

Rurally Queer, Queerly Rural: An Autoethnographic Literary Analysis of *Hillbilly Queer*

JOSH THOMPSON

VIRGINIA TECH

CLINT WHITTEN

VIRGINIA TECH

Recently, the number of books featuring both queer and rural youth experiences has increased (Kedley et al., 2022), including Jamison's (2021) Hillbilly Queer: A Memoir. The present study examined how this book functions as a memoir about young adult experiences and analyzed the possibilities it offers rural queer students as well as rural and/or queer educators. Through a queer autoethnographic literary analysis, the authors draw upon their experiences as once closeted rural queer youth and former openly queer secondary English language arts educators teaching in rural and rural-serving public schools. This study found important benefits for rural queer adolescents and significant implications for the English language arts classroom.

We are two current queer educational researchers and former secondary English language arts (ELA) teachers with similar rural queer backgrounds. Josh grew up as a closeted gay boy in Southwestern Virginia, raised in a white double wide trailer at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in a place no one has ever heard of. Clint grew up on a small farm tucked alongside the Meherrin River in central Southern Virginia and spent 23 years more comfortable with the idea of not existing than getting to finally choose *love*. Keeping those parts of our identities hidden, we often felt lonely. We knew no other people like us, and despite our desire for connection, our searches for representation were mostly fruitless. While queer characters did appear in movies and TV shows in the 1990s and early 2000s—such as Christian in *Clueless* (1995), Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), Will Truman and Jack McFarland in *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), Kurt Hummel in *Glee* (2009-2015), and Bob Hunter and Lee McDermott in *Desperate Housewives* (2007-2012)—the representation was sparse, relied heavily on stereotypes, and, in our cases, was steeped in whiteness. Similarly, we found little representation in literature, and even when

we did find books about LGBTQIA2S+ people and issues, we never read them for fear of being outed. For instance, Josh remembers standing in the stacks of his local library as a twelve-year-old, anxiously staring at a copy of Sanchez's (2001) *Rainbow Boys*. He did not read it until he went to college.

This lack of representation and the subsequent messages that our gay identities did not matter extended into school as well. We never read any texts by and/or about LGBTQIA2S+ people, and we never learned any LGBTQIA2S+ history. For Josh, the only time topics about LGBTQIA2S+ issues came up in conversation was to voice support for the amendment to the *Constitution of Virginia* banning same-sex marriage, which did eventually pass. Clint often heard phrases like "That's so gay" and "That boy has too much suga' in his tank" in the hallways. Our childhoods and adolescences showed us how various facets of society, especially schools, can be sites of cisheteronormativity and homophobia (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Mayo, 2021; Meiners & Quinn, 2010; Pascoe, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2018; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2020; Wimberly & Battle, 2015).

Our experiences as openly queer educators, however, illuminated other possibilities for schools, namely how they can also support and affirm LGBTQIA2S+ students (Miller et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2022; Schey, 2019; Schey, 2022; Thompson, 2022). Specifically, we both taught in rural and rural-serving public schools. Josh spent seven years as a high school English educator, teaching ELA classes in all grades and levels of classes. Clint taught middle school English for four years, serving students in ELA courses as well as in creative writing and theatre classes. We both developed as antibias, antiracist teachers, incorporating social justice and queer-affirming pedagogies into our practices. For instance, Josh included excerpts from Guo and Vulchi's (2019) *Tell Me Who You Are: Sharing Our Stories of Race, Culture, & Identity* in a memoir writing unit for 9th grade students and utilized a restorative reading framework to help students locate counternarratives to disrupt oppressive systems like cisheteronormativity (Thompson, 2022). Clint used poems written by queer poets, such as Roache's "21" (Button Poetry, 2014), while teaching elements of poetry and taught concepts like microaggressions and bias while simultaneously teaching figurative language, plot diagrams, and conflict with Hurston's (1928) "How it Feels to be Colored Me" and Tan's (1987) "Fish Cheeks."

In contrast to the lack of representation in our childhoods and adolescences, as ELA teachers, we had more books featuring queer characters and issues to bring into the classroom and

recommend to students. Books like Callender's (2020) *Felix Ever After*, Oshiro's (2018) *Anger is a Gift*, Thomas' (2020) *Cemetery Boys*, Moore's (2019) *The Stars Beneath Our Feet*, and Woodson's (2014) *brown girl dreaming* found their way into students' hands, serving as mirrors for LGBTQIA2S+ students and windows and sliding glass doors for cisgender and/or heterosexual students (Bishop, 1990). These were the kinds of books we needed growing up, yet they still did not completely represent us. We still did not find texts that spoke to both queer *and* rural experiences. These were the kinds of books we searched for as children and adolescents; these were the texts we sought out for rural queer students as well. Thankfully, there has been a recent increase in the publication of young adult novels featuring rural and queer representation, such as Bayron's (2021) *The Poison Heart*, Heath's (2021) *The Reckless Kind*, Lundin's (2021) *Like Other Girls*, and Murphy's (2021) *Pumpkin* (Kedley et al., 2022).

One book in particular, Jamison's (2021) *Hillbilly Queer: A Memoir*, captured our attention for its depiction of rural queer representation, and we wondered about its possibilities for rural queer students as well as rural and/or queer educators. Set in the Midwest, the memoir focuses on Jamison's road trip with his father to his 50th high school reunion from their hometown of Cowan, Indiana, to Steeleville, Missouri, and their attempt at mending their relationship given the political harshness of the 2016 presidential election. Recounting pivotal moments in Jamison's and his father's lives, *Hillbilly Queer* tells the story of one rural gay man's journey to reconcile his rurality and his queerness. Granted, *Hillbilly Queer* is not marketed as a young adult memoir: it is a memoir about an adult experience written by an adult. However, Jamison weaved memories of his adolescence into the fabric of this adult experience and critically considers them as influential parts of his story. Therefore, we contend that this memoir has significance for young adult readers and does focus in part on young adult experiences. In fact, in an author talk interview with Parton for her series *Reading Rural YAL with Dr. Chea Parton*, Jamison stated that he "wrote it [*Hillbilly Queer*] like a YA novel is written" (2021). Moreover, Parton elaborated upon the memoir's connection to what she called "the mission of YA":

To be somewhat pedagogical in a way that . . . helps kids figure out . . . who they are, who they want to be, how to be in the world, how *they* want to be in the world, that they can be who they are in the world. (Reading Rural YAL, 2021; original emphasis)

Indeed, though some may question this memoir's classification as a young adult text, it offers lessons and themes important to young adult—especially rural queer young adult—experiences as we demonstrated through this study. Aligning with Parton's discussion of the mission of YA, we consider

the role of memoir in the classroom as important to offering students a window or sliding glass door into another person's world and, at times, a mirror, reflecting their own stories and affirming their sense of self (Bishop, 1990). As a genre grounded in personal story, memoir positions lived experiences as valid, a point we particularly center in our autoethnographic literary analysis method.

Starting from the position that every school has LGBTQIA2S+ students, we drew upon our experiences as both closeted rural queer adolescents and openly queer ELA educators teaching in rural and rural-serving public schools and asked the following two questions:

1. How does *Hillbilly Queer* function as a memoir about young adult experiences?
2. What possibilities does this text offer rural queer students and rural and/or queer educators?

RURAL AND QUEER CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis examines the rural and queer possibilities afforded by *Hillbilly Queer* and as such draws upon the following theories and frameworks from queer studies and rural education: the identification and disruption of cisheteronormativity, Muñoz's (2009) conceptions of queerness, Biddle et al.'s (2019) theorizing of awayness, and Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen's (2021) Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP).

Though queer theorists and queer studies scholars hesitate to concretely define what queer theory and queer studies are (because doing so runs antithetical to the project of queer theory), a queer studies approach critiques and disrupts cisheteronormativity, the interlocking power structure that assumes cisgender and heterosexual as the norms for gender identity and sexual orientation, respectively (e.g., Arvin et al., 2013; Berlant & Warner, 1995; Collective, 1983; Eng et al., 2005; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990). Such an approach allows for analyses of systemic oppression and engenders nuanced understandings of queerness.

Theorizing a world beyond cisheteronormativity, Muñoz (2009) framed queerness as a perceptive affect and a horizon of possibility: "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (p. 1). Queerness, then, allows us to repudiate cisheteronormative oppression and to seek out opportunities for other ways of being and understanding. Indeed, Muñoz's claim that "[t]he future is queerness's domain" (2009, p. 1) aids in the dreaming and manifestation of a world beyond its present form.

While completing a citation analysis of Coladarci's work on rural education, Biddle et al. (2019) offered a new way to define contributions to rural educational scholarship under the

metaphor of “awayness.” Biddle et al. suggested that “researchers articulate the ways in which their topics are critical to rural communities (rather than inherently rural)” and proposed “that these studies must speak back to how power manifests across space” (2019, p. 11). Critically connected to Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which power is also bound to knowledge dissemination, Biddle et al.’s concept of awayness seeks to address how power is banked and spread across space. Power operates in this conceptual framework in connection to the ways in which cisheterosexuality is the dominant narrative in some rural spaces. Moreover, Biddle et al. offered questions to critically examine rural research:

How will this research matter to rural schools and people? Will it support their struggles? Does it expand, strengthen, or complicate our understanding of how power manifests across space through, with, or for education? And, conversely: Does this research essentialize rural people and communities? (2019, p. 11)

While their framework primarily addressed rural schools, it can also be used to address queer communities in rural spaces. For example, we ask, “How will this research matter to rural schools and LGBTQIA2S+ students and teachers?” and “Does our research expand, strengthen, or complicate understandings of how cisheteronormative power manifests across space through, with, or for education?”

Finally, Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) asserted the benefits of CREP. Starting from the premise that rurality is a social construct, CREP understands the particular aspects of rural students’ lives and adjusts teaching practices in the ELA classroom accordingly. This pedagogical framework “centers rurality as an analytic focus for critical literacy practices,” thus providing opportunities for analyzing and critiquing linguistic, textual, and societal representations of rurality and supporting students in creating texts that offer a more socially just, inclusive, and accurate understanding of rural people, places, and lives (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 7).

ANALYSIS PLAN

We came to this text because of the intersection of queerness and rurality, and Clint had prior experience of the value of having memoirs in his classroom library after listening to students discuss Krosoczka’s (2018) *Hey, Kiddo: How I Lost My Mother, Found My Father, and Dealt with Family Addiction*. We chose autoethnography because it “challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). This methodology embraces the ways in which personal experiences shape the research process: “[A]utoethnography is one of the approaches that

acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 2). As such, autoethnography asks how marginalized people use deliberate forms of communication to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences; honors the important function of emotions in understanding and theorizing relationships between power, self, and culture; invokes the embodied, sensuous, and political nature of knowledge and experience; requires a writer's self-interrogation of their role in a situation, context, and/or world; and acknowledges the need of narrative as well as its power to illustrate, disrupt, change, and evoke (Jones, 2008, pp. 210-211). Moreover, we use this approach to disrupt the ways in which queer voices have been exploited for cisheterosexual consumption. As two rural, white, cisgender, gay men, we feel connected to the experiences of another white, cisgender, gay man growing up in a similar rural context and are attuned to the need for critical examination.

Blending autoethnographic approaches with literary analysis, we asked the following questions to guide our study of the text:

- What does *Hillbilly Queer* teach us about a rural queer YA experience?
- What possibilities can *Hillbilly Queer* offer to educators who may wish to use it in their classrooms, and how might teaching *Hillbilly Queer* be influenced by current anti-queer sociopolitical climates (e.g., policies, legislation, acts of violence and terrorism)?
- What themes are apparent in *Hillbilly Queer* that connect to a rural and queer livelihood?

With these guiding questions in mind, we read and annotated the memoir separately, attending to our reading experience, especially the elements that resonated with us as openly queer ELA educators who grew up closeted rural gay children and adolescents. Then, we came together to discuss our notes, locating areas of overlap and dissonance, and used inductive coding to develop themes.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

Our analysis rendered three primary themes: "connected but strangers," places of security and places of passing, and rurality and queerness are not one-dimensional. In the subsections that follow, we blend literary analysis with autoethnography to demonstrate our engagement with the text. The connections we make shed light on some of the possibilities *Hillbilly Queer* offers rural queer young adults and rural and/or queer ELA educators.

“CONNECTED BUT STRANGERS”

Jamison (2021) couched his memoir in the notion of being “connected but *strangers*” (p. 11, original emphasis), introducing it in the first paragraph of the novel and equating it to “the rising divide in our nation” (p. ix) exemplified in the 2016 United States presidential election between frontrunners Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Jamison further specified this divide along the lines of political, geographic, class, and sexual identity: “Two people on either end of the political spectrum: a conservative, a liberal; a hillbilly, a queer; but also, a dad and a son” (p. ix). While more differences are revealed throughout the memoir, the two listed here feature prominently, but the primary driving conflict stemmed from Jamison’s queerness and the ways in which he was and was not accepted by his rural community, the ways in which he did and did not fit in. For instance, while searching for his old church, Jamison’s father stopped their car at the bottom of a driveway on the side of an empty road in the middle of the Missouri countryside. Jamison worried that they might be caught trespassing, noting that he would be perceived as the real outsider:

The truth was, Dad could pass and did look like he belonged there. I did not. It wasn’t only my camel-brown leather flip-flops, matching day bag, and four-inch inseam chino shorts that gave me away. It was my inflections. The sass in my walk. I was a queer, and I had a feeling that if I let my voice shine too loudly outside of our car, I would no longer be in a safe space. (pp. 18-19)

Even though Jamison grew up rural himself, his visible markers of queerness set him apart from both his father and any suspecting local who might drive by. This notion of visible signifiers of identity is an at times painful reality for rural queer people, especially closeted youth like who we once were. For example, growing up on the farm, Clint sometimes felt comfortable wearing a Dixie Outfitter shirt because he felt it signaled a hyper-rural masculine identity even though he did not believe in the message of the brand. Clint even asked his friend if she would fake date him in the seventh grade to avoid peer pressure from his classmates asking if he had a girlfriend. Physical and social mannerisms like these are outward signifiers of belonging and grant rural queer people safety and security in spaces and moments where we are vulnerable (Gray, 2009; Whitten, 2023).

At this point in our analysis, an important distinction must be made. While they share some characteristics, forms, and functions, “rural” and “hillbilly” are not the same. Both terms signify geographical space. “Rural” can be both a physical location (e.g., a rural place, rural-urban binary) and an adjective to describe characteristics and values associated with rural places and rural people. In contrast, as Harkins (2005) explained, “hillbilly” most often refers to the Ozark Mountains and

the southern regions of the Appalachian Mountains, but because portrayals of hillbillies rely on ambiguous or undisclosed physical locations, the term and image do not remain exclusive to these regions (p. 5): “Indeed, most cultural consumers, to the extent they considered the matter at all, conceived of ‘hillbillyland’ as, at best, an amorphous area of the upper South and, more often, as anywhere on the rough edges of the landscape and economy” (p. 5). Similarly, both “rural” and “hillbilly” evoke country (i.e., not urban or suburban), but “rural” can signify idyllic views of the countryside, agrarian land, vast and open fields, and mountainous regions—something that stereotypical portrayals of the hillbilly preclude.

As Brandon (2013) posited, “rural” and “hillbilly” are both terms of othering. Metrocentricism positions rural people, places, and ways of being and knowing as other and, oftentimes, problematic. For instance, Biddle and Azano (2016) indexed how a century of rural education research often characterized rural schools and communities—and, by extension, *people*—as problematic, literally referring to the “rural school problem,” “a term that came to frame the nationwide interest of the time in education reform specifically for rural places and people” (p. 299). Yet, as Brandon observed, “hillbilly” carries its own specific, oftentimes negative connotations loaded with racial, gendered, and class-based meanings. The term “hillbilly” evokes images of unintelligent, poor, backwards, deviant, “white trash” people. For example, in his examinations of the “hillbilly horror” genre, Bell (2000) argued that “hillbilly” is a particular subset of “rural” worthy of consideration. As he showed, the hillbilly is characterized as a frequently violent sexual deviant: “The cinematic genre . . . is especially crowded with characters whose sexualities embody this particular construction of rural sexuality—of animalistic passions and polymorphous perversions” (p. 551). In this manner, “hillbilly” extends the already otheredness of “rural” through sexual deviance and perversion. Other examinations of media portrayals of the hillbilly index more negative connotations. Through an analysis of Vance’s (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, Byrd (2019) explored how the term “hillbilly” pathologizes impoverished white communities and also “absolve[s] whiteness from complicity in racism and removes group members not conforming to a purported toolkit of cultural values and strategies of actions as ‘not white enough’” (p. 535). Byrd’s argument demonstrated how “hillbilly” also functions to uphold both white supremacy and oppressive class structures. And as another illustration, Roddy (2008) examined photographic and video depictions of the hillbilly and noted that these portrayals represent idyllic middle and upper class understandings of rurality: a people in touch with nature but whose

physicality, class, and sexuality are othered in the process. Despite these negative connotations, people who consider themselves hillbillies, like Jamison's (2021) father, embrace the term as a point of pride. Throughout his memoir, Jamison explored the implications of "hillbilly" as both a term laden with negative stereotypes and one signifying regional dignity.

To return to Jamison's (2021) initial characterization of his father and himself as opposite ends of a spectrum, notably, this description also inextricably links Jamison and his father *despite* these identified differences through his use of the phrase "but also, a dad and a son" (p. ix). Moreover, the two have much in common. Both excelled in high school activities, Jamison's father in track, Jamison in theatre. They both eagerly searched for brotherly relationships throughout their lives, many of which failed. And they both shared a particular familial strength, which Jamison attributed to his paternal great-great grandfather and grandmother, Wild Devil Jim and Eliza Morning Star: "the misfit blood had always run through my veins. Through *our* veins. Motivations have been different, but Dad and I were people who had always wanted to be free and had fought, in our own ways, every chance we got" (2021, p. 89, original emphasis). Significantly, while a term like "misfit" used to describe Jamison's white great-great grandfather's relationship with his Indigenous great-great grandmother can signal anti-Indigenous racism, Jamison used it to describe the nonnormative nature of his great-great grandparents' relationship and then connects it to both his and his father's identities, which are also nonnormative (i.e., Jamison's father as hillbilly and Jamison as queer). For Jamison, the phrase signified a particular strength. Jamison's decision to emphasize their shared biological ancestry demonstrated the significance of the connection between him and his father, albeit a tenuous one, a trait we also considered. For example, Clint reflected on a sense of ancestry value when thinking back to how his family and community members often said, "Oh, that must be a Brankley trait" or "Y'all know them Whittens are never up to good." Regardless of whose last name was used, those moments always cultivated a sense of familyhood—even if members did not see eye to eye.

This motif of being connected yet simultaneously disconnected pervaded the memoir and served as the impetus for Jamison's (2021) decision to go on the road trip with his father. He wondered if they would be able to reconnect across their differences or if any attempts at reconciliation would lead to a greater divide. Seeing the political divide in America typified in his relationship with his father, Jamison framed this road trip as an experiment, one that could be premonitory for the entire country: if their relationship could be mended, then so could the United

States' divisiveness. However quixotic it may seem, Jamison's story resembled the stories of many, though not all, rural queer people.

As mentioned earlier, the disconnect Jamison (2021) wrote about centered largely in part on his queerness and how it seemed to be a mismatch with his rural identity, family, and community. Indeed, he noted, "I had accepted I was gay at fourteen, but geography, and culture, hadn't allowed me to say it" (pp. 26-27). As Gray (2009) argued, "All contemporary processes of identity formation, regardless of where they take place, involve a disorientation from the self" (p. 167). For Jamison, Cowan was a place, culture, and community he desperately wanted to leave, a hometown that did not feel like home, an acknowledgement made in the novel's introduction: "For most kids, I imagine there's a longing for somewhere different; but for gay kids, who grow up in flyover country there's more than a longing—we know those tracks and roads can lead us to freedom" (p. x). Hulko and Hovanec (2018) found that LGBTQIA2S+ young adults living in rural Canadian towns expressed desires to leave their homeplaces for cities like Vancouver that offered more resources, safety, and opportunities to build community. Likewise, Jamison sought freedom from his rural upbringing fraught with experiences of homophobia and bullying.

Expressed alongside the initial explanation of the "connected but strangers" motif, this statement connects rural children and adolescents as many have a yearning for someplace else; however, that desire takes on new levels for LGBTQIA2S+ rural youth: an escape from a homeplace that does not feel like home. Like many rural children and teenagers, growing up, Josh spent a significant amount of time on four-wheelers. Sometimes, he would ride in the back, holding onto the handlebars, while an older relative drove, such as the time his grandfather took him and his brother, ten- and eight-years-old, respectively, around the field beside his house in the middle of a nighttime summer thunderstorm. Other times, Josh would ride solo, savoring the freedom of the wind in his hair and the ground racing past him. One of his favorite places to go was the bottomland where his extended family planted lush rows of beans, corn, peppers, cucumbers, and squash. He often wondered if he would fit in anywhere as a gay person. Finding solace in nature, Josh questioned if this place he felt so connected to, his home, would always make him feel like a stranger. Like Jamison, it was not until years later, after critical conversations with family members, that he realized that this place, his community, and his people were, in fact, not strangers but rather close friends who have always supported him in their own ways.

Biddle et al. (2019) explained that close knit social relationships in rural communities “create an in-group/out-group status that can be hard for those outside the community to penetrate” (p. 2). These statuses form boundaries, allowing rural folk to delineate areas of their control separate from the influences of “people from away” (p. 2). Biddle et al. asserted that this awayness can also apply to community insiders, a political move that forms “spaces of social exclusion for individuals or groups whose interests and values misalign with dominant or hegemonic values espoused by those in power” (p. 2). Examining moments from Jamison’s (2021) childhood and adolescence revealed the hegemonic effects of power, in this case cisheteronormativity, in this process of awayness. Jamison experienced various forms of homophobic bullying and assault, including verbal, physical, and sexual. On the bus and in the hallways at school, other students hurled derogatory slurs his way. In the locker room, his bully and former friend Jacob threw an aerosol can of deodorant at his head and asked him to perform fellatio. Several years later after high school graduation, Jacob sexually assaulted Jamison in his pickup truck on the side of the road. While no sexual assault is the same, Clint also experienced sexual assault in his rural community while in high school. Unfortunately, sexual assault is a young adult experience in America. These experiences of homophobia and assault are common among LGBTQIA2S+ adolescents who fall victim to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse at school every year (Kosciw et al., 2022).

These experiences of homophobic violence extended into Jamison’s (2021) home as well. During the height of the AIDS crisis, his father proclaimed that the epidemic “was God’s punishment to the gays for their wicked lifestyle” (Jamison, 2021, p. 26). The intensity of his father’s response lessened when he found out Jamison was gay by discovering a letter written by his boyfriend Steve. He brought up the *Bible* and Hell but acknowledged that he did not believe Jamison would actually go to Hell if he “did good in this world” (Jamison, 2021, p. 50). In fact, Jamison’s father seemed supportive and loving of his gay son. Jamison noted that his father held his hand, leaned his forehead into his own, and told him that he loved him. Despite these actions, Jamison retreated from his father. He reflected on the role of defiance, cowardice, and fear, admitting that he expected some sort of paternal defiance so much that he craved it and accepting that his fear of his father’s eventual disapproval caused him to pull away preemptively:

All the things that would happen hereafter might be too much for Dad. Maybe he’d retract his love. I decided that night that separating myself from his grip—from *his love*—would be the easiest in the end, because nothing ever turns out to be a happy story. (Jamison, 2021, p. 50)

Clearly, Jamison knew that his father did love and accept him, but sometimes, living in a cisheteronormative world requires queer people to do things to survive: receding from love and denying parts of themselves. Within this, we acknowledge that time matters in the process of coming out; the temporal flux of acceptance and love in terms of coming out changes over time. For example, we have only been out to our families for less than five years each, and within that time period, we have both experienced shifting thoughts and emotions from our families around our gay identities.

Jamison's relationship with his father is a story shared by many rural queer people. Josh knew he was gay when he was three—some people are just born like that—but did not come out until he was nineteen. It would be nine years before he finally told his mother. The fear of losing his family, especially his mother, seized his heart, enervated his lungs, and paralyzed his tongue *even though* she had shown him that she would accept and still love him. Psyching himself up to finally come out to her, Josh remembered all the times his mother spoke lovingly of her hairdresser and his boyfriend and how supportive she was of queer characters in shows they watched together. When society tells queer people they are unwanted every day and, in every way, possible, it can be painfully difficult to accept love, which is why a book like *Hillbilly Queer* that features honest depictions of love and acceptance is a lifeline for rural queer youth.

As the trip to Steepleville for his father's high school reunion progressed, Jamison realized more about his own role in creating the divide between his father and him. Because he felt a mismatch between his queerness and rural upbringing, Jamison pushed his family and community away and sought escape from Cowan in his gay identity and education. He felt ashamed of his rural roots, a reflection that highlighted the class and religious dimensions of this divide but knew that he needed to reach a point of acceptance and understanding with his hillbilly roots similar to his recognition of his queerness. In doing so, Jamison realized just how connected he and his father were despite how much of strangers they also were to one another:

Just as Dad needed to work to accept his background, to overcome the anger and fear when kids would question how high he jumped or how dark his great-grandmother's skin was, I, too, had to accept what it meant to be a hillbilly son of a hillbilly Dad. (2021, p. 93)

Through his reflections and realizations on the road trip, Jamison did reach a point of acceptance and understanding of his hillbilly roots. This progression was evident in the language Jamison used to describe rural places and people. For instance, he initially referred to the motel as a "shit-hole" (Jamison, 2021, p. 1), but as they checked out of the motel, he waxed nostalgic about the place that became home for four days, savoring the feeling of it before leaving. Furthermore,

Jamison's acceptance and understanding of his hillbilly roots manifested in his reaction to his father's friend James Pershing who had just recently written a book prior to the Jamisons' arrival in Steepleville. When Jamison first heard about the book, he made fun of it and judged his father for wanting a copy. However, near the end of the high school reunion, Jamison remembered the significance of his father's relationship with Pershing and the influence he had had on his father's life; he then changed his thoughts on Pershing's book, deciding that many people, his father included, needed and wanted it.

Jamison (2021) reconciled his queerness and hillbilly roots through an acceptance and understanding of his father. Striving to bring connected strangers closer together, Jamison offered bridge-building as a solution for healing divides. His issues with his father, like greater issues affecting our nation, were rooted in political differences. We share Jamison's definition of "political": "It was class. It was religion. It was sexuality. All of those can be political, but they're real issues affecting everyday lives. *Our lives*" (2021, p. 112; original emphasis). Indeed, the personal, the everyday is political (Collective, 1983; Lorde, 1984). To bridge these divides, Jamison suggested dialogue—and he underscored the importance of listening: "Sometimes it's better to listen than it is to speak *my truth* in the moment. Bridging divides takes listening as much as it does speaking" (2021, p. 167, original emphasis). The emphasis placed on listening highlights the humanist element of bridge-building. This importance placed on bridge-building is yet another moment of connection for us as former closeted rural queer people. Significantly, some rural queer people do not want to build bridges: cutting oneself off from family can be a means of survival. However, many rural queer people, like Jamison and ourselves, ultimately decide that familial connection and familial love are worth the sometimes painful, sometimes awkward process of building bridges. As Gray (2009) observed, the queer youth in her study "work[ed] every day, through strategies of familiarity, pushing public boundaries of recognition and renarrativizing the meaning of queer realness to reconcile identifying as queerly different from their local communities while still intimately a part of them" (pp. 168-169). Recently, Clint and his father have begun to more frequently share tips and tricks for gardening. In those moments of swapping strategies, they send each other YouTube videos of Stevie Nicks, images of hand built (by Clint's father) raised planters, and concerns for Clint's mom who never feels like she sees him enough. Coming from different perspectives, Jamison's and Clint's stories both demonstrate the multiple dimensions of bridge-building for queer people as an act of love. Jamison chose to go on the road trip because of his father's excitement as well as Jamison's

desire to mend the relationship. Clint chose to build a bridge out of a necessity for survival. When he first came out, he had to come to terms with the reality that his parents could have disowned him. The absence of this relationship would have impacted him mentally, emotionally, financially, and socially. Therefore, in this way, bridge-building for queer people is also, in some way, about finding peace in humanity again.

Jamison (2021) leaned on the humanist components of his and his father's story throughout the memoir, ultimately choosing to end it with this focus on humanity: "[I]n the end our stories and lived experiences are what we have, and they are the things that will unite us in the gray" (2021, p. 210). Stories matter; people matter. We agree with Jamison, and yet, we must also assert that we can listen and understand only to a certain extent. We do not dialogue with hate. We do not offer an ear to oppression. To fail is to make space for cisheteronormativity and to work toward violence and erasure for queer people.

PLACES OF SECURITY AND PLACES OF PASSING

Another theme focused on both Jamison's (2021) and his father's senses of security as they related to places they felt safe in *passing* within. We use the term "passing" to acknowledge the ways in which Jamison mentioned altering his voice, clothing, and body motions to mimic cisheteronormative ways of being in order to grant himself a sense of security. Jamison demonstrated how passing as straight may provide an individual with a sense of security, a fact queer people know all too well: sacrificing their gender and/or sexual identity for survival given a specific place context.

While exploring a sense of security in *self*, Jamison (2021) wrote:

I'm not embarrassed about who I am anymore, and I don't try to hide my life tucked away within letters buried in back pockets, but I am cautious about providing too many details in situations where I'm still uncertain how folks may react. I'd lived the past twenty years of my life in a world where it's okay to be me, but that world also taught me that . . . rural folks—are full of anger and fear. (pp. 52-53)

In this reflection, Jamison acknowledged how a sense of embarrassment may not be part of a queer experience but addressed a common queer sense of caution. As two openly queer educators, while we may have not felt shame for being ourselves, we both have experienced having to be more cautious because of our sexualities. When Clint first started teaching, he asked his mentor teacher if he could teach plot diagrams using a short story that featured two guys kissing. His mentor teacher suggested avoiding that story because he had not received tenure yet and it might be controversial for parents and administrators (Whitten & Maltzahn, 2024). Fear is a driving force in this capacity.

Examples of educators' fears of receiving backlash from administration and the community can shift personal thoughts when it comes to the craft of teaching; for instance, Clint's mentor teacher was always supportive but cautioned him out of a desire to protect him. Relatedly, while forming his own sense of security, Jamison also exposed a deficit narrative on how rural people "are full of anger and fear" (p. 53). The balancing act of seeking a queer sense of security within a rural context, which is often conservative and Christian, emphasizes two questions: Who gets to be secure, and within which context are people secure? This notion directly relates to Jamison's question of passing: "To pass or not to pass? Do we or don't we? Connected or strangers?" (2021, p. 92).

While Jamison's (2021) sense of security came from protecting details in certain situations, for his father, "Barbara's [his high school girlfriend] cabin, with its chinking missing on the top of that bluff, was a place of security" (p. 18). Jamison's father found Barbara's cabin as a retreat to nature and away from his escape from his own father. That sense of rural security for Jamison's father was present in how he "loved how the sun used to set over those hills and bluffs. It was a beautiful sight that spat out orange glows so bright it scattered through trees and would leave everything in its wake radiating" (Jamison, 2021, p. 17). This nature-centric imagery is often the bridge of comfort and security that we as former closeted rural queer youth and current rural queer educators have made meaning of for our rural and queer identities. In contrast, Jamison's sense of security was the theatre. He reflected, "The stage was the one place I felt safe. Where I could be someone else. A place where I felt like I actually belonged" (Jamison, 2021, p. 123). As a closeted theatre kid turned openly queer theatre teacher, Clint understands that a sense of security is often fantastical and a way to escape reality. The stage and the orange glows between the trees are rural queer places of security and queer rural places of security.

When it came to passing as both rural *and* queer, Jamison (2021) often wagered his gayness and hillbilliness, such as this scene sitting in the breakfast room of their motel in Missouri:

The truth was I didn't fit in there. As much as I wanted to rediscover my roots—my hillbilly roots—and find a connection back to Dad and learn what had separated us, I still sat at that breakfast table and wore my *Cartier Love* bracelet—that sparkled in the drop-ceiling lights—as I scrolled through my iPhone 6S. I was an outsider. I was a stranger in a strange land, but if I sat really still maybe I could fit right in. (p. 146)

A drive to (re)connect with his roots and hillbilly livelihood rested on his sense of comfort and insider versus outsider status, a point all too familiar for queer educators and students. For instance, as queer educators and students navigate anti-queer policies (*2022 Model Policies on the Privacy, Dignity,*

and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia's Public Schools, 2022; Parental Rights in Education Act, 2022), they may feel like these policies are forcing them to be an outsider and to just sit still to fit right in. Broadly, Whidden et al. (2020) found that inclusive, supporting environments, faculty, and peers have proven to help sexual minority youth feel more connected to their schools. Therefore, when the supports are removed, LGBTQIA2S+ students are harmed. Anti-queer policies have made both of us, while teaching in rural and rural-serving public schools, feel like strangers to education. After our former school district's school board yielded to homophobic, transphobic, and queerphobic parents and community members, Josh, like all teachers in the district, was forced to remove the Pride flag hanging in his classroom. The act of taking out a symbol of inclusion for many queer students sickened him and sent the message that LGBTQIA2S+ students and teachers did not matter to his school district.

Gray (2009) observed similar effects from hyper surveillance of queer people. A group of teenagers in her study decided to perform in drag in a Walmart parking lot and post their joy to their social media accounts. However, they received backlash online, so much so that they removed the images out of fear that their group, the Highlands Pride Alliance (HPA), would become the target of homophobic and transphobic violence. They had to make their assumed safe spaces, the HPA and the Walmart Supercenter, hidden again. Likewise, with the forced removal of signifiers of queer identity and pride that Josh and other educators had to face, anti-queer legislation and policies made queer youth and educators even more of a target by making the image of a Pride sticker or flag a signifier of a space where violence against queer people is legalized (Thompson et al., 2024).

However, a place of security is not always as easy as being in nature or finding a stage; sometimes it is acknowledging race and privilege. When weighing his sense of security, Jamison (2021) occasionally mentioned his white privilege. For example, he described his experiences talking to a Wisconsin couple in the lobby of the hotel: "And then I realized I fit in. If I stayed silent about my political views, they'd never know. I looked like them." (2021, p. 64). Moreover, he stated, "I thought about interjecting and raising those ideas around privilege, but I just listened; too afraid of what would be said back to me" (p. 55). In those moments, Jamison entered into a risk-versus-reward compromise that is sometimes realistic for rural queer folk (e.g., a white gay man presenting as masculine and valuing their white privilege to not feel othered in rural contexts). When, where, and how people discuss race in conversation to rural queerness matters as those spaces have history rooted in racism (Anderson, 2017; Love, 2019). For instance, often, as white, openly queer

educators, we examined our white privilege and co-generated conversations within our schools to dismantle white supremacy and advance racial equity. We also did the same to achieve equity for LGBTQIA2S+ youth, and we expected our cisheterosexual colleagues to do the same with their own gender and sexual privileges, thus creating a system to acknowledge privileges, levels of discomfort, and equity. Indeed, efforts to advance racial equity benefit all students by creating space for them to be their full selves in school.

As Jamison's (2021) sense of security and moments of passing began to form, he questioned fairness. While addressing his father, he contested, "I wanted to show him that these little privileges in life, like marriage and skin color, and who is allowed to do what and when, and who makes those rules and why . . . *How was any of it fair?*" (2021, p. 111, original emphasis). This question centers power on rules and fairness, addresses the privileges of marriage and skin color, and also raises questions of equity. In rural communities, where schools are the heartbeat of the community (Tieken, 2014), it is important to critically examine place-based pedagogies to address issues of power and privileges (Gruenewald, 2003). It is not often equitable for straight, married female-identifying teachers to use their family to build relationships with their students while queer educators may be at risk of losing their jobs if they discuss their families. Yet that is the exact question rural queer youth, like us, asked ourselves: How was any of it fair and equitable? How can a place that loves us so much reject us after finding out who we love?

Under a deficit lens, this text also highlighted how insecurities can manifest themselves into stereotypes. Jamison (2021) often addressed how he did not feel comfortable in certain rural situations because they lacked the urban sense of security. Echoing our first theme of "connected but strangers," Jamison grew up in a rural place, but he did go away, which affects his views of rurality. While describing a dirt road, he wrote, "I couldn't help but think that somebody had to be tied up in a shed back in those parts, or someone was making *Walter White style* meth" (Jamison, 2021, p. 30, original emphasis). The images of drugs and people tied to sheds reverberated a stereotype that rural spaces are violent and drug-induced. This rural violence was also reflected in Jamison's high school experiences. When dealing with his relationship with his abuser, Jamison acknowledged the insecurities, dangers, and homophobic viewpoints that do exist in rural spaces. While not every rural community may be labeled as homophobic or dangerous, Kosciw et. al. (2022) found that rural queer youth do experience higher rates of physical and verbal victimization.

Places of security and moments of privileges and passing are young adult experiences regardless of gender or sexual identity; however, as exhibited in *Hillbilly Queer*, they are themes of rural queer livelihood. Schools act as places of gender and sexual identity construction (Pascoe, 2007) and are meant to be places of security; yet, as reflected in this memoir in tandem with recent anti-queer educational policies, schools often do not grant LGBTQIA2S+ educators and youth with a sense of security (Thompson et al., 2024). In those moments, queer people are tasked with weighing the risk versus reward, given a rural context, when it comes to disclosing and advocating for LGBTQIA2S+ livelihood.

RURAL QUEERNESS IS NOT ONE-DIMENSIONAL

Perhaps we would not have needed to identify the first two themes if more narratives viewed rural queerness for all its complexities. Rural queer people would not need to feel like strangers with their families if society had more nuanced understandings of identity. Places of security and moments of passing within rural spaces would be obsolete. Jamison's (2021) memoir exemplified this possibility in its depictions of rurality and queerness. Indeed, the book began by describing Jamison and his father as polar opposites: "If good ole boy, straight-shooting, deer hunter, or a man's man are words that describe my dad, then, well, I'm everything opposite of that. I'm more of a gay-as-the-day-is-long don't shoot anything kind of man's man" (Jamison, 2021, p. ix). This acknowledgement created a binary with Jamison at one end, his father at another: queer, hillbilly; liberal, conservative; feminine, masculine; son, father. Queer studies informs us that, as with all binaries, the rigid structure leaves little to no room for nuance and difference. This reality harms people who exist outside of the cisheteronormative binary. In the instance of Jamison's return to Cowan and his road trip with his father to Steeleville, he was harmed as a queer person for feeling in conflict with his rural upbringing. As a rural person, he was harmed by the deficit views of rurality embedded within a metrocentric queer narrative. His journey throughout the memoir, in all his grappling with the oppression of this binary, rested on one simple question: "*Will these people accept me if I'm the real me?*" (Jamison, 2021, p. 163, original emphasis). We expanded this question to ask: *Will they accept how rural I am in queer spaces, and/or will they accept how queer I am in rural spaces?*

Much of this binary rested on the gender binary in which masculine is considered tough, stoic, violent, and domineering and feminine is understood as soft, emotional, sentimental, and submissive. For example, cisheteronormativity influenced the trajectory of Jamison's (2021) friendship with Jacob. When Jacob first visited Jamison, he was confused by the dolls on his bed—

Rainbow Brite, Teddy Ruxpin, Cabbage Patch, Pinocchio, among others—asking to play instead with G.I. Joes. This discovery did not end the budding friendship, and Jacob became Jamison’s protector and confidant. However, after Jacob’s baptism, the friendship changed. Jacob no longer defended Jamison against his bullies, and he told the school about Jamison’s dolls. This story from Jamison’s childhood speaks to our experiences, too, as closeted queer youth. For example, Clint had to navigate his Southern Baptist upbringing while also acknowledging his sexuality. Like Jamison, he often heard remarks about queer people being sinners and going to Hell. Those remarks constantly struck fear in Clint’s sense of self even though he knew prior to middle school that he was gay. The fear the church instilled in Clint manifested itself in the form of internalized homophobia, which eventually made an appearance in Clint’s 11th grade political science class when he was tasked with creating a presidential campaign. He addressed gay rights and said, “I don’t care what gay people do, just as long as it’s not marriage in a church.” Clint was taught to be fearful of who he was, and it created a hatred for himself that many LGBTQIA2S+ youth feel everyday given anti-queer social, political, and cultural contexts. This shift in Jamison and Jacob’s friendship and Clint’s story of growing up gay and Southern Baptist represent the influence of Christian-based homophobia that does exist in many rural places: “It was as if Christianity had turned him into Judas rather than a saint. Within two years, all I had left of our friendship were memories that had been quickly replaced with the sinister” (Jamison, 2021, p. 25). Ironically, it was Jacob who later sexually assaulted Jamison when they were both adults. Jamison’s friendship with him and the physical, verbal, and sexual assault he experienced from him showed how cisheteronormativity maintains itself through punishment for those who disrupt its binary.

Jamison (2021) experienced other influences of cisheteronormativity and toxic masculinity from his father. For instance, he gave Jamison advice for handling his bullies: punch those “motherfuckers right in the mouth” (Jamison, 2021, p. 127). Jamison, however, was not the punching type. It was not until the road trip that he was able to accept that people and identity are not one-dimensional: “We all need certain things from certain people, and Dad couldn’t offer what I needed in that moment. But my tears could. My weakness could. // Sometimes we need tears more than we need punches” (Jamison, 2021, p. 136). Here, Jamison acknowledged not only the binary but also its failure. His father could not provide everything for him; instead, he leaned into his weakness, his emotions—the opposite of the hypermasculine rural person—and realized its strength. This pivotal moment highlighted Jamison’s reconnection with his father and demonstrated his realization that his

queerness, amidst the backdrop of his rural family and community, was a place of security with no need for passing.

Interestingly, the hillbilly trope itself queers another binary present in society and reflected in the novel. Roddy (2008) examined depictions of the hillbilly in photography and video. Her analysis demonstrated how the hillbilly trope maintains various forms of power relative to class, geographic location, gender, and sexuality, what McNeill (2022) identified as “the Appalachia/America dualism” (p. 3). Roddy indexed how hillbilly, like other terms such as hick and redneck, runs counter to the binary “by virtue of class and rural isolation or resistance to dominant urban values” (2008, p. 38). Jamison (2021) exhibited these harmful deficit perceptions both during the road trip and with his husband and friends. Ultimately, he did acknowledge this damage and embraced the complexities of rurality and queerness: “The truth was, these people were all pieces of me that people like me judged. But really, they were walking complexities. Like Wild Devil Jim and Eliza Morning Star. Like my hillbilliness, my queerness” (Jamison, 2021, p. 177). Similar to the history of the term “hillbilly,” historically, the term “queer” has also undergone a connotation shift. Feminists, such as Sedgwick (1993), have acknowledged the complex, harmful history of the term. However, the possibilities of using “queer,” like “hillbilly,” do have a way of “‘turning things inside out’; making the unnatural natural and vice-versa. By reclaiming the word, ‘queer’ empties the category of its effects” (Watson, 2005, p. 73). Roddy’s analysis explored the two terms together, demonstrating that, combined, they “identify a territory of otherness where individual and collective identity, based on class, gender, sexuality, race, geographic region and relationship to modernity, is contested or at least complicated” (Roddy, 2008, p. 37). Jamison’s title of *Hillbilly Queer* placed these weighted terms in conversation to address the multi-dimensional possibilities that both “hillbilly” and “queer” offer, together.

These representations of rural, queer complexities shaped Jamison’s (2021) decision to build a bridge between his father and himself, between his ruralness and his queerness. Because humans are multifaceted, Jamison placed importance on dialogue and active listening across differences, an approach summed up in three words: “Listen. Forgive. Learn” (2021, p. 206). This strategy is solid advice for rural, queer adolescents, many of whom share similar experiences to Jamison. We agree with Jamison on the importance of critical conversations. Words matter. And we also must emphasize the *critical* nature of this dialogue and assert that oppression and dehumanization should never be integral players in any conversation. This caution is especially necessary for *Hillbilly Queer*

as it is set during the 2016 presidential election, a sociopolitical climate rife with racist, classist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and sexist rhetoric and an election that resulted in a presidency that perpetuated the same systemic oppression. Conversations should be had across differences, but that dialogue should never diminish or eschew critical examinations of power. Importantly, however, as mentioned earlier, queer folx must weigh the risks of engaging in such dialogue given various contexts, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and place, which Jamison demonstrated throughout the memoir.

CONCLUSION

Reading *Hillbilly Queer* caused us to reflect on our own upbringings as closeted rural queer children and adolescents as well as our development as rural queer people and openly queer educators. Interestingly, like Jamison (2021), we, too, were taken back to our roots. Our stories demonstrate the possibilities this memoir has for rural queer young adults. It is a book that we both needed growing up, one that would have told us we were not alone, that our ruralness and our queerness were not mutually exclusive. We are excited for rural queer adolescents—and rural queer adults, for that matter—who have the chance to read *Hillbilly Queer* and the opportunities it affords them. To that end, we offer the Appendix to educators who may wish to use the book in their classrooms.

Muñoz (2009) wrote, “The future is queerness’ domain” (p. 1). While cisheteronormativity still grips the here and now, it does not have to remain that way. While many rural queer adolescents continue to feel out of place, yearning for the freedom of life outside their hometowns, it does not have to remain that way. Jamison (2021) dedicated his memoir to “*all the kids out there in the middle of nowhere who feel like they don’t belong*” (n.p., original emphasis). The future is indeed queerness’ terrain, and we can think of no better people to help make a queer future a reality than young adults.

REFERENCES

- 2022 model policies on the privacy, dignity, and respect for all students and parents in Virginia's public schools. (2022). Virginia Department of Education.
- Arvin, M., Tuck, E., & Morrill, A. (2013). Decolonizing feminism: Challenging connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. *Feminist Formations* 25(1), 8-34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ff.2013.0006>
- Azano, A. P., & Biddle, C. (2019). Disrupting dichotomous traps and rethinking problem formation for rural education. *The Rural Educator*, 40(2), 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i2.845>
- Bell, D. (2000). Farm boys and wild men: Rurality, masculinity, and homosexuality. *Rural sociology*, 65(4), 547-561. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2000.tb00043.x>
- Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1995). Guest column: What does queer theory teach us about x? *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 110(3), 343-349. <https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290005937X>
- Biddle, C., & Azano, A. P. (2016). Constructing and reconstructing the "rural school problem": A century of rural education research. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 298-325. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16667700>
- Biddle, C., Sutherland, D. H., & McHenry-Sorber, E. (2019). On resisting "awayness" and being a good insider: Early career scholars revisit Coladarci's swan song a decade later. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 35(7), 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/1573762>
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6(3), ix-xi.
- Brandon, J. C. (2013). Reversing the narrative of hillbilly history: A case study using archaeology at Van Winkle's Mill in the Arkansas Ozarks. *Historical Archaeology*, 47, 36-51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/bf03376907>
- Button Poetry. (2014, April 24). *Patrick Roche - 21* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LnMhy8kDiQ>
- Byrd, W. C. (2019). Hillbillies, genetic pathology, and white ignorance: Repackaging the culture of poverty within color-blindness. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5(4), 532-546. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2332649218810290>
- Collective, C. R. (1983). The Combahee river collective statement. In *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. 264-274). <http://dx.doi.org/10.36019/9781978839038-038>

- DePalma, R., & Atkinson, E. (2006). The sound of silence: Talking about sexual orientation and schooling. *Sex Education, 6*(4), 333-349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810600981848>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research 12*(1): 1-18.
- Eng, D. L., Halberstam, J., & Muñoz, J. E. (2005). What's queer about queer studies now? *Social Text, 23*(3-4), 1-17.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum International.
- Gray, M. L. (2009). *Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*. NYU Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814733103.001.0001>
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational researcher, 32*(4), 3-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189x032004003>
- Guo, W. & Vulchi, P. (2019). *Tell me who you are: Sharing our stories of race, culture, & identity*. TarcherPerigree.
- Harkins, A. (2003). *Hillbilly: A cultural history of an American icon*. Oxford University Press.
- Hulko, W. & Hovanes, J. (2018). Intersectionality in the lives of LGBTQ youth: Identifying as LGBTQ and finding community in small cities and rural towns. *Journal of Homosexuality, 65*(4), 427-455. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1320169>
- Jamison, J. R. (2021). *Hillbilly queer: A memoir*. The Facing Project Press.
- Jones, S. H. (2008). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (3rd edition) (pp. 205-245). Sage.
- Kedley, K. E., Brenner, D., Parton, C. L., Eppley, K., Kleese, N. (2022). The 2020-2021 Whippoorwill Award: Redefining and reconsidering what counts as rural YA literature. *The Rural Educator, 43*(3), 70-76. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1350>
- Kosciw, J. G., Clark, C. M., & Menard, L. (2022). *The 2021 national school climate survey: The experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in our nation's schools*. GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/NSCS-2021-Full-Report.pdf>
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2022.2039532>
- Malo-Juvera, V. (2016). The effect of an LGBTQ themed literary instructional unit on

- adolescents' homophobia. *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature*, 2(1), 1-34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15763/issn.2376-5275.2016.2.1.1-34>
- Mayo, C. (2021). Distractions and defractions: Using parental rights to fight against the educational rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse students. *Educational Policy*, 35(2), 368-382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820983033>
- McNeill, Z. Z. (2022). Introduction. In *Y'all means all: The emerging voices queering Appalachia*. PM Press.
- Meiners, E. R., & Quinn, T. M. (2010). Doing and feeling research in public: Queer organizing for public education and justice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23(2), 147-164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903107507>
- Miller, C., Olmstead, K. M., Colantonio-Yurko, K., Shema, A., & Svrcek, N. (2020). Moving from inaction to action: Challenging homo- and transphobia in middle school English language arts. *Middle Grades Review*, 6(1).
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York University Press.
- Parental Rights in Education Act, no. HB 1557, Florida House of Representatives (2022).
- Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. University of California Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/9780520941045>
- Payne, E. C., & Smith, M. J. (2018). Refusing relevance: School administrator resistance to offering professional development addressing LGBTQ issues in schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(2), 183-215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X17723426>
- Petrone, R., & Wynhoff Olsen, A. (2021). *Teaching English in rural communities: Toward a critical rural English pedagogy*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Reading Rural YAL with Dr. Chea Parton. (2021, October 12). *Author talk: J.R. Jamison* [video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FJsOp06w94>
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs*, 5(4), 631-660. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/493756>
- Roddy, J. P. (2008). Country-queer: Reading & rewriting sexuality in representations of the hillbilly. In M. Kohlke & L. Orza (Eds.), *Negotiating sexual idioms: Image, text, performance*. (pp. 37-52). Rodopi. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789401206525_004
- Ryan, C. L., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. (2020). Heteronormative gatekeeping when enacting

- queer research in elementary schools: An autoethnographic perspective. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 24(4), 378-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1676567>
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *Tendencies*. Duke University Press.
- Schey, R. (2019). Youths' choices to read optional queer texts in a high school ELA classroom: Navigating visibility through literacy sponsorship. *English Education*, 52(1), 38-69. <http://dx.doi.org/10.58680/ee201930313>
- Schey, R. (2022). Queer and trans youth (not) knowing: Experiences of epistemic (in)justice in the context of an LGBTQ+-inclusive secondary curriculum. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-04-2022-0054>
- Schey, R. (2023). Literacy (dis)orientations in a secondary classroom: Possibilities and limits of an intersectional LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 58(1), 25-34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.485>
- Schroeder, G. (2023). Queer in the country. *English Journal*, 112(5), 35-40.
- Shelton, S. A. (2022). Queer contemplative pedagogy: Challenging gender and sexuality norms through contemplation. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 69(12), 2049-2065. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1984789>
- Thompson, J. (2022). Restorative reading: Using counternarratives to counter harm for healing. *English Journal*, 111(5), 79-86.
- Thompson, J., Whitten, C., & Kaerwer, K. (2024). "It's the Commonwealth's attempt to censor . . . what we teach": Anti-LGBTQIA2S+ educational policy influences on rural secondary ELA teacher practices. *Virginia English Journal*, 72(1), 1-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.58680/ej202231827>
- Tieken, M. C. (2014). *Why rural schools matter*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Vance, J. D. (2016). *Hillbilly elegy: A memoir of family and culture in crisis*. HarperCollins.
- Watson, K. (2005). Queer theory. *Group analysis*, 38(1), 67-81.
- Whidden, D., Brown, K., & Nix, J. V. (2020). Implementing strategic support for sexual minority youth and exploring the effects of social connectedness. *School Leadership Review*, 15(1). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1283274>

Whitten, C. (2023) Everywhere and nowhere...all at once: Exploring the role of visibility in rural queer narratives. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*, 13(1), 33-51.

<https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v13n1p33-51>

Whitten, C., & Maltzahn, M. (2024). Humanizing equity in co-teaching: Love, trauma, and healing. In C. M. Tschida, E. Fogarty, K. Cuthrell, J. Stapleton, D. Lys, & A. Bullock (Eds.), *Co-teaching in teacher education: Centering equity*. Teachers College Press.

Wimberly, G. L., & Battle, J. (2015). Challenges to doing research on LGBTQ issues in education and important research needs. In G. L. Wimberly (Ed.), *LGBTQ Issues in Education: Advancing a Research Agenda* (pp. 219-235). American Educational Research Association. https://doi.org/10.3102/978-0-935302-36-3_11

JOSH THOMPSON A product of rural public schools, Josh Thompson is a queer Appalachian educator and scholar. He is currently a PhD student in English Education at Virginia Tech. His research interests include rural education, adolescent literacy, and the experiences, needs, hopes, and dreams of rural queer youth. His work on anti-bias, anti-racist teaching; English language arts methods; reading education; rural education; and young adult literature has been published in *Virginia English Journal*, *English Journal*, and *The ALAN Review* as well as in two book chapters.

CLINT WHITTEN earned his PhD in Foundations of Education from Virginia Tech with a focus on the intersections of Queerness and rurality. He has taught English, creative writing, and theatre in middle school classrooms and a social foundations of education course at Virginia Tech. He also implements youth initiatives for the Center for Rural Education at Virginia Tech and is the co-founder of Community Pride in Blacksburg.

APPENDIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR *HILLBILLY QUEER* IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

Our autoethnographic methods allowed us to articulate what Jamison's (2021) memoir offers for both rural queer adolescents and rural and/or queer ELA teachers. Our particular lived experiences guided our reading and served as the foundation for indexing implications for teaching *Hillbilly Queer* in the ELA classroom. Below, we supply context for teaching LGBTQIA2S+ young adult literature or memoirs about young adult experiences, like *Hillbilly Queer*, in the secondary ELA classroom and provide practical implications for using this book in ELA classes. Importantly, this memoir does depict descriptions of sexual assault (pp. 94-97), and educators teaching with this book may want to prepare students for this scene.

Including LGBTQIA2S+ young adult literature and teaching from critical queer pedagogical stances benefit students (Blackburn & Miller, 2017; Malo-Juvera, 2016; Miller et al., 2020; Schroeder, 2023; Shelton, 2022). Blackburn and Miller (2017) argued that the ELA classroom can be a source of revolutionary social justice change for LGBTQIA2S+ students through intentional text selection, curriculum, and pedagogy. Schroeder (2023) demonstrated how the intentional incorporation of queer young adult literature, specifically Johnson's (2020) *All Boys Aren't Blue*, engages student readers and supports their activism. Importantly, Malo-Juvera (2016) found that incorporating LGBTQIA2S+-themed young adult literature in the secondary classroom can lower levels of adolescents' homophobia. Furthermore, he experienced no student backlash against the instruction and actually discovered that students who had high pretest levels of homophobia showed "significant and sizeable reductions in homophobia" (Malo-Juvera, 2016, p. 9). These findings provide a critical counterpoint to hesitation some educators have over delivering instruction centered on LGBTQIA2S+ texts and topics, worries that often cause educators to leave queer topics out of the classroom entirely, thus perpetuating cisheteronormativity (Malo-Juvera, 2016, p. 19).

Similarly, inclusion of rural young adult texts benefits students in the ELA classroom. Boyd and Darragh (2022) demonstrated the power of using a Critical Rural English Pedagogy (Petroni and Wynhoff Olsen, 2021) in a unit focused on Zentner's (2017) *The Serpent King*. Because CREP constructs rurality as a unit of analysis, students and teachers can critique representations of rural livelihoods, examine relevant power relations, and create counternarratives that illustrate the complexities of rurality. Boyd and Darragh asserted that, through CREP, "teachers can affirm students' lived experiences and help them to identify that where they live is indeed something to be explored and celebrated" (2022, p. 233). We see numerous benefits and possibilities of teaching

with *Hillbilly Queer* using CREP, especially in Jamison's (2021) depictions of coming to terms with his rurality and the ways in which he celebrated his hillbilly roots. Additionally, the fact that Jamison embraced his ruralness and his queerness—that he claimed his rural people as “all pieces of [himself]” (2021, p. 177)—shows particular benefits and opportunities for rural queer students to grapple with their own identities and even write their own counternarratives.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Hillbilly Queer presents rich possibilities for the ELA classroom, including units centered on thematic concepts like father-son relationships, political divides and bipartisanship, community, adolescent development, and memory as well as lessons teaching various reading and writing skills, such as analyzing author's style and character development. Below, we provide four concrete, practical applications of *Hillbilly Queer* in the ELA classroom.

Using Memoir to Situate Current Events with Lived Experiences

For a writing exercise or prompt, an educator may use this text to teach students the genre of memoir. One of the literary strengths of this book is how Jamison (2021) used flashbacks and current events to situate his narrative. The art of merging current events, historical events, and personal experiences cohesively can be challenging for writers. The first two pages of Chapter Four serve as a mentor text to teach students how to be detailed while considering current and historical contexts. Jamison mentioned not only the contemporary political climate of the 2016 presidential election but also the Brexit vote, immigration policies, and job insecurity, which provides the reader a clearer understanding of how a memoir is part of a larger context.

Teaching “Show, Don't Tell” Details

Another writing-focused implementation of this text is to teach the concept of “show, don't tell,” the skill of incorporating vivid, evocative, and sensory details in writing. For writers of any genre, details matter, but especially in narrative and descriptive writing. For instance, instead of writing “John was angry,” the concept of “show, don't tell” may prompt a student to write, “John stormed into the classroom, feet stomping with earth-shattering quakes, and threw his books across his desk, sending everything plummeting to the floor below.”

Using the same excerpt from the beginning of Chapter Four, an educator could use Jamison's rich description of his morning at the hotel to teach students how to show and not just tell. Here are mentor sentences that a teacher could use to teach students the skill of incorporating sensory details:

- Smell: “No amount of Garnier Fructis could mask the staleness that poured into the cramped space through the vent overhead.” (Jamison, 2021, p. 58)
- Sight: “Dad listened intently with wide eyes as if the TV were a hearth and he was a guest at the fireside chat.” (Jamison, 2021, p. 58)
- Sound: “On the other side of the wall, I heard a deep voice. I pictured a big, burly man.” (Jamison, 2021, p. 58)
- Touch: “Dad put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed tight with a laugh and told me to get the open table closest to the TV while he got his breakfast.” (Jamison, 2021, p. 61)

Exploring Identity Through Reading and Writing

From personal narratives, poetry, novels, and media literacy to arts-based inquiry, socratic seminars, and fishbowl discussions, reading, thinking, and writing about identity is a staple in ELA classrooms. With its focus on Jamison’s (2021) development as a rural queer adolescent, his attempts to mend his relationship with his father, and his reconciliation of his ruralness and gayness, *Hillbilly Queer* would serve as an engaging whole-class text or even as an offering for a unit employing book clubs or literature circles. The discussion guide at the end also provides several prompts for consideration that could facilitate student exploration of identity and place.

Drawing upon reading-writing connections, students could write their own identity narratives using *Hillbilly Queer* as a mentor text. For instance, students could read Chapter 3 to determine what the story about searching for the Old Babcock School revealed about Jamison’s (2021) identity and how he chose to write about it. Moreover, an educator could focus in on specific key excerpts in which Jamison returned to this story later in the memoir to teach ways of further exploring pivotal moments of identity development.

Incorporating Independent Reading as an Instructional Practice

Jamison’s (2021) novel would also be an excellent addition to any classroom and school library as an offering for independent reading. Through various forms of assessments and activities, ELA teachers can guide students in their reading skills, engagement with the text, and identity development, which can have significant benefits. For example, Thompson (2022) demonstrated how independent reading as an instructional practice can employ antibias, antiracist pedagogy to influence students’ worldviews and senses of self. Using a restorative reading framework, he taught students how to identify dominant, oftentimes damaging narratives as well as the counternarratives that aim to remedy that harm. Educators can apply Thompson’s framework in conjunction with Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen’s (2021) CREP to guide students in examining their own biases and

senses of self as well as critiquing deficit thinking about rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019) and the effects of cisheteronormativity.

Another crucial benefit of offering *Hillbilly Queer* as a choice for independent reading centers on rural queer adolescent readers. It is a book by and about a gay man from a rural area written, in part, for rural queer adolescents. Through reading stories from Jamison's (2021) life, rural queer students get glimpses at possible futures for themselves. Granted, not every relationship with family members and friends needs to be mended—for some queer people, ending these relationships is a matter of safety and wellbeing—and not every rural queer person needs to return to the sites of their abuse in order to reconcile differences. Still, *Hillbilly Queer* presents real moments of rural queer life during a time in which society, government, and culture perpetuate anti-queer sentiments and target queer people. Students need books and experiences that tell louder, brighter, *different* stories. With that said, teachers should be careful about relegating *Hillbilly Queer* as a choice to still offer it to students while mitigating their own risk of parental, community, and administrative pushback. Schey (2022) argued that doing so actually makes selecting a queer book a hypervisible choice, thus endangering student readers, a fact made more precarious for LGBTQIA2S+ adolescents.