

# THE COUNTRY'S A DRAG: EXAMINING QUEER RURAL SPACES IN JULIE MURPHY'S PUMPKIN

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*This paper examines the queer rural spaces in Julie Murphy's 2021 young adult novel Pumpkin. In particular, it explores the concepts of rural-urban binaries, rural out-migration, and drag culture as they are related to the LGBTQ+ community. The author argues that Pumpkin creates a portrait of modern rural communities that confutes previous assumptions that queer people don't exist in rural spaces, and if they do, they must leave in order to find acceptance and community.*

The pervasive concept known as “rural brain drain” describes how many young, college-educated workers leave their rural communities in search of better pay and the amenities of city life (Artz, 2003, p.11). It is a narrative that impacted me over thirty years ago as a rural young person and that continues to define the choices that the rural high school students I teach make to this day. This narrative also feeds into the stereotype that, if the educated people leave in pursuit of professional careers, rural areas are populated with uneducated farmers; however, this characterization is not only untrue, but it also “erases the historical and growing diversity of rural places, masks real and persistent rural challenges, and miscasts rural ways of life as antiquated or regressed” (Junod et al., 2020). Rural communities are much more complex than the stereotypes that abound in popular culture, and even the news, as rural places became more politicized than ever during the 2016 presidential election and beyond.

The idea of rural out-migration is particularly tied to the LGBTQ+ community. Annes and Redlin (2012) assert that rurality has been portrayed as inherently heterosexual (p. 2), conflated by popular culture images that depict a rugged masculinity that is equated with rurality. Normalized heterosexuality, beginning in the late 19th century when homosexuality was considered a mental illness, made homosexuality invisible in rural areas, a problem which continues to this day (Schmitz & Tabler, 2021; Slepian, 2021). Studies have shown that “the total percentage of rural queer

Americans mirrors the percentage of rural Americans overall: around 15-20% of queer Americans live in rural areas, while around 19% of total Americans live rurally” (Slepyan, 2021). In other words, rural areas are just as gay as their urban counterparts, although this is a fact that is rarely publicized. A common perception is that LGBTQ+ people must leave rural areas to find community and acceptance, but studies are increasingly showing that this is not necessarily true (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Connor, 2021; Connor & Okamura, 2021).

Young adult literature has the potential to challenge rural stereotypes and change perceptions of the rural-urban binary, and Julie Murphy’s 2021 novel *Pumpkin* provides readers with a new way to experience rural settings and the queer youth who reside there. Reviews have called the book both “boundary-breaking” (Morris, 2021) and “populated with enough singular, quirky personalities and endearing, eccentric characters to fill a jumbo-sized box of Froot Loops” (Hitchcock, 2021). Winner of the Whippoorwill Award for well-written middle-grade and young adult books set in rural places, *Pumpkin* is the third book in the fictional world of Clover City, Texas that Murphy created in the popular novel-turned-Netflix-movie *Dumplin’*. *Pumpkin*’s protagonist is Waylon Russell Brewer, a white, fat, openly gay teenager with red hair, who stands out in a big way in his small town. Waylon and his twin sister, Clem, are obsessed with the drag reality show *Fiercest of Them All*. Waylon creates the drag persona, *Pumpkin*, in the privacy of his own bedroom and films an audition tape for the show just for fun. The video ends up getting leaked to the whole school, and, as a cruel joke, Waylon is nominated for Prom Queen. Instead of retreating in embarrassment, Waylon goes through with the process to claim his identity before he plans to leave Clover City for the promise of more acceptance in Austin, but in the process, he learns that he doesn’t have to leave to find it.

Parton and Kuehl (2023) venture “the deficit-laden depictions frequenting popular media demonstrate the need for counter-narratives that illustrate the complexity of rural communities and the young folks who live there—especially those who exist at even more marginalized intersections due to other identity markers” (p.2). In the case of *Pumpkin*, it’s Waylon’s sexuality that places him at the margins. Kleese (2021) also argues, “We need young adult literature set in rural places that depicts possibilities for organization and collective action that does not also perpetuate metrocentric reform narratives that rely on an inevitable progression from rural to urban. There must be ways to extend opportunities for mobility while also honoring rural life” (p. 12). Through Waylon’s story, Murphy does just that.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *RURAL OUT-MIGRATION*

Rural out-migration is the term for the migration of people from rural to urban areas. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, rural communities typically see young adults leave after high school to pursue higher education or to join the military (McGranahan et al., 2010). For many years, the concept of rural out-migration has applied specifically to the LGBTQ+ communities, as studies have traditionally shown that queer people leave rural areas to find more community and acceptance in urban areas (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Connor, 2021; Connor & Okamura, 2021). As Connor and Okamura (2021) point out, “The narrative that many researchers use to understand rural LGBTQ+ identity paints the picture that sexual minorities are born in the rural and, after having come out in a hostile small-town environment, flee for spaces where such identities are more normalized.” However, the work of both Annes and Redlin (2012) and Connor and Okamura (2021) depict a reality that is much more nuanced. For example, many LGBTQ+ individuals find migrating to an urban area to be an important part of their identity development, but many of those same people return to rural environments because they long for some of the more positive qualities of small town life. Gorman-Murray (2007) argues that focusing on rural versus urban creates yet another strict binary that becomes embedded into our consciousness.

### *QUEER YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE*

Queer young adult literature was introduced to the world in 1969 with the publication of John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, and since then it has evolved over the past fifty years. The 1970s were characterized by queer young adult novels that were somber in tone, characterizing homosexuality as a phase to be grown out of or something to be punished, most frequently in a car accident (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Cart & Kaywell, 2018). While the 1980s brought more titles with happy endings for queer characters and more secondary queer characters, such as adults and teachers, lesbian characters were few and often not portrayed in a positive light (Cart & Kaywell, 2018). Queer young adult literature in the 1990s dealt almost exclusively with the “problem” of coming out, but also included stories of “gay assimilation,” or characters who just happened to be gay (Cart & Jenkins, 2006). Seelinger-Trites (1998) noted that queer young adult novels in this time period had gay protagonists with “more power, more knowledge, and more physical pleasure,” albeit not explicitly stated (p. 144). While Seelinger-Trites noted these

advancements in the genre, she ultimately concluded: “Even if the genre has developed a sense of self-awareness, its largely negative rhetoric still denies the validation one might wish to find in YA novels about being gay” (pp. 149-150).

The twenty-first century has ushered in the “golden age” of queer young adult literature that not only includes an explosion of queer titles, but more queer novels written by international authors, more expansive themes, and different genres, such as historical and speculative fiction (Cart & Kaywell, 2018). Nevertheless, Crisp (2008, 2009) has shown that even books written during this time that are lauded for their queer representation, such as *Rainbow Boys* and *Boy Meets Boy*, can continue to reinforce heteronormativity and stereotypical ways of being queer. Characters ranging from the heteronormatively “masculine” males (such as the Tragic ClosetJock and the adult Internet predator who takes advantage of young boys) to their “feminine” counterparts (like the Sympathetic, Understanding Doormat and “Queer and Proud” target of abuse and homophobia) end up strengthening stereotypes rather than weakening them and add to “the depiction of a world that is a frightening and dangerous place for queer characters” (2008, p. 258). Research has shown that while representation matters, queer young adult literature still needs to be critically examined.

One area of young adult literature that has not received enough attention is books that focus on queer characters in rural settings. In his study of the history of boyhood, Kidd (2004) explains that early depictions of rural boys in literature were always tied to farming and the farmer boy. As far back as the 1800s, there was apprehension over rural boys abandoning the farming lifestyle for urban pursuits: “rapid industrialization in tandem with immigration and shifting gender roles heightened anxieties about enervation and inspired backlash against the feminizing forces of the city” (Kidd, 2004, p. 32). While queerness is never explicitly stated in these early works, Kidd’s assessment of the rural-urban divide shows that it was a concern of the time and implies that the rural farm was a place for a boy to be masculine.

Additionally, in a study of three twenty-first century YA novels depicting the lives of rural lesbians, Keys et al. (2017) concluded that the books depicted rural spaces as “paradoxical”: “offering attachment, connection and community while also being a source of alienation, marginalisation and oppression” (p. 10). In an analysis of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Pini et al. (2017) had a similar conclusion: while the novel provided representation of the existence of rural queer people, the experience is often complicated by experiences that are both positive and negative. The argument in this paper builds upon previous work to look at the queer representation in the rural YA novel,

*Pumpkin*, particularly how it complicates the rural-urban binary. While examining white privilege in rural spaces is important, the scope of this article did not allow for a comprehensive look at each aspect of the rural identity. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on the particular intersection of rurality and queer identity.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this analysis, I used textual analysis focusing on critical issues of power and privilege (Beach, R. et al., 2009) and read the novel through the lens of both queer theory and Critical Rural English Pedagogy. Queer theory enabled me to carefully examine Waylon's identity and performativity. Queer theorists, such as Judith Butler, assert that "heterosexuality is no longer assumed to be the original of which homosexuality is an inferior copy...what they manifest instead is the endless—though heavily regulated—possibilities of performativity" (Jagose, 1996, p. 85). According to Keenan and Hot Mess (2020), "Queer theory can be used to examine how often-impossible standards of normalcy are formed, not only through institutional categorizations of gender and sexuality, but also through social expectations produced through the racialized structures of capitalism that are inextricably intertwined with that hierarchy" (p. 444). In breaking down gender binaries, queer theory helps us to deconstruct other binaries, as well, such as rural versus urban. As a way to counter "the marginalization, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding of rurality within mainstream American consciousness, politics, and, sometimes, education," Petrone and Olsen (2021) developed Critical Rural Pedagogy which asks questions such as: "How do ideas of rural get produced? How do these ideas get reified (through language and texts)? How do these ideas get challenged and subverted?" (p. 7). These questions were central to how I examined Waylon's thoughts about his rural hometown and about whether he should stay or leave, which ultimately led to my research question: What narrative does *Pumpkin* create about queer teens in rural spaces?

## ANALYSIS

### *GET OUTTA TOWN*

Throughout the novel, Waylon's feelings about Clover City vacillate. As a person who was outed early in life due to his outward characteristics—" [He's] always been the kind of gay that announces itself and asks for a wide berth. *Flamboyant*, as Grammy says" (Murphy, 2021, p. 7) —life in Clover City hasn't been without its struggles. He has experienced bullying and negative comments from

classmates, such as being nominated for Prom Queen. Another conflict developed in the novel is with the character Tucker Watson. During their sophomore year, the two were paired up for a school assignment, and Tucker requested to be assigned a new partner. Waylon interpreted this as disgust towards his identity and he has worked hard to avoid Tucker ever since. On the other hand, Waylon has a close knit family that is accepting of his identity and provides a safety net and support system for Waylon to be himself. His twin sister, Clem, identifies as a lesbian and is in a relationship with the gender-fluid Hannah. Waylon's parents are the epitome of parental support and accept him unconditionally, and his eccentric Grammy has always encouraged Waylon to embrace his fabulousness. Waylon's construction worker dad's response to running for Prom Queen sums up how the family defies the rural stereotype of the unaccepting conservative: "I'm a small-town guy, but that doesn't mean I'm small-minded" (Murphy, 2021, p. 114). This is just one example of the harmful misrepresentations of rural people that Petrone and Olsen (2021) discuss: "anti-rural prejudice deems rural people as ignorant, backward, and sheltered in their ways of knowing" (p. 5). Waylon's father's response, while meant to cast him in a positive light, reinforces this negative stereotype of rural people by implying that small-town people often are small-minded. At the same time, Waylon's father's positive reaction to his son's candidacy for Prom Queen disrupts this very stereotype, as well as demonstrates how the negative stereotypes pervasively integrate into the way that rural people perceive themselves. Small-mindedness definitely exists within the novel in the form of hateful messages directed at Waylon's emerging drag persona and in the conversion therapy camp that Hannah's grandmother made her attend, but this is balanced by Clover City high school's LGBTQ+ Prism Club and The Hideaway, a club on the outskirts of town that hosts a regular drag show. Through Clover City and its inhabitants, Murphy (2021) has illustrated how rural places are complicated and how the many queer people who exist in these spaces have complicated feelings towards their rural environments. Waylon says it best when he proclaims, "It's a shithole. But it's my little shithole" (p. 10).

Gorman-Murray (2007) moves the discussion of queer migration away from the rural-urban binary and into the body itself, defining it as "*an embodied search for sexual identity—an individual search which can be materialized at differing, multiple scales and paths of relocation*" (p. 111). In this way, queer migration is likened to a quest for identity that takes place "through space and time—material, psychic and at a variety of scales—that are constructed internally as being about the search for an integrated wholeness as individual humans living in some kind of community" (Gorman-

Murray, 2007, p. 111-12). As Waylon is still in high school, his plans for leaving town are still a dream and symbolize his desire to live as his true self rather than hiding behind the bland clothes that his mother buys him and trying not to stand out to his peers any more than he already does: “Austin is like a world away in terms of culture and has plenty of space for me to blossom into Waylon Stage Three...My butterfly moment. Austin will be the perfect arena” (Murphy, 2021, p. 14-15). Early in the novel, Waylon feels, like many young people in rural places, that he must leave to find opportunities and to fully express his identity.

Before getting on prom court, Waylon could equate his move to Austin with his self-actualization, while continuing to hide the part of himself that wants to wear fabulous clothing and let others see his full personality. These feelings are evident when Waylon admits, “I’ve been stocking up on clothing that I’ll wear after high school when Clem and I are living our truth in Austin...One day, I’ll wear it all, and I’ll wear it with intention” (Murphy, 2021, p. 38). Getting nominated for Prom Queen unexpectedly sets Waylon on a quest to truly claim his identity. He decides to actually try to win and, in the process, transforms into a person he has always wanted to be but didn’t think was fully possible in his current environment. Waylon’s migration is no longer about a move from rural to urban, but a move from invisible to visible. Waylon’s community consisted primarily of his family who loved, accepted, and supported him, but he had never attempted to integrate himself into the community at large in any real way. Despite his sister and Hannah being members, Waylon isn’t involved in the school’s active Prism Club, and when he goes to The Hideaway, the drag club on the outskirts of town, for the first time, he rejects encouragement to sign up for amateur night. Tucker makes Waylon’s aloofness clear when he asks Waylon, “Have you ever thought that maybe you’re using *this town* as an excuse to not put yourself out there? . . . Maybe you should turn your volume up to ten and see if these people can handle you” (Murphy, 2021, p. 174-5). Waylon was outed by the community at a young age, but he has been downplaying it ever since. Being on Prom Court is his way of coming out on his own terms and letting people see him for who he truly is. No longer will he try to blend in and be invisible.

Blackburn (2022) proposes another psychological migration: the movement towards a person or a community (p. 25). Waylon experiences this type of movement in two ways. First, as Tucker reveals that he is also queer and has feelings for him, Waylon allows himself to move towards Tucker both mentally and physically, as he lets his guard down and initiates their first kiss: “I kiss him, my lips parted, before he can say another word” (Murphy, 2021, p. 245). Second, Waylon

finally moves toward the queer communities that already existed in Clover City. As part of his Prom Court responsibilities, he must create a legacy project, a campus improvement done on behalf of the underclassmen and future students. Waylon's project is to create a "WE ARE Wall" where anyone can write their truth. It's a way for Waylon to be more vulnerable, but it also helps him to form an alliance with the Prism Club, as they pledge to help him to maintain the wall. Blackburn (2022) asserts that "people are thus 'perpetually reconstituted' through encounters" and that "encounters that result from movement between and among people and communities broaden people's understanding of the world and the people in it" (p. 26). After putting up the wall, Waylon reflects: "I've never felt part of this school. For so long, this place was something just to survive, and everyone I went to school with was one more thing to endure. But it turns out that all that's divided us is what unites us in the end" (Murphy, 2021, p. 284). The impetus for many rural people to leave their communities is a feeling of isolation and loneliness (Connor & Okamura, 2021; Slepyan, 2021). When Waylon begins forming more meaningful relationships outside of his family is when the narrative of *Pumpkin* becomes less about his potential journey from rural to urban and more about his movement towards visibility and connection in his own community.

Through the character of Waylon Brewer, Murphy creates a more nuanced understanding of the rural queer teen by illustrating how queer teens can exist in rural spaces in a variety of ways and how their feelings about leaving their rural hometowns are complicated. Waylon realizes the shortcomings of his community and expresses a desire to leave for a better future in the city, and at the same time he feels comfortable and connected in his hometown. As the novel progresses, Waylon's journey becomes less about the journey from rural to urban and more about a psychological journey of acceptance in which Waylon understands that he can happily exist in either a rural or urban space. This psychological journey is developed through Waylon's participation in drag culture. In this way, rural and urban take on symbolic meanings where the rural is the so-called "closet" and the urban is self-actualization. Waylon battles with conflicting feelings about his rural hometown early in the novel:

...the small town queens always hold a special place in my heart too. It's a reminder that incredible things happen in all kinds of places, even Clover City. This is the kind of place gay teenage boys like me are supposed to dream of escaping. But my hometown is much more complicated than that. Yeah, I think about the wider world out there and what it might have for me, but there's also some comfort in walking into a room and feeling like the most refined, smartest person there. (Murphy, 2021, p. 10).



While he sees possibilities in leaving his hometown, he also has hope that those same possibilities could happen right where he already is. In their content analysis of narratives of leaving in rural young adult literature, Parton and Kuehl (2023) found that while the dominant narrative that the protagonists heard was that their hometowns were nowhere worth staying, the characters had their own counter-narratives, one of which being that a person doesn't necessarily leave a rural place because they hate it. In other words, you can leave a place that you love.

### *EMBRACE YOUR FABULOUSNESS*

Another way that Waylon finds visibility and connection is through his participation in drag. Drag is not only a performative art form, but also a way to subvert traditional gender roles and play with sexuality. Judith Butler argues that drag is a form of subversive performance that challenges traditional notions of gender: "in its literal staginess, [drag] offers an effective cultural model for deconstructing those commonly held assumptions that privilege certain genders and sexualities by attributing 'naturalness' and 'originality' to them" (Jagose, 1996, p. 86). While drag initially had its origins in the theater when women were not allowed to act on stage and men portrayed women's roles, over time it became linked to the LGBTQ+ movement through drag shows in San Francisco's gay cultural scene, drag queen participation in the Stonewall Rebellion, and drag queens headlining gay pride parades worldwide (MasterClass, 2021).

The art of drag is about over the top creativity and the transformation of your personality, speech, and appearance into that of a new persona. The values that drag embodies are self-expression and authenticity. In the words of the famous drag queen RuPaul, "We're all born naked, and the rest is drag" (MasterClass, 2021). In other words, everyone uses clothing, accessories, and makeup to create the identity that they want to present to the world. RuPaul's words are echoed in Hillman's (2011) look at drag's political history. In the 1960s and beyond, people have expressed their political views through their physical appearance: "black men and women sported Afros to signify Black Power; feminists removed their bras and scorned makeup and high heels; and youths wore blue jeans, floral prints, and ruffled shirts to mark the rise of unisex fashion trends for all" (p. 157). Nichols (2017) builds on this idea with his term "rural drag," or "the appropriation, arrangement, and deployment of rural fashion, objects, and aesthetics in order to assert membership in and support for white, settler heteropatriarchy" (p. 41). Just as a drag queen will don a wig, makeup, and a dress to assert membership into the drag community, Tucker, and even Waylon at times, dress in ways that alert others that they are conforming (or at least trying to conform) to the

heteronormativity that one might expect in a rural community. Although Waylon keeps a closet full of fabulous clothing and accessories, he rarely wears any of it in public. Instead he wears clothing that makes him unobtrusive among his peers. At one point, he realizes that he is wearing the “the same bland polo shirt” as another classmate, one of the “decidedly popular senior guys, most of whom are football players” (Murphy, 2021, p. 194). But in Waylon’s case, not even wearing that shirt gives him access to the group as they call him “Pumpkin” and “freak” upon noticing. Rural drag is less about performance art, and more about what Keenan (2017) refers to as “the script.” By engaging in rural drag, Waylon, Tucker, and Lucas are following the socially constructed rules about gender and how it is performed that has most likely been enforced through school and other social interactions since they were young children.

Tucker’s clothing and appearance—his rural drag—help him hide his queerness by following the script. Early in the story we learn that Waylon had a brief relationship with another boy in town, Lucas, who also appears to conform to heterosexuality because of his outward appearance. Waylon sarcastically reflects on this phenomenon: “Guys like Lucas can really throw people off, because if big, strapping Lucas, who is a total Clover City golden boy in his beat-up Wranglers and muscle shirt, can be gay without anyone suspecting it, then—GASP—anyone can be queer” (Murphy, 2021, p. 20). Tucker and Lucas have their own type of rural drag that allows them to hide their queerness and gain membership into popular groups, such as the football team, which in turn helps them gain social status. Nichols (2017) defines this type of rural drag “as a performance of crisis. . . in that [it] refuses to acknowledge any crisis of cultural categories, either gendered or otherwise, insisting instead on the immutability of these categories through its deliberate and consistent use of rural symbols and practices as signifiers of cisgender heterosexuality” (p. 52). As long as Tucker and Lucas maintain their rural drag, they do not have to face negative consequences as Waylon does; their lives can go on as normal, which is illustrated when Lucas says, “I know that people assume I’m straight. And I don’t usually correct them, because it’s easier that way” (Murphy, 2021, p. 164). Yet, both characters struggle with their identity and eventually come out as gay: Tucker to Waylon and Lucas to his family and a boy on whom he has a crush. Both characters look to Waylon as a guide for how to be honest about their identity. As Lucas says, “You’re so sure of yourself. You always have been. You’ve never been sorry for who you are” (Murphy, 2021, p. 163). While there are many ways to present as gay and express identity, through the characters Waylon, Lucas and Tucker, *Pumpkin* implies that while

hiding behind gendered scripts and engaging in rural drag to mask identity may make life easier in the moment, it doesn't lead to happiness and liberation.

For Waylon, drag has a completely different meaning. Whitworth (2017) asserts that “drag...is rife with pedagogical power that allows us to understand our identities--specifically within the contexts of gender, sexuality, and performance” (p. 138). Unlike Tucker and Lucas, Waylon has never been able to hide his sexuality because of his outwardly feminine characteristics, and while those characters view this as daring and boldness, Waylon's assessment of his identity is more complicated: “Sometimes falling more on the femme side of the spectrum sends me into a massive thinky, feely spiral. I don't hate those pieces of myself, even if they sometimes scare me. Those attributes are part of me, but it's just a small sliver of who I am. And yet for so many people, it's all they see” (Murphy, 2021, p. 163-4). Waylon's first experience with drag is through the reality show, *Fiercest of Them All*, which is comparable to the real life show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Representations of queerness on television allow viewers to “experience and consider cultures or identities that may be new to them within the relative safety of home” (Whitworth, 2017, p. 141), which is exactly what Waylon does. His next step is to try out his budding drag persona in the privacy of his own room, based on what he has learned from watching the show.

Eventually Waylon gets the courage to perform as Pumpkin at the local bar, The Hideaway, and there he receives advice and mentorship from local drag queen Peppa Roni. This is a turning point for Waylon as he finds a way to feel more self-possessed in his identity. He also begins to see new possibilities that drag can afford him: “It's the first time I've heard someone talk about Pumpkin like she was a legitimate thing. . . Like I could actually build a life around being Pumpkin by night and Waylon by day. And like maybe in order to fully be Waylon, I need to let myself be Pumpkin” (Murphy, 2021, p. 189). Waylon's experiences with drag have been a tool for learning about himself, embracing his unique qualities, and aiding him on his psychological journey. Keenan and Hot Mess (2020) suggest that “the aesthetic dimension of drag pedagogy engages with *potentiality* (that which does not exist in present material form, but on the horizon) rather than *possibility* (that which already exists in a tangible and real way)” (p. 449). Participating in drag helps Waylon imagine possibilities for a future in his hometown and not just in an urban setting like Austin. He realizes that happiness and leaving are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Waylon's privilege as a white man who is not transgender has implications for his ability to stay or leave his rural environment that cannot be ignored.

*TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?*

While Murphy certainly creates a more modern portrayal of rural communities through Clover City, it is worth noting that some readers have found it to be more fantasy than reality. Although most reviews of *Pumpkin* on goodreads.com are four or five stars, there remain many readers who question whether Clover City reflects the rural places with which they are familiar, citing that the amount of diversity in the novel was unrecognizable and didn't ring true to the lived experiences of some readers. I must admit that I, too, was surprised at first by the number of queer people portrayed in the novel. It certainly didn't reflect my own rural high school experience where in my four years of high school I only knew of one gay person, and he was only out to a select group of close friends. But that was twenty-five years ago. When I think of my experiences today as a high school English teacher in a small rural school district, I see a very different landscape. At the beginning of my career, I had one student who was openly gay, but fast forward two decades and I have multiple students who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, and nonbinary, and I host a monthly LGBTQ+ book club that is supported by the school administration. While the fictional town of Clover City might present an idealized version of reality, some argue that this is precisely what queer children's books are here for. In an interview in *The New Yorker*, Jessica Love, author of queer picture books *Julian is a Mermaid* and *Julian at the Wedding*, argues, "It's important to have stories that are a portal into the world as we wish it to be. The counter-argument is: don't we owe it to people who have been traumatized by bullying, or by the crueler shape of the world, to reflect that? But I tend to think that that's in the world plenty already" (Winter, 2022). Crisp (2009) argues that books that "give a feeling of hope uncharacteristic of LGBTQ adolescent literature" be labeled as magical realism (p. 341). In analyzing David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), Crisp acknowledges that Levithan's goal was for the book "to serve as an intervention, a tool for activism," but asserts that at the same time, it also reinforces heteronormativity by portraying characters as stereotypically masculine or feminine. *Pumpkin* does the same. While readers, including myself, initially viewed Clover City as almost fantastical, a closer examination reveals characters who fall into the same tired heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) and a plot that pits Waylon against the homophobic conflict of being nominated Prom Queen as a joke.

On the other hand, where *Pumpkin* does differ from books such as *Boy Meets Boy*, is its treatment of the rural/urban binary. While speaking specifically about geography and city planning, Spanier (2021) uses the term "rural futurism" as a counternarrative to deficit thinking towards rural

spaces that aims to rediscover their diversity and to see them as connected to the world rather than isolated, all to create more desirable futures. Queer theory (Butler, 1990) allows us to imagine a world without binaries and rural futurism allows us to imagine a world where rural and urban are not set in opposition to each other. At the beginning of the novel, there was a clear distinction in Waylon's mind between the city where he aspired to go and the small-town in which he lives. But by the novel's end, the distinction is gone. He may stay or he may go, but geography is no longer the issue. The issue is how he connects with those around him and how he is honest about his identity.

## CONCLUSION

The fictional Clover City is located in Texas, which is home to some of the largest and most populous cities in the nation, yet "at 3.8 million people in 2010, there were more people living in rural areas in Texas than in any other state in the nation" (Murdock & Cline, 2021). Whether in rural or urban areas, Texas is currently a hot spot of controversy when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues: "Governor Greg Abbott has attempted to criminalize gender-affirming pediatric care and asked the state's education agency to investigate 'the availability of pornography' in public schools, the state representative Matt Krause has compiled a widely circulated master list of some eight hundred and fifty books that potentially violate HB 3979, which bars the teaching of material that could cause a student to feel 'psychological distress on account of the individual's race or sex'" (Winter, 2022). While at the time of this writing *Pumpkin* is not on Krause's list of offending books, the LGBTQ+ and gender identity content make the book susceptible to scrutiny and book banning, especially considering that the state of Texas has banned more books than any other state to date (Lopez, 2022). In fact, the inclusion of drag and drag queens also places this book in danger of pushback from conservative groups, such as the Proud Boys, who have of late specifically targeted Drag Queen Story Hours across the country (Bikalis, 2022). The rise in popularity of drag has been seen as a positive step for LGBTQ+ visibility and acceptance and the breaking down of rigid gender binaries, yet current threats and violence threaten to push the movement back into the shadows (Bikalis, 2022). This is precisely the reason that it is important for books like *Pumpkin* to exist: to provide readers with a world in which queer people and drag queens can exist in a rural space because they do exist in these spaces.

In *Pumpkin*, Julie Murphy creates a portrait of modern rural communities that confutes previous assumptions that queer people don't exist in rural spaces, and if they do, they must leave to find acceptance and community. While at the beginning of the novel Waylon is set on moving to

Austin after graduation, after performing on stage as his drag persona, Pumpkin, winning the title of Prom Queen, and admitting his feelings for Tucker, Waylon sees new possibilities for his future: “Maybe I’ll leave Clover City. Maybe I won’t. But it turns out that dreams and hopes and wishes can come true anywhere. Even here” (Murphy, 2021, p. 324). The reader is left not knowing where Waylon’s physical journey will take him, but it doesn’t matter because the more important journey was the one he made toward visibility and community with others. These encounters and experiences made him reimagine and understand Clover City: “I’m starting to wonder if maybe I haven’t always been so alone and if, in reality, there’s been this little queer network all around me” (Murphy, 2021, p. 139). It is important for books like *Pumpkin* to be available to both rural and nonrural readers because as Kleese et al. (2022) point out, “The lack of rural books connects to a broader social imaginary in which rural is idyllic or, more often, a site of extreme deficiency, a trend exacerbated by the political events of 2020” (56). Books like *Pumpkin* help to break down the rural-urban binary, showing that both places have their challenges and benefits and happiness can be found in the country and in the city.

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