



Retracing Rural and Queer Literacies: An Autoethnographic Dialogue with Rural Queer Scholars

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Abstract

This autoethnographic essay explores the concepts of mobility and literacy development by unpacking my rural, Queer journey—from closeted farm kid to openly Queer educator to rural, Queer scholar. To guide this autoethnography, I used five grounding texts, each explicitly reflecting rural Queer literacies. These texts were points of inquiry acting as earworms, continuously reminding me of my own rural Queer literacies. Following this dialogical reflection, I reference three understandings related to rural and Queer literacy development focusing on mobility, literacy as identity kits, and the influences of cis-heteronormativity and metronormativity. These understandings underscore the fluidity of mobility as it relates to literacy development, while also illustrating how mobility can complicate lifeworlds and challenge assumptive narratives of rurality and Queerness.

Keywords: rural education, literacy, Queer identities, mobility, autoethnography

Introduction

Mornings in grade school start early when you have an hour-long bus ride to school. Mom dropped me off at Grandma's house since technically our farm was a little too far off Highway 47. Food was not allowed on the bus; however, my grandmother, who taught in the area for over 30 years, made a deal with my school bus driver to allow me to eat my chocolate chip muffins on the bus since I rarely had time before it arrived. The route to school featured Baptist churches, tobacco fields, dirt roads, thick forests, cow pastures, several general stores, ranch-style homes with the United States flag displayed (some a Confederate flag), a few road-crossing chickens, and the old, abandoned Union Level ghost town. Most afternoons started with my Grandma and I sitting on the porch swing as she helped me with homework (cursive lettering, arithmetic, and spelling is what she would say) followed by lessons on sewing, gardening, and cooking while dad fed the cows and mom finished work at the local bank. While rural public schools granted me formal classrooms, Grandma's house was my first rural schoolhouse. In Grandma's garden, I read Mary Pope Osborne's *Magic tree house* series near the fishpond under an azalea bush, completed fractions while learning to bake pies for church gatherings, and listened to every story that Grandma told.

By middle school, my hyperactive, energy forced my parents to drive me to and from school; an hour-long bus ride can be a daunting experience for any youth wanting to be outside and move. The car rides to school echoed similar landscapes, except Mom would get me sausage, egg, and cheese biscuits from the Country Boy's general store near the house and Dad would get me an after-school-snack of peanuts, a Little Debbie cake, and a Coca Cola. By this age, I would either stay home alone while Dad tended to the farm, or he would request my assistance. Often, I'd

blame homework to get out of farming chores. After all, homework was challenging in the age of flip-phones, dial-up internet, and encyclopedias. Nonetheless, I learned the lessons of the farm: every few weeks rotate the cows between the two pastures, burn parts of the underbrush when weather permits, watch for the bull at all times, the electric fence will pop you, cows will stray away when they are about to give birth, and no matter how frustrated your dad gets, curse words never solve the problem. Like my Grandma's house, the farm was another classroom with its own curricula and family history. For example, Great-Grandma Lizzie's house sat in the middle of a pasture and Uncle Arie's house next to the shop.

That route to school never changed much as I moved through elementary, middle, and high school in rural Southside, Virginia (United States). The schools shared similarities, such as, teachers knowing my whole family (one teacher sent me home on the bus with a potted fern for my Grandma), jokes suggesting that being gay was bad (including homophobic slurs), and messages that college was the way out of my rural community (and the only way to get fully educated). As a closeted rural youth, I frequently heard and internalised phrases from classmates and community educators like, "*that's so gay*", "*homosexuals shouldn't get married*", and "*deviants are going to hell*". I never read about any rural Queer folks in my curriculum, just heterosexual relationships (e.g., Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) and violence (e.g., Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and works by Edgar Allan Poe). Moreover, I never saw intersecting representation on media at home; *The Andy Griffith Show* was the rural and *Project Runway* was the Queer. I straightened out my dialect with a deeper tone, being more careful about how others may have interpreted my speech impediment.

The stories and representations of rural, Queer experiences were vessels passing in the night. The childhood messages sounded clear. If I wanted to come out, to find love, I needed to find refuge in a bustling, metropolitan area with visible Queer life. Yet, I feared an urban Queer community may require me to dilute my rural identity and knowledge. It was a balancing act of de-Queering or de-ruraling myself with no direct path of how to remain whole. These early rural classrooms as spaces informing my current rural Queer literacies and my experiences led to an initial query concerning the concept of mobility related to rural, Queer identity development. As an openly Queer community activist, educator, and scholar, who is deeply invested in rural Queer scholarship (Whitten & Azano, 2025) connected to policy (Thompson et al., 2024; Whitten & Thomas, 2023), visibility politics (Whitten, 2023), and place-based Queer literacy possibilities (Thompson & Whitten, 2024), I was curious how mobility influences rural literacies and how Queer literacies can be critically (co)cultivated within rural spaces. Donehower (2022), when explaining rural literacies and mobility factors, noted, "*rural communities are comprised by distinctive combinations of the literacy beliefs, practices, and values of the different peoples who inhabit, for however long, that rural space*" (p. 193). The (in)visible stories of place and who is accepted were understood in the visuals along the bus route, the lessons learned at Grandma's house, the natural untamed landscapes, and the narratives uplifted in my classrooms.

I retraced and mapped my current rural Queer literacy connections, as an openly rural Queer educator and scholar, back to my childhood rural classrooms, as a closeted rural farmboy, using autoethnographic methods (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) to explore the larger sociocultural phenomena related to rural, Queer literacies and mobility influences. I wondered how my coming out and connecting with my Queerness rekindled my joy and love for my rural identity. Perhaps being more authentically out allowed me to exist more authentically in my rural identity. For this autoethnographic narrative, I incorporated methods such as, "*using self artifact and photo elicitation, discovering self through others' published memoirs and autobiographical essays, [and] reflective memoing*" (Weaver-Hightower, 2012, p. 371). I began with discovering self through five other rural Queer mentor texts which guided my exploration of mobility. When I started my scholarly journey focusing on rural education and Queer identities, there were few resources

other than Mary Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country*. When I revisited these texts, noted in this piece, I took reflective memos, mined my childhood photo albums, and asked my close family questions when needing clarification. These authors and texts provided small earworms, little messages getting stuck in my head sending me down a rabbit hole of childhood memory (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Conceptual frameworks should feel like a conversation between theoretical thinkers sitting in the same room with you—expanding across time and space. In this article, I invite these authors and texts into a metaphorical car ride back home to my rural schools, Grandma's house, and the family farm, while I unpack the role of mobility and literacy development.

Foundation Framing for Understanding

I moved away to attend Virginia Tech, about three hours from the farm, where I've lived ever since either attending the university or teaching middle schoolers in the community. It was in this community that I came out. The ride home to the farm was connected by windy, country backroads that took me past my Grandma's house and my former public schools—those spaces were informants of my rural literacies (Donehower, 2022; Gee, 2015). Each space directly and indirectly taught me lessons from hidden curricula (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Upon reflection, I learned that being outside on the farm may grant individuals protection and freedom to explore their Queerness away from community judgement, whereas other individuals may hide their Queerness in schools to protect their wellbeing in an era of anti-Queer legislation sweeping America. Today, when I return home to the farm to visit my parents, leaving my community of Queer kinfolk (rural and urban alike), I often internally self-censor phrases and terms that may be misunderstood or mis-interpreted. For example, my parents shudder at me using the term Queer while also reciting microaggressive homophobic comments. I understood the artistic and multifaceted tenets of both rural and Queer literacies, and I often imagined the possibilities of them co-existing within classroom and community spaces. Living in Southwest, Virginia as a community organiser and teacher, I found many folks were deeply connected to their rural Appalachian lifeworlds while also thriving as Queer individuals.

Rural literacies have been related to the everyday language practices of rural people, literacies learned in rural schooling, and a thirdspace existing in how those two spaces influence each other (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). Moreover, rural literacies have themes connected to sustaining rural communities, influencing place identity, and challenging metrocentrism with hopes of providing social justice for rural places and individuals (Corbett & Donehower, 2017; Donehower, 2022). Donehower (2022) unpacks the close relationship between mobility and rural literacies by arguing that geographic distances in rural settings create a multitude of layers related to rural literacies and how those literacies are influenced by individuals moving in and out of rural spaces. Indeed, the heightened emphasis on transversing space for rural individuals provides additional texture to how the mobility paradigm shifts rural literacy development.

Likewise, Queer literacies are rooted in Queer linguistics, narratives, histories, culture, and lifeworlds, and are often situated in states of flux—similarly influenced by mobility paradigms (Pennell, 2025; Valentine, 2002). In other words, physical and metaphysical situations, alongside mobility, may promote, or hinder, rural and Queer literacy development. Azano and Whitten (2025) operationalise Queer rural literacies as a way “to interpret rural literacies differently, [and] to reject traditional notions of rurality” (p. 10). Often the metaphors from Queer rural literacies can be hooks for rural, Queer folks to communicate against a backdrop of metrocentrism, binaries, and heteronormativity. Understanding Queer rural literacies means to (re)envision rural places as home to Queer literacies, histories, and narratives (Azano & Whitten, 2025). Queer rural literacies acknowledge the spatial inequities and mobility factors that contribute to literacy and identity development.

Methods

This study combined an autoethnographic methodology (Ellis, 2020) with literary analysis to critically self-engage and reflect on my rural Queer literacy networks and how they inform my scholarship and pedagogical educational practices. In the chapter titled, *Searching for Utopia in rural Queer narratives*, Cummings (2021) argued, “Autoethnography is a methodology that utilizes personal experiences to bridge the connection between the self and culture that produces the self, demonstrating how power works to dominate and marginalize particular groups within society” (p. 155). This understanding of autoethnography highlights the critical nature of understanding how power works to influence the connections between self and the surrounding environment that produces the self. This relationship between power dynamics, selfhood, and environment is particularly important as I consider literacy erasure (Carey, 2023; Eppley, 2011) and how dominant, monolithic narratives can shape who feels valued or who can fully exist within that space.

To guide and focus my critical autoethnographic literary analysis, I implemented the concept of ‘earworms’ as a place to start (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). As a metaphor, earworms represent the thoughts and narratives that get stuck playing on a loop inside one’s head—data earworms. These earworms are memories and stories from my childhood that get stuck playing on a loop as I listen to and read from rural Queer narratives. For this study, the earworms were triggered from phrases and quotes from five rural Queer scholars and authors. The key passages and stories shared from these authors activated my own memories, often from a place of familiarity. I found myself consistently coming back to the same passages to (re)inspire my scholarly inquiry. Furthermore, these earworms created portals of self-reflection, allowing me to revisit my own rural Queer literacy journey in tandem with these researchers and artists.

The texts I explored for earworms were, Mary Gray’s (2009) *Out in the country: Youth media, and Queer visibility*, J.R. Jamison’s (2021) *Hillbilly Queer*, Z. Zane McNeill’s (2022) collection *Y’all means all: The emerging voices Queering Appalachia*, Neema Avashia’s (2023) *Another Appalachia: Coming up Queer and Indian in a mountain place*, and Allison Carey’s (2023) *Double erased: LGBTQ literature in Appalachia*. I first read these texts during my doctoral program because they each explicitly address the role of rural places, education, and community in identity development. During my first read of these texts in my program, I highlighted specific quotes and passages that may have been beneficial during my dissertation scholarship. For this study, I revisited those passages and quotes (my portals of data earworms) that have stuck with me as I have developed scholarship examining the intersections of rural education, Queerness, and literacy. These five foundational texts illustrated how systemic power dynamics and mobility connected to rural (place) and Queer (historically marginalised) identities can shape literacy and a sense of belonging. While I revisited these earworm quotes, I asked myself two questions:

What lived experiences are relived when connecting the author’s narrative/research to my own rural, Queer literacies?

How do those earworms support or challenge my own journey exploring rural, Queer literacies in relation to mobility?

I selected two passages from each text that best capture the nature of my inquiry. They provided me with the clearest memories that I could revisit in photo albums and conversations with family. Using autoethnography methods, I hoped to invite these authors into a passenger seat as I metaphorically returned home to revisit how my rural and Queer literacies influence my budding scholarship. Like in music, these literary refrains were learned quickly and played on a loop. These literacy earworms signalled from the selected passages connect to my own personal childhood, research, teaching tenure, and scholarship.

Since this was a self-study using literary content and personal experiences, Institutional Review Board (ethics committee) approval was not required.

Literacy Earworms

Mary Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country: Youth Media, and Queer Visibility*

As theorist Bruno Latour argued, there are histories embedded in the objects we lean on (literally) every day. The Wal-Marts, websites, church-sponsored skate parks, and other symbols of rural space come with their own histories, lessons, and expectations. Youth in this study use these everyday objects of space as props to fashion their identities. In the process, they bind their surroundings together and transform them in complicated ways (p. 170).

In high school, my friends and I often loitered in the Walmart parking lot sipping our Sonic slushes. Our town Walmart was about 30 minutes from my family farm and conveniently located right next to a major interstate for the southeastern United States. Everything seemed to happen between that Walmart parking lot and Sonic, including blossoming new relationships; I could tell you at least four high school sweetheart stories that started there. Evening entertainment was limited to a bowling alley and movie theatre that shut down and reopened every six months. That parking lot was the place to be after a Friday night football game to gather with friends in a space that was free and centrally located. It was also the place to see Confederate flags attached to truck beds, guns used for hunting hanging in windows, and the occasional local teacher trying to dart by unseen. If you listened, you would hear conversations about school projects and local drama with periodic racist and homophobic slurs. And part of me wanted to just fully assimilate to all of it—get a high school sweetheart to marry (a wife), say and do what all the bullies were doing even if you knew it was wrong, and just pretend so maybe the harassment would fade and my soul could find peace.

In school, it was often my English teachers who would correct the hateful language and provide educational context to the harmful discourses. Those teachers, along with my theatre coaches, showed me new worlds of being, often explaining how narratives and worlds carry with them their own languages, histories, and cultures. I remember in tenth grade being excited to take a scene from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and retell it through our own creative outlets; my group made finger puppets and told the story using our youthful slang learned in our community. Reading and writing can give opportunities to transverse and mobilise throughout time and space, learning new social literacies to critically understand personal and community embedded histories.

But as much as familiarity might breed contempt, it can also foster comfort and provide resources for queer-identity work. Young people focus on forming makeshift public spaces that can alleviate the disenfranchisement of their daily lives. (Gray, 2009, p. 176)

My school did not have a Gay-Straight Alliance, and my community never hosted a Pride celebration. I also never saw Queer themed books in the school or town library. To be fair, I'm not sure I would have attended an outwardly Queer event or carried around a book with a visible Pride symbol. The internalised homophobia and fear of even being associated with anything Queer made me reject those spaces. While I had played soccer all my life, by ninth grade the increased toxic masculinity and homophobic speech forced me to find new extracurriculars. I needed places of belonging where I could be self-expressive and creative—judgement free zones. Forensics, speech, and drama clubs and community theatre gave me space to be confident, explore new lifeworlds, and create magic. The thrill of being assigned a new character and bringing that character to life kept me passionate about the art of storytelling. I lost hours world-building and creating characters at home playing *The Sims* on the computer and *Pokémon* on the GameBoy. During my junior and senior year in creative writing class, I was given three blank pages of freedom to write about anything, within the communicated school appropriate guidelines. While I never wrote about being Queer due to fear of being outed, I did often write

about trying to keep a mask on, so people didn't see the real me. I became invested in young adult novels that featured individuals with superpowers (e.g., Pittacus Lore's *I am Number Four* series). Sometimes I reimagined stories with gay romantic plot lines, such as Harry and Ron from Rowling's *Harry Potter* being gay lovers. Those fantastical worlds gave me permission to be creative, to imagine futures of love, and to believe in the magic of books as temporary spaces of authentic existence. I did not have to code-switch or be geographically isolated. New lifeworlds and literacies were readily available on the page, and eventually on the screen, regardless of my location.

J.R. Jamison's (2021) *Hillbilly Queer*

The smell of old books, pencils, and floor wax took me right back to Cowan High School. A place that held good memories but painful ones as well. I felt fifteen all over again. The deodorant canister barreled my way as Jacob shouted "faggot." The pain from the slate table bounced through my head. Will these people accept me if I'm the real me? (p. 163)

I tried my best to never use the restroom during my public school experience, and I quickly got in and out of locker rooms during gym and soccer practice. Nonetheless, I heard enough phrases referencing "faggots", "smear the queers", and "gay boys are sissies" to make me fear for my safety. It did not matter that I thrived in my band class, found joy in theatrical spaces, and relished in reading new stories in English; I was terrified to be anything associated with the term *gay* or *Queer*. While I didn't come out until I was 24, I have always been, and known, I was *Queer* and the question of *accepting the real me* clung with me like the sticky sap on my fingers from pulling tobacco during the summers. The community that uplifted my farming family, showed me how to be sustainable, and rooted me in the solace of nature, equally gave me the phrases and rhetoric that being *Queer* is worthy of abuse and neglect. I wondered about the possibilities of pedagogical practices that embrace the idea of accepting all identities of youth folks in rural communities—closeted and visible (Azano & Whitten, 2025).

I was stuck between what I was always taught—that being gay was wrong—and what I knew I was becoming—gay. Pastor Lloyd put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a stern look. "Son, you'll know when God's ready for you. (Jamison, 2021, p. 25)

In ninth grade, I drafted a research project questioning why God provided people with free will since there was so much violence in society. I struggled understanding how people forgave and praised an all-knowing God that knew humans were committing genocides, living in harsh conditions, and suffering. My teacher approved it, and I interviewed an avid church-goer in my community. Following this interview and after scanning the school library, I knew this topic was bigger than my ninth grade essay. I requested to change topics, but my teacher was unyielding and said it was too late. The day the essay was due, I turned in a last-minute paper on chupacabras that my teacher did not approve. It seemed asking questions about free will led me to more questions than answers which I felt I needed for a research report.

I grew up going to Sunday school and service at a small Southern Baptist church. Community and family showed up to that church every Sunday. We went from singing about Jesus loving everyone, just the way you are, to hearing our pastor announce how gays were going to burn in hell. I figured an all-knowing God with a Jesus that loved everyone knew I was gay and still loved me. So, I found it misleading trying to understand why the homophobic churchgoers wanted me to die. However, that never stopped the pastor and folks from the congregation claiming that *Queer* folks were abominations—deviants ready to be slain for their *extra* sinful nature. While I genuinely was curious in the concept of religion and free will, I felt questioning what I was taught and who I was becoming to be overwhelming and insurmountable. Religious trauma can be exiling in a community where everyone emphasises their religious connections.

Z. Zane McNeill's (2022) Collection *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia*

The dominant metronormative narratives about queerness in Appalachia argue that queer people in Appalachia do not exist, and if they did they would most certainly be suffering. The Queer Appalachia project's social media archive (even with its many recent failures) pushes back against these narratives, asserting that LGBTQIA+ Appalachians do exist and that they navigate joy, suffering, survival, visibility, culture, and community on their own terms. (p. 128)

As a rural youth, I recognised the gay representations of *Project Runway*'s Tim Gunn, *Desperate Housewives*' Lee McDermott, and *Glee*'s Kurt Hummel. Meanwhile, *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Dukes of Hazard* were reprised constantly as the standard for rural southern communities. The metro-urban representations poked fun at rural communities as uneducated and uncultured, while the rural standards considered urban folks to be snooty and arrogant. Queerness was segregated to urban spaces and rural spaces lacked visible Queer representations—two conflicting narratives of place and identity. Being rural and Queer felt impossible from anything that I heard or saw. After *Brokeback Mountain* came out, my peers used it as a new joke book to bully any guys they thought were *fruity*—a slang term meaning gay/queer with a history of being used as a homophobic slur. A movie about rural gay joy, survival, visibility, love, and community became another platform for individuals to spread anti-gay rhetoric and mock the Queer community. The consequences of existing as both, rural and Queer, meant either leaving town or not being visibly Queer, both meant sacrificing parts of myself and code switching when needed. The couple of out gay students were often demonised by classmates and adults, and labelled as being 'flamboyant', having 'too much suga' in their tanks', and 'asking for a death wish' in reference to contracting HIV. Nonetheless, those Queer classmates in school were living testimonies of resilience and disrupted the monolithic idea that Queer folks don't exist in rural schools.

Re/understanding the historical and political geographies of these places and the people—the lives, experiences, and physical bodies of those that live t/here--as already having their own distinct and uniquely informed activist histories is part of the responsibilities of activist scholarship. (McNeill, 2022, p. 66-67)

My Dad recently told me how a group of geologists from Colorado visited the river on the farm decades ago searching for a mineral called tungsten. When their search came up short, they just left. The adults in my family often seem jaded by researchers, citing their overeducation and disregard for the individuals who live off the land. Moreover, they were sceptical of law enforcement, mentioning their hopes of keeping the government out of their business and property. Every once in a blue moon, I'd hear Dad get frustrated and say the government was going to come in one day and take everything they had spent generations building. It seemed the common thread was a deep concern over unfamiliar folks with hidden agendas assuming familiarity to make a quick profit. According to my Dad, my grandfather asked the geologists where he would be able to plant tobacco if they mined the river. The geologist responded, "with all the money they would be talking, he could buy Miami Beach". The stereotype of the poor, uneducated rural farmer in need of civilisation being liberated by education and money created a culture of mistrust. This motif is echoed in *The Beverly Hillbillies* where a rural family strikes oil, becomes millionaires, and moves to a city to become civilised. It was one of my family's favourite shows.

Neema Avashia's (2023) *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place*

I do not know what it means to possess a love of place so strong you remain rootbound even when the soil sometimes rejects your very existence. (p. 159)

Mom and I would visit Wooten Brother's greenhouse on the other side of the town every spring to get plants for our flower beds and pots for the porch. The array of colours, aromatic floral scents, and thriving insect ecosystems found in that greenhouse captured my attention. I had dreams of getting a part-time job at the local plant nursery; tobacco picking during the summer did not bring me the same joy as hanging out in a greenhouse or garden. We'd get our fair share of pansies, marigolds, petunias, and impatiens to plant in our flowerpots and garden beds. Some plants became deer candy while others became bees' favourite landing pads. One of my favourite parts of gardening was repotting a plant. I'd gently grip the lower part of the stem, give the plastic container a slight squeeze, and tilt the plant sideways to carefully transfer the plant. Just before placing the tightly bound roots into the dirt, Mom would remind me to break the roots up a little bit and add some water to encourage new growth. Occasionally, the plants would wilt due to the new soil and environment, but on other occasions, they flourished and grew wildly. Gardening and visiting the local plant store were warm weather rituals that my Mom and I shared.

Growing up I learned plants were didactic and full of knowledge. They communicated when they needed water, or were being overwatered, and when the soil was not giving them the proper nutrition. When they wanted the sun, they would face it or reach their stems closer to the light. Some of the plants held long histories; the spider plant that hung in my kitchen was propagated from my Grandma's plant that she had been growing for over a decade. Some held their own healing properties; my grandmother was quick to cut into a piece of aloe vera to ease my sunburn. They taught me lessons on resilience; when the soil rejects you, there are other ways to exist—aerial roots, underground rhizomes, propagation, and reseeding.

My bedtime routine as a child was the same every night. My mom came into my room and patted my back as she sang Gujarati and Sanskrit bhajans to me. I fell asleep each night to the sounds of "Raghupati Raghav" and "Vakratunda Mahakaya," learning the words long before I learned the meanings. (Avashia, 2023, p. 89)

"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible told me so," still echoes in my childhood memories. My preschool had afternoon visits to the church that connected to the school. Most Sundays my family would attend our Southern Baptist church service, singing hymns about love in Sunday school and listening to leaders describe how everyone is a sinner and all sinners, especially the homosexuals, were going to hell. "He's got the whole world in His hands," conjures the stiffness of the wooden pews, the joy of singing with a group, and the hopes that the guy who has the whole world in his hands loves me. I learned that Jesus loved me because of a book, and he was powerful enough to hold the planet Earth in his hands. Meanwhile, the adult leaders taught me that love can come with conditions; internally, I questioned those conditions of love—if someone is gay, Jesus won't love them as much, and if he doesn't love them, then how can they have family and community? Eventually, when I did come out, my parents said, "we love you, but we just can't accept your lifestyle" (we are still healing). Love—a word with a range of meanings depending on which narrative is being told and who is telling it.

Allison Carey's (2023) *Double Erased: LGBTQ Literature in Appalachia*

In literature by LGBTQ Appalachian authors, food serves a few primary functions: it brings people together, often transcending generational and ideological differences; it provides pleasure, often representing sublimated sexual pleasures; and it serves as a marker of loss,

reminding us of family members who once prepared these foods or warning us of the impending loss of Appalachian foodways. (p. 187)

“Go ‘cross the road and grab a cup of sugar and an egg,” was a pretty common phrase shared by my Grandma and Mom, especially when I took up baking. Childhood photos captured my Grandma filling pies and icing cakes while I sat on the countertop next to her. Often those pies and cakes ended up at church luncheons where my Grandmas’ recipes competed against the community and congregation. Those recipes, amongst others, were published in the yearly church cookbooks that captured intergenerational food knowledge, including how to prepare and preserve food (e.g., pickling, canning, and jarring recipes). Most recipes were written down by hand, typically in cursive, on index cards and included everyone’s unique language for measurements. During family luncheons, each person had their food responsibility: my Mom had the devilled eggs, Grandma handled the fried chicken and biscuits, my Uncle made homemade banana ice cream, and my aunts would bring casseroles and veggie-based dishes of shifting varieties. The texture, creaminess, and perfect balanced ratio of cheese-to-noodle achieved in my Mom’s macaroni and cheese is unmatched.

This past holiday season, my partner and I cooked dinner for any of our friends who may not have a place to go home to. For Thanksgiving, I made all the foods that reminded me of those luncheons growing up, including sausage balls, devilled eggs, country ham, mashed potatoes, and homemade apple butter. Being in a house with my partner surrounded by Queer kinfolk eating food that reminded me of my rural roots, was the ultimate joy I never thought I’d get to experience.

Although nature is indeed figured as a refuge in some LGBTQ Appalachian texts, many authors have acknowledged the complexities of Appalachia—both its rural landscape and its cities—for queer Appalachians. Appalachia is of course not always safe or welcoming for its queer inhabitants. Consequently, many queer Appalachians choose to emigrate, whether for the same reasons that other Appalachians have moved—including job and educational opportunities—or for safety or Andrew Wallen’s motivation: the chance to live and love openly among a queer community. (Carey, 2023, p. 154)

My family and many teachers routinely asked if I was going to stay around and work on the farm. I could tell that Dad had hopes of having a son eager to keep the family farm business going. Truthfully, the farming life seemed appealing; however, if I had stayed, I’m not sure I would exist today. Until the time I came out, I had a persistent understanding that if I was outed, I would have to unlive myself. Leaving for college and starting my teaching career finally gave me the voice, language, and independence to advocate for my own right to exist. Unfortunately, based on combined statistics connected to suicide rates amongst rural males (Cammack et al., 2024; Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.) and Queer individuals (The Trevor Project, 2021; Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.), the probability of me thriving and finding community and self-acceptance was low.

While I haven’t moved back home, my joy in community, scholarship, and activism often makes me revisit my rurality and farming roots. Laying in a hammock overlooking the New River made educational theory easier to conceptualise. Attending and helping organise drag shows in rural Southwest areas became a side passion. Co-developing an enrichment camp for rural middle school learners that is rooted in critical place-based pedagogy reconnected me to the concept of rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023). These examples provided opportunities to rekindle those tensions around identity and place with hopes of healing the wounds caused by desperately trying to separate and silo my rural and Queer lifeworlds.

Discussion and Conclusion

This autoethnographic literacy exploration sought to explore experiences that informed my rural, Queer literacies in conversation with other rural, Queer scholars, texts, and authors using the concept of earworms (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). The passages from these texts served as gateways for me to critically reflect on experiences and mobility factors that shaped my rural and Queer literacy and identity development. Metaphorically, these mentor scholars made the drive home more relatable as we shared familiar stories. While I do not share my experiences to create sweeping generalisations, I do believe these narrative data points can provide insight into experiences that shape literacy skills and how literacies can inform identity. Based on their words and my own connected experiences, while also listening for the voices in critical pedagogy, I provide three points of discussion concerning rural education, literacy and identity development, and Queerness.

Queer Rural Literacies Relationship to Mobility

As evident in this reflection, understandings of literacies can exist in states of flux often transforming based on representation, place (geographic, virtual, and fantastical), and new knowledges of self and society. Introducing more pathways and exposures to diverse literacies from various worldviews can give students a voice for self-advocacy and self-determination. In rural communities with fewer access opportunities and resources for Queer individuals, the role of mobility is particularly important. For example, the nearest visible Queer community was an hour and a half from the farm in a densely populated city. I had to navigate online and media spaces to find and develop my Queer literacy until I was able to move away to college with more independence. Instead of making false assumptions of which literary communities are visible in rural schools, educators and researchers can query the role of mobility's influence on literacy skills. Donehower (2022), explained, "*Grounding curriculum, instruction—and research—'into the immediate locality' means accounting for all 'local' literacies, including those that flow into, and out of, rural communities within the new mobilities paradigm*" (p. 194). Mobility, in relation to rural Queer literacies, presents not only geographic pluralities but also emphasises traversing third spaces (e.g., online, in media, or subtle lessons learned within the environment).

Online platforms celebrating Queer literacies can disrupt access challenges in remote communities, given minimal broadband internet challenges. School fieldtrips to see plays and explore museums can teach languages, histories, and cultures of individuals not represented in everyday curricula and community. Schools, especially in rural communities, that support artistic expression and humanities-based enrichment programs are cultivating a space for youth to discover the possibilities of both rural and Queer literacies by getting to disrupt the norms and transform or imagine spaces of belonging authentically. Rural Queer literacies are not rootbound or confined to isolated pots—they are part of rich, diverse plant ecosystems traversing across geography; rural Queer students may eventually attend an urban school and Queer students in urban areas may go to a rural school. To do anything Queer, is to critically reject binaries and silos of place and identity. When individuals move in and out of places and/or develop their full selves, they carry those literacies representing place and identity.

Rural Queer Literacies as Identity Kits for Survival

Critical dialogical conditions should foster a multitude of literacies representing local and global experiences, especially from historically marginalised communities. Often literacies can loudly, or subtly, signal to learners' familiarity and comfort. In other words, literacies are a lifeline to identity kits (Gee, 2015) that work to sustain rural and Queer ways of knowing (Azano & Whitten, 2025; Donehower, 2022). When providing introductory subjectivities on early childhood memories in *Rural education and Queer identities: Rural and (out)rooted*, Azano and Whitten (2025) confessed,

If we've come to understand rural literacies as a primary discourse, an identity kit for understanding who we are and are about in a situation, as a utility for community sustainability, then there were no literacies, no expression, no kit or map or guide for understanding my growing Queer identity as a rural youth (p. 3)

When curricula and policies attempt erase or censor parts of humanity, they remove access to literacy opportunities. Azano and Whitten (2025) reference the power of literacies allowing for individuals to understand who they are in and the context in which they exist. Understanding the nuances and importance of both Queer and rural literacies may have provided an earlier voice for me. To understand rural Queer literacies is to validate and (re)centre diverse experiences in rural communities in order to combat the threat of stereotypes (Azano et al., 2021) and monolithic narratives that erase identities from rural narratives (Carey, 2023; Eppley, 2011). Embracing Queer rural literacies allows for youth to have the language and voice of their communities which then allows them to sustain their intersecting identities. Educators and researchers may expand conversations into examining the influences of literacy in identity development situated within the context of place(s) and power dynamics.

Critically Critiquing Cis-Heteronormativity and Metronormativity through Literacy Development

I often hear the phrase, if you love and care for someone, or some place, you can hold them accountable. Carey (2023) claimed,

The erasure of these Appalachian writers also exemplifies the invisibility of Queer Appalachians and other rural queer people within popular representations of homosexuality in the US. Such representations are primarily dominated by images of urban, white, largely upper-middle-class queer subjects, a phenomenon that queer theorist Jack Halberstam has dubbed 'metronormativity.' (p. 3)

Here, Carey expressed the possible dangers of relying on dominant narratives and popular representations to tell stories of place and humanity. Those dominant narratives can create devastating and isolating stereotypes of rural places and Queer individuals. Just as cis-heteronormativity upholds cisgender and heterosexual identities as the norm in American society, metronormativity places urban environments at the core of Queer lifeworlds. Critically critiquing literacies that challenge cis-heteronormativity and metronormativity requires individuals to audit their own assumptions and (re)examine issues of stereotype threat. Educators and researchers engaging in critical literacy scholarship may question what language and histories are emphasised in place and which identities are forced to migrate for safety and belonging.

By critically exploring both my rural and Queer literacy development, I better understand the ways in which farming, cooking, gardening, reading, and writing reconnect me to my communities while also acknowledging harms from religious and homophobic rhetoric. Normative assumptions risk potentially erasing complex intersecting literacies and lived experiences.

A Final Note

In an episode of The A24 Podcast titled *All the ways to be* (Washington & Vuong, 2020), Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong said,

Queerness in a way saved my life... Often we see queerness as deprivation. But when I look at my life, I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me. I had to make alternative routes; it made me curious; it made me ask, 'Is this enough for me?' (16:41)

This quote lingers in my mind, an earworm playing on a loop, because I also consider my rurality as a life saver—minus the homophobic rhetoric, occasional bully, and institutionalised religion

spreading hate. Returning to my roots through didactic stories of gardening, cooking, and exploring the farm reminds me of the resilience that rural Queer people possess in abundance. The current anti-Queer sociopolitical climate targeting youth in America, seeks to erase Queer identities from existence; however, Queer folks will continue to exist inside public school classrooms and in communities. I hope this autoethnographic essay encourages educators and scholars to consider intersections of literacy development, query how mobility can complicate lifeworlds, and disrupt dominant metronormative and cis-heterosexual assumptions. That childhood bus ride instilled in me, alongside many other rural youths, that being mobile is connected to education, while also reminding me that stories and literacies of place shape youths' ability to communicate and authentically exist. After all, rural school buses have always known Queer youths sharing hopes and dreams of their places and futures, while envisioning a world where love and acceptance conquers all geographic boundaries.

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