary is another expression, but there is no judgment in the cacophony of clarifications.

Jayce says he and James demanded people call them he/him because they had to fight to be recognized as transgender, to be affirmed by others. He tells us his stories of getting bullied, kicked in the ribs, slammed to the floor, and being called a carpet muncher. The stories were heartbreaking and horrifying, but not surprising that Jayce had to endure this.

Jayce was out as a lesbian in high school. He didn't see staying in the closet as an option, and I'm not sure Jayce could be in the closet; it's not his personality. This outwardness carried over into his life as a trans man. He wears shirts that identify him. James started transitioning in high school. "I was called a lady with a beard," he says with a shrug.

Earlier, Kris offered to take the crew to a gay bar after the debate. Now that it's just the crew, Jayce says he isn't comfortable doing that. "I know it may sound paranoid. I haven't stepped in a gay bar since Pulse," Jayce says, alluding to the 2016 shooting at an Orlando gay bar that left 49 dead. He says it's too many people in one place who may get attacked.

The topic seems to shift further into the therapeutic elements of this trip and its work.

"This is amazing; it's remarkable. I haven't experienced anything like it," I seem to be saying. "I mean, who gets to do this? Who gets to be around a massive, varied number of trans folks for a couple of weeks. To travel with you all. I've never had this experience before. I needed this."

The level of joy in the car is palatable. Jayce and James seem to be sharing a look like they are so glad I'm benefitting from this. I also recognize I haven't been expressing these thoughts regularly, just thinking them. I'm long past due for letting them know how much this experience means to me.



James said he had all kinds of realizations on the last Transilient tour. This one is no different. He needs a change, or he will be stuck in the same cycle. Without change, he notes, he's not going to grow. This cycle is apparent through his multi-day breakups. He is constructing texts with Jayce to his partner about how he is an activist, and his work will take him on the road.

We arrive at Atlanta's City Hall for Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR). The schedule is packed with speakers. There is a full taco buffet, and the icing remains of a trans flag cake when you enter. There are trans-flag-colored bracelets and a printed color program with the names of murdered transgender Americans, complete with the speakers, their respective organizations, and the event sponsors. The front of the program has an MLK quotation: "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."

There is money here tonight. I see a lot of white men dressed in high-end business casual clothes and tailored suits. Later, the crew says they felt underdressed. I do see people of color, primarily black. It's a break from the predominately white spaces we've been occupying. I also note that many people of color in the room stand around its perimeters, behind the rows of chairs, instead of taking seats.

On the inside of City Hall, the walls and floors are decked with this marble with white walls and gold-tinted rails and banisters. The space is large, five stories tall, and complete with skylights. Monica Helms of TDOR, Atlanta Inc, says the first TDOR in Atlanta was held 19 years ago in 2000 with 16 people in attendance. Tonight is the first time the city has recognized the day. Reporters and news crews are present. There are plenty of notable speakers, but a few stood out more than others.

Co-director of Freedom Overground Pinky Shear stands in front of the crowd with a trans-flag-colored handprint covering her face. The handprint symbolizes violence against

Indigenous people and the intersection of transgender with its pink, white, and light blue colors. She speaks with a tone of urgency, commanding the room almost immediately. To her knowledge, she says at least three trans women were killed in prison. The state of Georgia, however, does not report transgender deaths. Often these murder victims are listed by their deadname and are improperly acknowledged.

Pinky reads the testimony of a woman who heard the murder, the screams of another trans woman from her prison cell. She heard a woman who was either killed by the guards or the guards opened the door for other inmates to kill her. Pinky tears up and suppresses a sob with her hand. The murdered woman was reported as having killed herself. She says this is often what families are told about trans women of color who die in prison. She is from the Blackfoot tribe, which honors two spirits, a phrase used by some indigenous tribes to describe a person who exhibits qualities from both genders. She obtained approval from her elders to get the trans-flag colors painted across her face in the shape of a hand.

Director of the Syed Group Feroza Syed speaks about the violence she experienced in the past, even with her economic and social privilege. She says she has been choked out, slammed against walls, and thrown down the stairs - and black trans women have it worse.

“Amplify our voices while we are alive, Feroza says. “This is nothing short of genocide. Trans women of color have the solutions to violence and should be trusted to lead.”

Feroza’s a veteran and asks for the vets to stand. About a dozen people rise. The blonde woman in a fitted little blue dress stands in the row in front of me. She has a United States Marine Corps Recon tattoo on her upper arm.

In remembrance, the names of murdered trans women in the United States are read aloud by the organizers. After each name is said, a person hits a cymbal. The program feels like it's coming to a close, and it is.

Gentle Spirit Christian Church's Rev. Paul M. Turner takes the stage soon after and directly addresses the trans population in the room.

"Your community is taking a hell of a beating, and I'm here to tell you, as a man of faith, this is wrong," he says. "You all need to come to the table, sit down, and dare them to make you leave. These people gave their lives so you could live yours."

He moves like a stereotype of an evangelical preacher with a sing-song voice that bellows. The Georgian accent adds to the effect. He is a white, cisgender, and older gay man.

We take a moment of silence which is needed. I'm uncomfortable with the reverend's prayer that follows, though I pay little attention to the words. I'm struck by his earlier message, blaming the victim instead of the abuser or the culture supporting and encouraging violence.

Just as people start to stand to leave, one of the speakers steps up to the microphone and tells people to "be safe out there tonight, take a Lyft if you feel unsafe."

I'm in mid-motion when I freeze along with the couple of hundred other people in the room. It's an odd three or so seconds of collectively questioning our safety. We are in a public place. We are in the heart of the town. Violence against trans people is on the mind of everyone. I wonder if we all should run outside at once or trickle out of the building, then people begin to move again. I later find out one of the crew had a panic attack that evening; the fear of safety was tangible.

A middle-aged black man takes the microphone while half the room moves out and the other half gathers around. It's hard to hear his voice through the background chatter and movement of chairs and bodies. He says we need the voices of more trans black women, and people in this room need to hire them to talk.

Driving back to the rental place, we discuss how uncomfortable we are with the reverend's message and the ceremony's conclusion. We agree the Transgender Day of Remembrance at Roanoke was more community-based and intimate. Mostly, there is minimal conversation, a sharp change from the ride to City Hall.

## **Atlanta Day 2**

Around 10:30 am, I feel a hand gently shaking my knee, which appears to be in the air. And I hear whispers, "Beck, Beck, Beck, it's time to wake up." It's James, and he's squatting while he does this. He explains later that he tries to be very gentle when interrupting someone's sleep; it can be jarring.

I need a shower. I need to write up yesterday. There was no time last night to do it. I need to sleep, too. The blow-up air mattress I'm using is robbing me of body heat. I see Mo staring into space while sitting on the edge of the fold-out couch. I ask him how he slept.

"I hurt slept. Nothing was going to wake me up."

"What's 'hurt slept,'" I ask, feeling drawn to the phrase.

"When you sleep so hard, it hurts."

Mo describes his accumulating body pain. I have it, too. My back is in knots. I ask if I have time to shower. James tells me they are leaving in a few minutes. I decide not to go with them and to watch the interview later.

While the crew is gone, I strike out to find coffee. I stop at a gas station to gamble on its offerings and win. I see an elderly black man walking by on the way out, and I make eye contact, smile, and nod.

“How’s the season going,” he asks. “You a linebacker? I used to play ball myself.”

I say I’m neither, but I appreciate the remarks. Linebacker is a new one, I think. Later, I’ll look up what that means. I see the man hesitate, then decide to approach me. He says he was short one dollar to get on the bus to go home. He asks if I could help him out. I know I brought a \$20 with me for tolls, but I figure I had broken the bill at least once. I say, of course, and look into my wallet. Not broken, but I pull the bill out and hand it over. He tells me he can go get change. I say, don’t worry about it.

He stares at my face.

“Can I ask how old you are? You can’t be over 25.”

I tell him, “I’m 39.”

“Did you say 21?”

“No, sir, I’m 39.”

He steps back and stares. “How did you do that?” He seems genuinely alarmed. I chalk it up to genetics and say it has hurt me in the workplace. In some ways, hormones shifted how I am aging, too, not that I say this. He sticks out his hand, tells me his last name, and asks what mine is. He thanks me and repeats my last name a few times as he walks away. I know this ritual, but it’s been a long time since I encountered it. I haven’t lived in the South in 13 years. The man is trying to remember me through my family ties or place those relationships. It’s not about me as an individual but the “kind of person” I come from.

When I speak to the crew later, it sounds like they got some great material. Mo tells me they visited MLK Park and saw his casket. He and James are still red-eyed from crying.

“It’s cray to think that was 50 years ago,” Mo says. My dad was alive then.” Mo speaks about the interview earlier and how the counselor pointed out that healthcare access has always been inadequate for particular identities. We are catching the same themes from mental health experts: more access is needed; the poorer the region, the harder it is to obtain it; and the attitudes toward trans people in the medical profession can be dangerous. Overall, more transgender education is needed in medical care, and it’s rare to receive it.

For a few hours, we hang out, do laundry in the rental, eat Chinese take-out, download footage, talk to family, play on phones, discuss the next day, and watch *Bad Moms Christmas*, a Jayce pick.

While I’m lounging on the couch, James runs at me sideways from another room, pulling his pants down partially with a stunned expression on his face.

“Look at this, look at this,” he says, eyes wide, mouth ajar.

I assume this has something to do with his boxer’s print design. It does not. He lost a lot of weight, and his pants don’t fit him. There is a wide gap between his body and his jeans where he is tugging his pants. The weight loss started happening when the trip did.

To top it all off, James can’t locate his chest binder. He left it hanging to dry in Asheville. He has some tape, but he finds it itchy and rarely uses it. I have a couple of extra binders on me and pass one off to him. James is half my width (not a linebacker), and the binder hangs off his frame, failing to do its job. Mo says he wants to try tape, a touch of excitement in his voice. Jayce thinks it won’t work for Mo. Like himself, he’s too top-heavy. Jayce tapes up James for the temporary fix.

Outside on the patio that evening, I chat with Jayce at length. He's been trying to process the trip. That evening he said healthcare is better developed for people assigned male at birth, trans or not, a loaded topic that needs more unpacking. I've heard him suggest we would all want bottom surgery if it were better developed. I still maintain that I'm not interested in pursuing it regardless of the advances. The conversation shifts to societal standings. We discuss what it means to take a step down in society versus a step up and what is allowed and supported.

Soon after he started taking testosterone, Jayce tells me, he stopped at a gas station in Warsaw, KY. Three guys approached him in the parking lot and "beat the shit" out of him. Nonbinary isn't something they could do, he adds. It's not necessarily an option. There is a lack of in-between space because it isn't safe. He says he sees how Mo would be struggling with it.

Jayce says he has been told he's "Messing with God" and needs to "Just be a dyke" by a family member. "You don't occupy a space in between," Jayce says. "You don't talk about these things. You don't question God. It's very black and white. You don't rock the boat."

When he goes back to Kentucky, Jayce says he will have to return to being compliant, quieter. He says he can't have conversations like these. That time will be over.

"Is there something from this experience that you'll take with you," I ask?

He pauses before answering, "I think I'll own my experiences more - claim my work and contributions."

"You know what I hate," he adds. "Having to be so nice to make other people comfortable."

The bending over backward to accommodate others, to show they are safe, and not scare them. It makes trans people always have to demonstrate "goodness," an expectation that isn't put

on non-queer people. It's a please-accept-me approach to interaction that causes trans/queer people to be shaped by other people's fear. Jayce says while he avoids doing that with people he just met, he starts to do this as they become closer. He makes eye contact throughout the discussion and even leans in while talking. I can tell he's trying to give me plenty of information for my project.

### **Atlanta Day 3**

The day is packed with interviews. We start by picking up around the AirBNB and getting the place tidy. One interview takes place in the morning at our spot. Afterward, we head to the Rush Center. Last night, we saw Kimble Sorrells speak at the Transgender Day of Remembrance. He opened the ceremony. Kimble is a non-binary, trans-masculine pastor who also heads Atlanta Pride.

The Rush Center is strikingly queer-friendly from bathroom signage, brochures, and other organizations stationed there. As I walk in, I say, "Oh, Sojourns are here?!" It's a progressive Christian magazine. I've marked myself as a specific type of person, but more like a person I used to be.

Being in Kimble's presence is soothing. Subtly dressed in trans-flag colors, he is immediately relatable and authentic, asking how he can make us comfortable. He attended Emory College's theology school and specialized in trans theology. Like myself, he worked hard to stay in religion. Unlike me, he stayed in it. He's tired from his one-month-old staying awake the night before, telling us about his experiences as a new parent while we prep for the interview.



## **Reverend Kimble**

Kimble grew up in Birmingham, AL, and the Southern Baptist denomination. His higher education involved attending a conservative Christian college and then Emory University for theology. When he first came out as a lesbian, he went through the complicated process of reconciling his identity with his faith. He grappled with a high level of internalized homophobia.

“Academics helped me with that to be able to understand my faith tradition and in a way that was more historically informed,” Kimble says. “That really understood that we can’t just pluck things out of the Bible and flop them down into the time - 2007 or whenever it was or a minute ago, and just apply it.”

Like others on tour, Kimble felt coming out as gay wasn’t the right fit. He still didn’t feel right in his body, which caused him to turn more of an eye toward gender. When visiting someone in North Hampton, MA, he encountered a person who worked at a women’s college. The person spoke about the trans-masculine students who attend the school and their experiences. Kimble felt connected to these stories. While initially resistant to understanding his trans identity, he began to explore it more. The reasons not to were socially influenced.

“Both internalized transphobia, fear of being judged. I think even within the LGBT community like trans people were kind of outsiders,” Kimble says. “In the larger society, especially at that time, gay people were starting to become more accepted, but trans people were still sort of seen as these weird people. I think I let that influence me a little bit.”

He also saw so much toxic masculinity that it made him reluctant to explore his own. He says he thinks he studied his gender identity backward compared to other trans-masculine people. He knew he wanted top surgery. He wasn’t so sure about a name change or hormones. After his top surgery, he felt amazing. The rest of the process clicked in place.

Kimble feels lucky he had an affirming community and medical support in Atlanta for medically transitioning. Finding a doctor or a therapist can be challenging when you step outside Atlanta. He isn't free of discrimination because of his location, though. He laughs when asked if he has ever been harassed because it's more times than he can count or remember. As a clergy person, he gets hate mail at his church, and so do the cisgender straight clergy for being at an affirming church.

At this juncture, he stays visible but knows he has passing privileges. He can go to the gym locker room without being harassed. That was not the case when he presented as more androgynous before medically transitioning. His experiences ranged from the daily looks of "are you supposed to be here" to the more aggressive tactics of getting in his face.

His faith and spirituality have shaped his trans identity. He says he can write a whole book about that; fortunately, there are books about transgender theology. As he has become more in tune with himself, he no longer wonders if he is allowed in the church. Trans is a reflection of the divine. Scripture shows God as gender fluid.

"There are very masculine images of God, and there are more feminine images of God in the scriptures. A lot of times, that's been brushed under the rug. You know, reading Genesis One, which says that God made men and women in God's image, a lot of people try to use against trans people to say, 'See, there are men, and there are women.' But what that doesn't recognize is that both ends of the spectrum are embodied in the divine. So God is both encompassing of masculinity and femininity and everything in between."

When his peers at Emory seminary asked him what a genderqueer approach to theology was, he had questions in return. He would ask if God is a man, to which they would reply no, like the good progressive students they are. He would reverse the question to ask if God was a

woman, which they were reluctant to embrace. Kimble would tell them that's why he uses inclusive language for God. He cites people in the bible who do not conform to gender roles. He drew from these figures to help understand his faith and that being trans is a spiritual gift.

“My hope for trans and non-binary experiences in the church - I think we're starting to get there with being affirming,” Kimble says. “My hope is that we move toward being celebrated, that we move towards being seen as a gift rather than something to be accepted, and that we move to being just yet another person at the table. Rather than seeing as, ‘Oh look, we're welcoming you to the table.’ I think that would be my hope is that we're moving beyond acceptance to celebration.”

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After the interview, James and I discuss how to make a series on transgender theology in the Bible Belt. It begins when I see him grabbing all the organization cards in the lobby. We discuss funding ideas and names for a new group and project.

James checked out a studio space on the outskirts of Atlanta. We head there. It's dark so early. It's not even dinner time, and the sun has set. We pull into the long lots of portable structures. We hear a gunshot as we unpack the car and carry the equipment inside.

For about 20 minutes, we set up an interview. By the time we're ready, the person who works at the front desk has a couple of visitors come inside to sit, eat, and talk. I ask if they could lower the volume at which they are talking; it's so loud, feeling almost personal.

He tells me if we are doing audio, it won't work out unless we rent the whole place. He shoots a condescending grin that reeks of power issues; I've seen this before. The photographer next to us isn't making noise. It's just the front desk attendee and his friends who are.

We pack up and leave. As a group, we decide to keep shooting. We'll just use the apartment we are at; it worked well earlier in the day. James combines these interviews with a group we did on the last night in Knoxville. PFLAG National, a sponsor of the project, requested a making of the documentary short. I think it's the most substantial piece in the docu-series regarding editing and storytelling.

We have only a few more days before we finish the tour.

## Chapter 11: Transilient Part IV: Knoxville and the End

I start driving to Knoxville around noon. On the way there, I pass by a city where I was a reporter. I expect waves of nostalgia, and I suppose I have a form of that. It's rainy and foggy. I check myself to make sure I'm not grimacing. After college, I worked a couple of newspaper jobs near Knoxville. I spent my time here feeling like an outsider and having those feelings well punctuated by others. Being queer appearing and assigned female proved to be a joke in the early 2000s here. I was often a punchline for both gay men and straight people. My mental health suffered immensely.

The crew texts me to let me know they are with the following interview participant: Jamie. They want to order for me.

I tell them to surprise me; I'll be there shortly.

Market Square is packed with restaurants and stores, even more so with the farmers market in the middle today. I park in the garage next to it. I was here a month ago to grab a meal with an old friend. I have problems seeing Knoxville as a likable city, though it is. I had too many issues and too little support while I lived here. I'm not surprised that an old friend who lives here isn't returning the text that I'm in town. I'm greeted by a chicken pesto sandwich and the crew at a restaurant in the square.

I sit next to Jamie and introduce myself. Wanting to know about everyone's relationship with place, I soon ask if she is originally from Knoxville.

"No, I grew up in Elizabethton," she says. "I lived in Knoxville and now Nashville."

"I'm from Elizabethton, too," I reply with a pleasant surprise.

The flow of the conversation is a little choppy as we start to share commonalities. Jamie tells me her grandparents had over 20 children. I mention I'm related to a lot of people there. We are likely distant cousins, I tell her. We talk high school. She graduated 12 years before I did, and we have high school teachers in common. We know that the Presbyterian preacher in town recently revealed he's an atheist. We know the Cyclones - the high school football team - are on a winning streak.

The rain won't stop, moving from sprinkles to downpour and again. It's limiting the b roll options in Knoxville's plaza. We head to a store Jamie likes to film her as she walks around it before going to the rental house for the primary interview.

## **Jamie**

Around four or five years old, Jamie knew she wanted to be a woman when she grew up. There was never a question of this. During elementary school, she started to see how much people wanted her to behave in a masculine manner, to enact the gender assigned at birth instead of her own. By high school, she was well aware of her differences. While people didn't have the language to recognize Jamie as transgender, they noticed she was different.

"I could not go from class to class without slurs being hurled," she says. "It was very common, and I had teachers that would verbally harass me in front of the class, so that was a very painful experience."

The lack of education about LGBTQ people made it difficult to understand her life going forward. She knew she didn't quite identify with the gay students. As a result, she decided to become celibate and pursue the ministry to focus on helping others and less on herself. She

began attending a conservative Christian college and started to experience different issues in that environment.

“But after attending Johnson Bible College, I did develop problems with an eating disorder,” she says. “I was constantly being reminded of what an abomination people like me were. It was just no longer a good fit, and I just felt like I could no longer feel comfortable at that school or living my life as a male or assigned as a male.”

Jamie benefitted from having a family who provided unconditional love. Still, it was hard for them to understand what transgender is. For a while, they questioned if Jamie’s mental healthcare provider instilled these ideas about gender in her. Additionally, accessing affirming healthcare proved to be complicated. It took three years before Jamie found a doctor who would prescribe hormones. Finding a mental healthcare provider to approve hormones took a long time, too.

In the 1990s, Jamie started beauty school and hormones with the goal of presenting as female by graduation. Several of her classmates went to the program director and said if their husbands or fathers knew they were sharing a restroom with Jamie, they would have to drop out. These interactions created an even more profound awareness of issues she would face. Early in her transition, she struggled financially, picking between food and hormones. She found herself binding her chest at a job because human resources told her being transgender was unacceptable, and she was on the cusp of homelessness.

As for her view on religion’s impact on her life, it caused a lot of harm. There are only so many times you can be called an abomination, she says, before you start to think of yourself that way.

“When I did decide that I needed to transition for myself, I did pray at the time, and I knew that the feelings that I was a female, I was confident they would not leave,” she says. “Finally, in my prayer, I asked God to just give me the strength to do what I felt like I needed to do because I felt like without that higher power or strength, I would not be able to achieve that. So that became my new prayer.”

Now, Jamie is an outspoken activist. She works with two PFLAG branches (Maryville and Nashville, TN), serves on the board of Connectus Health (a nonprofit medical clinic system in Tennessee), and helps organize Nashville Pride. Jamie appeared in the country singer Jennifer Needles’s music video “I Can Do Hard Things” (2019). To her knowledge, she is the first openly transgender woman in a country music video.

Being trans did not go hand-in-hand with becoming an activist. That happened later and as a result of a tragedy.

On a Sunday in July 2008, Jamie attended a children’s musical performance, Annie Jr., at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville. A man was approaching the building with a guitar case in hand, so Jamie held the door open for him. Within a few minutes, the man opened the guitar case, pulled out a rifle, and opened fire on the sanctuary. That day, two of Jamie’s friends died, one of whom was very close. Later, she would find out the gunman attacked because the church is affirming.

“I knew that I could no longer be silent, and I knew that we had to speak up with the community, and that really began my cause of activism.”

Because Jamie survived, she threw herself entirely into activist work, considering herself one of the lucky ones because she didn’t take a bullet. She delayed mental health help. It wasn’t until the Pulse shooting in Orlando that she realized she had developed PTSD. The mass



shooting news can be triggering. She is careful in how she balances her life and reactions to violence. Even with all of this, Jamie says her life is joyful. The continued onslaught of anti-trans legislation is taking a toll, though.

“There have been many times in my transition where I felt defeated. More frequently or more recently, legislation that keeps appearing just wants to strip me of any rights that I have as an individual,” she says. “When I see the lack of compassion that humanity has for one another, particularly towards my community, that’s very painful.”

After the interview, Jayce asks her for advice. Mo asks for a hug. Jamie is someone they admire. She’s an older activist, and that future means a lot. She paved the way.

We chat, and she asks if I’m around Elizabethton for the holidays.

Not this time, but I’d love to do something in the future, I say.

After a round of hugs, she returns to her white convertible and pulls out of the driveway.

As soon as she leaves, we watch the Jennifer Needles music video and cheer when it hits her footage in which she says, “As a transgender woman, I’m proud to be who I am, to own who I am, and to show the world who I am.”

With the rain, we need to take a break. We needed it anyway. James is working on converting footage. Mo is blogging. Jayce is working on the schedule. James starts to worry about his chest at some point in the afternoon. He’s had some pain. Jayce helped him tape his chest with binding tape on the first night in Atlanta. I’ve watched James inadvertently rub his nipples while walking around the house, seemingly uncomfortable. They hurt now. He’s decided to take the tape off.

James and Jayce give me a rundown on what it's like to tape your chest after asking me if I'd ever done it.

I quickly answer no and decide to retreat to another part of the house.

Jayce says he tried the tape once. When he removed the tape, it took off a layer of skin. "You have to soak your chest in oil, and it still hurts when you take it off," he says.

I go to my room to talk to my partner. We'll see each other on Wednesday at her parents' place. While we are talking, I hear screams from another room. I start to put together why. James' binding tape is coming off. At one point, I catch Jayce saying, "Yeah, there's some hair on that one."

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There have been a lot of shorter interviews on tour. All of them feel like a warm hug. This morning, we head to Jade's house. She just bought a house and is in the process of unpacking it. I comment on what a lovely and spacious place she has. She says she bought it with the expectation of living with her mother, who died two weeks previously. As she says this, I notice the number of flowers in the house and on the table.

Before we start, Krispy Kreme donuts and a box of coffee are delivered. Jade tells us to help ourselves. She says she did film work in the past, editing "nerdy" stuff. She seems very sympathetic to the crew. She spent her whole life in Knoxville and hopes to leave it one day. She is one of many people who have told us their plan for leaving Central Appalachia. We didn't hear people speak about strategizing to leave Atlanta. Asheville had fewer departure plans, too. Almost everyone else is working on it or has left, like Jamie.

On the way there, I ask Mo what he thinks of Knoxville. There is no opinion yet, but he says it feels like a place where people keep to themselves. We have lunch at Myrtle's Chicken and Beer in Market Square, complete with pimento mac and cheese, collards, and dry-rub hot chicken with a cheddar biscuit on the side. We walk through an alley, gathering some of that b roll we couldn't get the previous day. We head to the World's Fair Park, Fort Dickerson, and plenty of other b roll locations. Driving around, the crew notes the high number of churches, shifting uncomfortably at the Eternal Life Harvest Church. I start to hear some comments from them about how the town seems sad, more depressing than some of the other locations. I keep my experiences to myself.

## **Knoxville Day 2**

We are on time to leave at 7 this morning. Jayce pops on "Tennessee Homesick Blues" by Dolly before jumping into a banjo version of Rocky Top. I'm reminded of the radio station in my hometown that played a handful of Rocky Top covers before its official launch.

The GPS sends us through a windy back road in Pigeon Forge. It's been a few years since I've been in Sevier County, home of Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg, and the Smoky Mountains. During my first job out of college, I worked in Pigeon Forge, taking a mountain route from Maryville through Townshend. The paper wasn't particularly well done, but the four-page center spread dedicated to Dolly Parton felt like a triumph. While the town is more developed, it seems to have stayed the same in many respects.

We stop at a Shoney's, where the waitress shows us pictures of her son-in-law tagging bears for the forest department. She pulls up one picture of a sleeping bear after another. We are living for this.

We head into the park early. So few people are there. It's deeply relaxing. The music isn't - Cardi B, Notorious Big, Niki Minaj. We stop at the visitor center. We drive in, immediately seeing a gray fox that is not afraid of cars. We stop at some pillowing water to capture some footage.

James films from the vehicle a lot. We park to walk through an open field and get a beautiful view of the mountain's ridges on a clear, almost too sunny day. It shifts from relaxed to stressed as the traffic starts to build around the field. It's been four hours since we entered the park. It takes an hour to go three miles by the end. Hanger emerges. We are fucking hungry.

The first two spots we check out have hour-long waits before we find a place to overeat poor-quality fried food. As we sit down, we catch a glimpse of the conversation behind us, "He's still preaching?!" I start having waves of nausea from the windy drive and fried food.

We agree that stretching our legs and walking around is called for. We check out a store next door. There is a sculpture of an alligator wrapped around the entrance, and above it a sign says "live alligators." We walk in. There is one alligator, and it looks upset. It's staring at us in the corner of a tank that's too small for it. I turn and look at the clothing. While the guys float to the other, less disturbing side of the room, I stare at the T-shirts.

I have strong memories of Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg, growing up an hour and a half away from there and working in that county as a reporter after college. Its politics and those of many of its visitors can be seen in clothing. When I was in middle school, the movie Malcolm X came out. On a trip to Gatlinburg, I saw a t-shirt that said, "You wear your X, I'll wear mine," with a confederate flag. The shirt was next to another one with "100% Cotton. Your Momma Picked It." I recall getting upset about it. The people I travel with shrugged and told me it wasn't a big deal, and I needed to calm down.

Now, I see Trumpian rhetoric all over the wall in front of me. It feels like a natural progression of the language I saw at a younger age. A flag that reads “Support Blue Lives” is on the wall. I’m steps away from a “Keeping America Safe. Border Wall” t-shirt that shows a person piling bricks and near another shirt with a Chinese hut-like structure says, “HO Lee Chit.” The always-available rebel-flag-themed shirts are on display.

The sexism is as rampant as the racism. One shirt says “Choking Hazard” with the outline of a woman giving head to a guy. There are displays of Trump 2020 hats under these. The “Women for Trump” shirt further support this. The shirts for women in this story are primarily in his and her sets that show ownership by men.

I look over at Mo. I would like to get him out of here. Then, I think, none of us should be here. Jayce buys a new knife, having left his last one in Roanoke. He’s gotten into a habit of sleeping with it next to him. We leave soon after the purchase. A large Paula Deen restaurant is in view as we pull out of the parking lot.

I came here a lot in the 90s for Tennessee Christian Teen Conventions, trips to Dollywood, biking in Cades Cove, and family weekends at cabin rentals. It’s always been an entertainment destination. The 90s brought a ton of bungee jumping places and giant swings to accompany the go-karts, putt, dinner theaters, pancake houses, and outlet stores. Now, it has a Ferris wheel, even more go-karts, dinner theaters, pancake houses, and outlet stores. But the bungee places and swings are pretty much gone.

The crew goes on a go-kart ride. That’s too intense for me right now. I’m tempted to take pictures as I watch them, but that might be too parental. Instead, I watch them and their stressed faces. Afterward, James goes to buy some moonshine with Mo while Jayce and I head to the gas

station and figure out how to maneuver Monday mid-afternoon traffic on the Dolly Parton Parkway.

Jayce is intelligent and wants to explain that to me. He says Transilient's executive director wrote about him and James during the grant process. These writings played up James and Jayce as uneducated and hillbillies, noting that they don't have bachelor's degrees. He says their hometown is more like a distant suburb of Cincinnati on the Kentucky side. Jayce tells me about his high ACT score and his partial ride in mechanical engineering. I find out he and James got their media training in high school. It sounds like a much fancier high school than the one I attended.

During the discussion, I learn the crew is being paid \$500 each. It seems like exploitation, almost too steeped in history. The underfunding impacts the final project, too. The series was to be released on Transgender Day of Visibility on March 31, 2020. Between the quick turnaround, the low pay, and the pandemic's onset, James and Jayce would struggle with post-production and employment.

We leave and drive through Seymour to Knoxville, ordering delivery when we get there. We are about to set up for a group interview with the plan to pack up after. Tomorrow morning, we leave. We take a seat after we set up, and I read my notes from the first day. The crew is howling laughing. We are a wreck, but this trip has come together beautifully. I worry I might offend them with my notes. They say it feels genuine.

For the final interview, it is me asking the crew questions. It is sweet and reflective about unexpected, pleasant surprises, group dynamics, emotional care, and what they learned from each other/interviewees.

## The Crew

Mo, James, and Jayce sit together on the couch, joking and laughing as the interview starts. I'm interviewing them this time. The group's congeniality and cohesion are clear at this point, even if it doesn't work in the long run. We've had a unique experience, a type my partner calls an "island experience." By this, she means a time set apart from average days where there is an acceleration of community - a school camp, a retreat, or the like. The experience stays with you long after. It's the penultimate of memory-making.

Connections and community proved to be markers of the trip. I saw it every interview and behind the scenes. The crew notes it, too, as they start to unpack why that happened. It's because of their identities being close to those of the interviewees and the attitudes coming into the interviews.

Mo saw the trip as a tremendous learning opportunity that allowed him to understand others and himself better. Looking back, it's apparent he took every interview personally and continued to process it long after it was over. He says it was nice to have people in his community during a time when he is learning how to do this work, too.

Jayce doubts that the interviews would be as intimate and honest if cisgender people from a major city did them. Being from Appalachia and trans gave the group access that other people couldn't achieve. The rest of the group shares this idea. The role the crew played in helping form community is also noted.

"I think it lets them [the interviewees] realize that they're not alone," Jayce says. "There are a couple of people we interviewed that really didn't know any other trans people in their area. So for us to come in there and kind of be like, 'You're not alone, we are here with you, and we're going to do you right with your story.' I think it made a huge difference."

I ask the crew about personal realizations. I've had them in droves. I want to hear about their insights. This time seemed to explode with self-understanding, as demonstrated in some of our past conversations.

Mo jumps in first, saying he learned a lot about self-advocacy. He found he needed to speak up about the project. There was no room for him to take a backseat on contribution, and he says what he had to contribute.

“A lot of tears were shed during the interviews, but it was necessary,” Mo says. “It was so necessary to just grieve and also be happy with everyone that we were interviewing, and to have a good time with everybody, like playing darts with Alex on the first interview, which was freaking awesome. It's really hard work, but it's necessary for all of us to just get the word out, and also keep sharing stories.”

A sense of growth emerges as a theme. Mo says he also learned patience with himself as he acquired better interviewing skills. Jayce found himself speaking more constructively to himself and others. James comments on how everyone got better at their jobs and working together.

“It's been really cool just to see both of them grow,” James says of Jayce and Mo. “Also just to see my own creative sense grow as well from just having more experience in the field and getting to talk to more trans and non-binary people because that alone is just an amazing experience and always broadens my horizons, and I always learn new things from every person that I interview. So that has also helped me grow as an individual on this tour.”

When addressing what the crew learned from others, Mo's response isn't surprising. They keep circling back to Aurora. He says the trip taught him how multifaceted people can be. It showed him new ways to think about and create himself.



James says he wasn't expecting to learn as much or even more than on the first tour he did with Transilient. On the last tour, he saw connections between people like puzzle pieces in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest. He realized how many trans people are experiencing the same issues in different places. This tour magnified those trends because of the commonality of Appalachia. Because the crew is fans of Queer Appalachia, the evening spent with Mamone and Chelsea meant a lot.

Jayce brings up the idea of authenticity and safety at the same time.

"I think what I learned most from all the interviews collectively is no matter what we identify as, we just want to be our authentic self, and we just want to be able to live that way safely," he says. "I think a lot of people take for granted living up North or out West where they can be nonconforming, or they cannot pass completely, and not being fear that they're going to have the crap beat out of them, or be murdered, or have their house burglarized, or you know ransacked or whatever. And I think that down South, people don't realize that that's such a big issue."

A few moments later, Jayce adds, "I think we're the strongest people ever."

When he says that, he means all transgender people. He is still in awe of the ways people opened up to us on camera and so willingly shared their stories.

The crew felt supported by each other and the people they interviewed. This care provided a different atmosphere for all of us for over two weeks. Some of those relationships lasted longer. Over two years later, Mo is still in touch with Kris. Recently, they've been talking about rentals in Atlanta, so Mo can do his practicum for his master's in social work there. They are specializing in transgender healthcare.

Jayce seems to be settling into a long-term relationship, living near his family, and enjoying attending his nephew's football games. He and James recently made a new short film.

James continues to explore film ideas while working in construction.

He and I wrote a variety of grants to help gain more money for post-production for the docu-series. It needs a revamp that involves more pay and some reshooting. The final product felt raw and needs more work. It didn't help that the COVID-19 pandemic began around the time the shooting ended and the deadline for the documentary approached.

Mostly, I've stayed in touch with James and Mo. Occasionally, I've interacted with Jayce on a social media platform. I expect I'll know them for the remainder of my life.

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After we wrap up the interview, the crew asks me how I want to be credited. This question surprises me. At this juncture, I have a history of people apologizing to me for not crediting me. I just started to receive recognition for my contributions recently - some public thank yous from amazing faculty members, a short film at a couple of trans-film festivals, a scholarship for research, and other acknowledgments. And now, I'm being asked as a tag-along academic who was lending a hand. I say I want to be their assistant. It feels fitting. James enthusiastically calls me a production assistant. As I continue to provide feedback over the next few months - some taken, some not - the title consultant is added to the series.

That evening before heading to sleep, James and I hang out on the front porch. There's so much unpacking of the last two weeks. For the first time, I start to hear more details about Transilient's previous tour, particularly the Midwest portion. James tells me about holding a knife between himself and a person who was in his face, physically threatening him. He speaks of an assault that happened to another crew member. He recalls the stalking that occurred at one

photo shoot where someone used a dating app to track down another person. It's so obvious how he has been carrying that experience with him on this trip. I sense relief now that the tour has come to an end, and we are all well.

## **Chapter 12: Discussion and Conclusion**

For this discussion, I will synthesize and interpret findings from each results chapter (Chapters 5 to 11) and address the limitations of the project.

### **Oakley: Chapter 5**

The time with Oakley and in those spaces (queer or supportive) showed how younger generations are increasingly trans-identifying or allies in Appalachia. The division appears in older generations. Still, the people from older generations make a massive impact when they hold spaces like Pikeville Pride, The Internal Storytellers, or Appalshop. The need for this space was recognized by Gray, and the importance of a queer space is noted by many (Morgensen, 2011; Sandilands, 2002, et. al). It is making a difference. Only one of the three spaces I interacted with people was explicitly queer. The space for queer and trans people needs to be made outside of the typical venues, particularly in rural locations where they experience more vulnerability.

Some of these younger people are making their own space. Oakley recognizes his work as a part of the journey toward self-acceptance and larger conversations. He collaborates with people who are constantly misunderstood because of their transness. He also lets them shape the work to prevent further mangled communication and create agency. It is not surprising that he started a safe space/punk venue in Whitesburg. The space is an extension of the media work he does.

Oakley's work was well received by this regionally based audience, and people interested in these issues around the United States. It compelled him to make more work like this because it

provided honest insight into transphobia and the complications people in smaller towns can face. When schools, churches, and the government prove to be complicit and propel hate, these spaces and representation offer a direly needed oasis.

#### Transilient Documentary Tour: Chapters 6, 8, 10, & 11

Transilient's crew contained a lot of personality, which might not necessarily be compatible. The changing sense of time and sense of surprise at the start masked several issues we might have had. While trans identity served as a means of connection, it was even more important that we shared mutual goals that focused more on others and a larger picture of transgender well-being in the region.

Much like *Queer Appalachia*, the whiteness of white activists becomes known. The lack of people of color who volunteered for the film series speaks to the lack of safety and marginalization.

For Mo, working on the series was the first big step in the direction of social work and policy. In the rocky COVID years that soon followed, they became more involved with activist groups in larger cities. James continues to think through future projects. He and Jayce made a short film a couple of years later. Jayce seems to be headed towards becoming more of the family guy he is, having recently moved in with his girlfriend.

Exposure to various trans people helped the crew articulate identity better. Mo realized they are more at peace with a nonbinary identity, which was something they hadn't considered before. Jayce stopped rejecting elements of himself that might be labeled feminine by some, like touching or hugging a friend. The trip and community led them toward greater self-actualization. James also mentioned having this experience on his last tour and this one as well.

## **Queer Appalachia: Chapters 7 and 9**

Queer people from Appalachia and other small towns and rural areas were starving to see themselves. Queer Appalachia met the needs of so many. It queered the region and brought contributors from around the globe. More importantly, it struck a deep chord with so many people and inspired them to pursue academic and activist work. It created a particular queer and transgender archive that propels this work throughout Appalachia. It's the type of archive Halberstam (2005) speaks of needing.

Queer Appalachia's playfulness pulled people toward it and caused it to grow from a zine to an Instagram account to a mutual aid network. Mamone's background and then living situation is a sad story. The premature death of Bryn is too. As Chelsea pointed out, they believed Mamone's drive to make and maintain Queer Appalachia was a way to continue living and connect to other people. Mamone's sense of humor and purported politics were amazing and engaging. It's also a life that led to stretched truths and shady administration.

The connection element excited people and pumped life into a community that needed a name. Mamone spoke of having fewer people involved because of distrust built by threats and attempted arson. They also were very nervous about the possible newspaper story at that time. When Queer Appalachia stopped, a hub for information was lost. It allowed people to connect through featured events and projects. That void needs to be replaced or emulated, preferably by more than one group or as an extensive collaboration. It's a giant task, though. There is a roadmap for this type of success now and for it to be done with financial transparency and more people behind the scenes.

## **Limitations**

Limitations consist of my positionality, time in person in the field, and trans makers I with whom I collaborated.

While I regularly visit family, I have not been a resident of Central Appalachia since 2004. Because of this, I don't have the type of insight to these activist groups and the conversations surrounding them that people who are live there have. I never heard much about the issues with Queer Appalachia until its cancellation. This limitation can just as easily be seen as a benefit when discussing insider/outsider perspectives. My involvement with Queer Appalachia created a blind spot. I struggled to understand what happened well after *The Washington Post* article was published.

I used triage to explore trans media making in the region. Ultimately, I only looked at two production groups and an individual. This provides insight that could be made even more salient by working with more groups. Working with Queer Appalachia possibly produced some inaccurate information. I worked with what I decided to believe from its founder Mamone. I am reliant on the worldview of other people. Naturally, those views vary and might not be reliable. Queer Appalachia, however, provided more reason than usual to question the information.

I spent two months in the field and the following ten months collaborating via text, phone calls, email, and zoom. While I found this to be sufficient, especially because of COVID's onset during that year, more time in the field might have generated more findings.

### **Future research**

More work could be done with activist groups in Appalachia and in other parts of the country. Transgender rurality needs to be explored to gather a larger picture of transgender life in the United States. Through piecing together various regions, more can be learned about the

population, thus allowing for more ways to discover support systems and provide solutions to the issues they face. Putting several groups in conversation could prevent redundant work and showcase the projects these groups and individuals are undertaking. It can continue to tell the stories that aim to reduce harm and improve lives.



## Chapter 13: Conclusion

Through working with media activist groups like the Instagram project Queer Appalachia and Transilient's docu-series as well as documentarian Oakley Fugate, I saw the drive to create a better Appalachia for its transgender population. By using ethnographic methods, I posed three specific research questions:

R1: What compels trans-media producers to do their work?

R2: Who are their audiences, and what is the reception of this work?

R3: What insight do transgender media productions and receptions provide about transgender lives in Central Appalachia and possibly beyond?

### **Why the work?**

These trans media producers give voice to trans stories throughout the region because of the acute discrimination they face. They tell stories to reduce harm. These trans-media creators are making the representation they want to see with stories that likely wouldn't get told otherwise. The work also gathers trans people together, which proved to be a drive for Transilient, Oakley, and Queer Appalachia. They are engaging in digital place-making and creating connections through this work. Queer Appalachia strove to get its larger community information about LGBTQ events and issues. It also wanted to build an archive. Even with its demise and questionable administration, it started a legacy.

Those makers who are trans gain further insight into who they are while they connect to each other. There is a community that forms, one that creates a culture of care. Like Gorman-

Murray (2007), this involves an interior journey in addition to the outward journey queer and trans migration often contain (Weston, 1995; Halberstam, 2005). Movement is at the core of trans lives, and trans migration theory helps map those paths for healthcare, displacement, or otherwise. There is a movement toward the self and other people while creating in these trans media productions. The purpose of this work is greater than the people making it, which allows for more cohesion internally and connection to its audiences. Through the productions, the makers find what I will call “actualization through activism.”

Actualization through activism is a trans migration. It involves trans people moving toward each other to make connections and understand themselves deeper because of that socialization. Actualization through activism relies on a duality of the movements – external and internal, both of which are well explored in trans and queer migration theory. Activism and creating serve as a unifying point that also includes building. The making provides a point of convergence and allows for ease with the internal and external connection.

The generosity I experienced during my fieldwork connects to this social fluidity. These trans media makers needed help with their work and to spread the word about it. That need can be attributed to the region’s geographical, social, and economic issues. It is also a result of a marginalized community that needs a united front. The fast rise of Instagram fame Queer Appalachia experienced because of a desire to have a resource and centralize this type of community work. The Transilient crew and the people they interviewed felt like a “portable home,” the type he types Sandilands (2002) and Morgensen (2011) discuss. These experiences stay with you after the work is done, much like Mo and Jayce saying they will claim their work and space more post the docu-series. I saw this type of power build while collaborating on *Y’all Mean All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia*. I watched as Queer Appalachia lost this momentum, and fewer people aligned themselves with the group.

## **The Audience**

The audiences of these transgender media makers are first and foremost trans and queer people. If other people see it and it shifts their perspective, that's welcome, too. They are motivated to create meaningful connections between people and create space for them to be recognized. I saw that drive in how Oakley speaks of approaching collaborative films, how the Transilient crew was welcomed into other's homes, and how eagerly Mamone was to include me in *Queer Appalachia*. When it goes well, these collaborations and spaces establish a respectful environment, one they hope transgender people can obtain. Actualization through activism is at play here. This is not a call for trans people to "take a place at the table;" it's a call to take a place in your own life and invest in the well-being of other trans people.

It would be even more helpful for nonprofits and other businesses to make their events and workplaces safe spaces for trans gathers, much like Appalshop and The International Storytelling Center. Places that are genuinely committed to inclusion are obligated to do this. It is even more critical in Central Appalachia because of the transphobia, the inability to mask transitioning, and the dominant type of masculinity (Ableson, 2019). The representatives who continue to produce hate legislation and the violence toward trans people add another layer of importance.

The media representation can only go so far as the rise in transgender people on the screen and in the news correlates with an increase in violence against trans people and targeted hate legislation. That is the representational trap Stanley, Burton, and Gossett (2017) address. The mainstream media portrayals spark a conversation, and people start seeing elements of their gender represented. The localized productions and access to the makers help other people

understand that they can engage in storytelling and community building. The audience and the makers become of the same ilk. No representation can fully express an individual's identity unless made by or with the person. Even then, it's just a snapshot of who someone was at a specific time and on their way to who they will be.

## **Insights and Beyond**

The sheer number of trans people who told me they want to move says something. Almost everyone had a plan to relocate. They were starting not to view Appalachia as a life-long option. Life, they believe, will be better elsewhere. So much of this decision depended on finances and support systems elsewhere. It may not work for many people. There are paths for those who cannot afford it.

Like Weston's (1995) or Halberstam's (2005), or Aizura's (2018) journey, there is physical movement; it's crucial to connecting in a remote area, much like Oakley making the rounds in Central Appalachia. I have been in touch with almost everyone involved in the fieldwork ended. I would not hesitate to reach out to most of them again. While the Transilient docu-series needs a revamp, the result did not matter as much as its path. If the docu-series was fantastic and the work miserable, it would diminish its activist goals and demean the people it was for.

The journey toward each other is key to actualization through activism. Too many factors aim to prevent this. There are plenty of reasons people find it scary. At the start of the documentary tour, the crew was wary of telling cis people we encountered about what we were doing. James mentioned the previous tour's issues – the stalking and assaults. We experienced people who were not ok with us to an unnerving degree. Jayce said his fear surrounding Pulse

and possible shootings. That uneasiness appeared in Atlanta's Trans Day of Remembrance when everyone started to leave the event. Even the existence of this day signals serious danger as it should. Violence appeared in so many stories.

The message lawmakers are sending to trans people in the region is disgusting and subhuman. It negates the best parts of the region – community and care. It is not trans people who need to be questioned, but if these mythic values of Appalachia exist in parts of the area. I saw those alive and well in Asheville and Roanoke. I saw it in all of the trans people who welcomed me into their homes and so many of the people with whom I worked. It gets murky outside of that.

Gathering is even more important within the scope of trans rurality. It is vital that trans people connect with each other, be that online or in person. Like Cavalcante (2017) notes, people can use online communities to help with their transition. There needs to be more and for the work to exceed one's own self-interest. The reasons are endless for doing this, but here are the top three ones I noticed:

**Health:** The US system for transgender mental and physical healthcare is pitiful. While we should not avoid healthcare, we need a network to navigate it and find or train people who are respectful. We all deserve safe and respectful healthcare. The exchange of this information between each other and healthcare providers is essential to well-being.

**Social Well-being:** It's not just about mental and physical healthcare experts and peer information exchange; it's about fighting isolation. Other trans people are needed in one's life to help further understand and actualize it. It's creating a home that can be a web of people from various areas, an annual retreat, or an occasional meet-up.

**Thriving:** From the tour, we all talked about our growth in such a short period of time. Jayce and Mo said they planned to advocate more for themselves going forward. James spoke about getting more of his life in line. I left the trip with a more robust inner life and a commitment to creating. There was an affirmation of self. I could see it in Alex while enjoying himself on the first day. I caught it repeatedly in the generosity of all the trans people I encountered while doing this project. Being in each other's company and doing activist work made us stronger.

## **In Conclusion**

Ultimately, trans people need each other, particularly in Central Appalachia, where they are great in numbers and often face unsupportive communities. Actualization through activism provides ways to connect with each other, one's self, and lift each other up. It allows for better healthcare, social well-being, and the ability to thrive. This activism can be action, such as making a zoom book club, a phone film, a jam session, or anything involving connecting with other trans people. It doesn't need to be as extreme as flipping tables, but it could be.

Gray (2009) says that queer people were accepted as long as they fit in, and didn't rock the boat. At this juncture and for trans people, this time demands more. It doesn't mean you need to come out for cis people, though. For cis people, however, silence on trans human rights is harmful, even deadly. Complying with a church, the state, or a workplace that negates trans lives actively marginalizes people. Cis people in Appalachia who have ethics need to show those and recognize that staying quiet is a perpetuation of violence.

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