RURAL EDUCATION AND QUEER IDENTITIES

Rural and (Out)Rooted

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INTRODUCTION

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This book is a love letter to Queer youth and Queer educators in rural spaces. It is evidence that you are seen and valued. That you matter. That you deserve to be held in love and with respect in every single damn educational context in which you find yourself. It is also a love letter to the allies who are advocating for and supporting Queer youth in rural schools. This book began as a seed that has blossomed into a wildness beyond our imaginations.

Rural and *Out*Rooted

In rural education scholarship, the claim is often made that rural communities are tight-knit places where everybody knows everybody (along with all their business) and that rural people are rooted deeply in the communities from which they've sprung. We wondered if those same claims held true for Queer folk from rural places. What does it mean to be Queer and rooted in rurality—to be *out*rooted—particularly for those not wanting to be deracinated or *up*rooted from home, from familiar geographies, rural cultures, and environments? In this exploration, we begin first by sharing our own subjectivities.

Clint

Spoken into existence by the most honest humans,
seventh graders,
I just don't understand a world not
gettin' to love who you want,

stuck with me like purple glue
on an elementary school project
–oversimplified and ready to fall away

Surely, my grandmother,
an educator for over thirty years in her rural community,

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in which our family farmed for generations,
would have seen me.
now I know, as she walks with me in spirit,
she always did–
long before I understood what unconditional love meant.

Writing about where I'm from comes natural:
grand fantastical journeys of streams and pastures
tobacco pickin' for a summer job
snake-like roads, winding
neighbors sharing eggs and cannin' recipes
Sunday dinners: string beans, mac and cheese, and conversation.

Writing about who I am, is *now* just as natural:
educator, poet, scholar, and activist
supporter of the future generations of Queer youth
listener to the elders and voices from marginalized communities
farmer of diverse wildness
Queer and Rural.
A gift from the universe
(commonly held with weary),
my who and where
(re)rooting within a sense
of selfhood and home.

This collection of voices from the intersections of rural education and Queer identities is a lifeline, promise, validation, call for community, and dream—it is everything that saved me and told *me* that *we* belong from the roots of the Earth. As my grandma told anyone who'd listen: I was the best medicine she ever had. Well, for me—it's this collection. It's an herbal remedy we would have concocted in her kitchen derived from the plants we visited along our evening strolls through the gardens because it does for me what I did for her: exist, laugh, care, love, create. I'm rooted in spaces of care, education, and advocacy, unfolding with didactic narratives and lived experiences of place and identity; I am a rural Queer educator, scholar, and advocate.

Amy

If you had told me there was potato soup in my veins or that the holy spirit lived in a jar of my Nanny's grape jelly or pickled beets, I'd have believed you. My childhood fable, so full of Appalachian tales– I can no longer quite decipher the fictions from the lived truths, except for the enduring image of my younger self in that one stoplight town. Wild. Wiry. It's like I can touch her long stringy hair—*I wish I could*. I wish I had been the blue mountains circling, hugging her so that I might have whispered hope and shown her a future. Instead, they closed in like a vise, narrowed the sky above the holler, and twisted the water out of her like a dirty washcloth.

My Queer identity—then and now—is shaped (if not skewed) by my rural identity. Big Momma, my maternal great grandmother and matriarch of our expansive family, had eight girls and four boys. A local midwife, I hold an imagined snapshot of the three generations of women together as she brought my own mother into this world at our family

homestead—the home where the last of her 12, my Uncle Kenny, still resides. Big Momma died at just 48, long before my time, but her presence loomed large, and I grew up with the stories of her ingenuity in caring for such a large brood during the Depression.

The strong and hardworking Appalachian women who raised me were reflected in the formidable mountains—enveloping me in warmth at times and, in others, suffocating possibility. They symbolized a paradox of sorts—fierce independence cradled by maternal expectations, emblematic of the complexity of women's gender roles and expectations in relation to the rural idyll, a romanticized version of rural life, especially with regard to motherhood and community belonging (Little & Austin, 1996). I didn't necessarily want to have a dozen children and die before my 50th birthday, but I absolutely aspired to be a mountain. 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. The Queer women I had access to as a country kid of the 1980s (mostly in limited media images) looked, acted, sounded, and seemed nothing like the Big Mommas of my youth. I had internalized a mixed- and mis-message that queerness ran counter to rural and, without any obvious representation to the contrary, my aspirational rural felt unattainable.

In rural classrooms—*then and now*—there are rural youth (little Clints and Amys) who desperately need to know we can love *who* we love *where* we love to live. In our classrooms, we have students who are out and those who are closeted. We have students with invisible traumas. We have students who have been told confusing mistruths about their worth and value. We have students who are unsafe and whose lives are at risk. These are the reasons we need our classrooms to be affirming spaces. For me, this book is an overdue affirmation of that little girl still running free in the mountains. I see glimpses of her now and again in the mirror—her stringy hair replaced by gray wisps, Big Momma's broad grin showing up in what I can only hope is wisdom in my own. Like an optical illusion with reversible figures, I at long last see us both.

Joint Subjectivity

The fact that we are able to collaborate on this book is a professional privilege, and we are grateful not only for the academic space in which we work but also for the trust placed in us by the contributing authors in this volume. We are both white and able-bodied and neither of us identifies as trans or nonbinary, an important acknowledgment given the current sociopolitical (anti-Queer and anti-trans) climate. We know that our identities are historically privileged and also that Black trans women represent disproportionate targets of violent crimes. While we come to this work with personal and professional vantage points, we fully embrace our limitations and regularly consulted each other, our local Queer community of friends and colleagues, chapter authors, theorists (living and in other realms), and elders on virtually every aspect of this book. We honor the voices shared here knowing there are countless others in rural communities and small towns everywhere.

Getting into the Weeds

We have organized this book into three broad sections that bear fruit on this inquiry. Readers will note that sections include a variety of approaches—poetic, empirical, theoretical—alongside personal reflections, narratives, and praxis; and that chapter authors do not consistently or uniformly use Queer or LGBTQ+ or other iterations in their contributions. In our effort

to model Queer-affirming methodologies, these choices and terms were intentionally left at the discretion of authors. These place-based Queer-affirming methodologies take the shape of narrative inquiry, photovoice, poetry, and reflective research and incorporate methods such as centering positionalities, considering the ethics of Queer research (e.g., not outing participants, creating safe spaces for Queer folks to share their stories), and sourcing participants for broad understandings—or, as Roseth explains (see Chapter 8), "In a world with seemingly less and less regard for facts and reality, don't give up on persuasively telling a story rooted in research, data, and testimony" (p. 65). Chapter authors represent Queer parents, rural education scholars, rural youth, community members, allies, healthcare providers, teachers, educational leaders, and those from Queer-affirming organizations. They come from, by, and through a host of rural geographies—some they only survived and others where they thrived. These sections and their powerful voices embody the notion of rural and *out*rooted.

The first section, **Rural Taproots**, explores core, foundational tenets. A taproot grows downward into the earth (think of a carrot) and grounds us. Decades ago, George Ella Lyon gifted the world her poem, "Where I'm From," and she begins this section with a tribute to her friend, poet, and storyteller Lee Howard (1952–2003) from Clay County, Kentucky. Greenberg shares his experience presenting a 25th anniversary performance of *The Laramie Project*—in Laramie, Wyoming—a play memorializing that community's reaction to Matthew Shepard's murder. From the Great Plains of western Kansas to Yale to the *Daily Yonder*, journalist Fischer advocates for Queer representation and reveals his ruralness is his superpower. Childhood classmates Heasley and Baker unpack messages of homophobia and masculinity as they reflect on their schooling experiences. Gill's systematic literature review grounds these narrative reflections in a deep understanding of LGBTQ+ K12 students' experiences and well-being in rural schools and communities. Taproots are the central roots from which others grow, an image captured in Mann's essay as he describes his long "insurrection beard" and how it defies expectations for his college students on what it means to be a gay hillbilly elder in Appalachia. These chapters, our grounding taproots, are as much history as they are a living memory and call to action.

The second section, **Rural Root Systems**, explores a diffuse system of intertwining classrooms, leaders and advocates, and communities. A fibrous root is a fitting metaphor for these interconnected systems, each fine root touching and influencing the other.

The first group, ***Rooted in Classrooms***, begins with poet Willie Carver's chapter, "My Queerness Is My Teacherness," explaining how his braided identities—rural, Queer, teacher—make space for love and empathy in the classroom. Inspired by her transgender student, McAllister explores the power of Queer Straight Alliances and what it means to foster a rural sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ youth in the rural Mountain West. Reflecting on growing up gay and closeted in Southwest Virginia, Thompson shares his evolution to an out and proud educator and advocate. Anderson takes us from Nashville to a small rural community where he and his husband became the school's first openly Queer couple. Rural education scholar Shelton reflects on cornbread and community and a formative experience (for her and her students) supporting HIV+ patients as part of a rural school's community service requirement in the Bible Belt where she taught as an openly Queer teacher. And Pennell reflects on high school and college-level teaching across three diverse rural geographies through the lens of queer time. These powerful reflections serve as praxis for bringing into scope an understanding of life experiences and teacher identities—a sentiment explored in Roseth's chapter as he argues that supporting Queer teachers is supporting Queer students.

The second root system in this section, ***Rooted in Leadership and Advocacy***, explores the role of administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, school board members, front and central office staff, and others; and further explores complex and interdependent rural networks: remoteness and cultures of care (Cwikiel and Dick et al.), sports and Jesus (Peeples & Kraus), higher education and dreamspaces (Magness et al.), race and Queerness (Flowers & Hood)—each examining interwoven opportunities and challenges from narrative and empirical approaches. In a powerful piece of advocacy, Day's chapter explores microvalidations and argues that rural schools are uniquely positioned to celebrate Queer families.

The last set of roots in this system, ***Rooted in Community***, puts classrooms and educational leadership in dialogue with rural communities, beginning with Magnetek's ethnographic inquiry into Queer safe spaces in rural Alaska from her perspective as an African American transgender woman. Schey and colleagues describe Queer and trans advocacy efforts in small town community organizations, while Campbell celebrates Queer visibility in pride events and parades in Oxford, Mississippi. These praxis pieces bring to light what Bowman's study explores as rural spaces as places for Queer communities. This section closes with a powerful reflection between a mother and her transgender rural youth about the power of "camp magic" and the opportunities for community partners to foster Queer joy for rural youth. These interconnected rural systems in classrooms, leadership, and community serve as a powerful metaphor reminding us that healthy roots yield thriving plants.

The final section explores **Rural Aerial Roots**. Aerial roots grow above ground, sometimes from nonroot tissue—like the chosen families that emerge when we finally surface and can anchor and support plants to rocks and other structures.

Here we begin with a collection of chapters, ***Rooted in Nature and the Body***, exploring rural landscapes as informal Queer educators, as safe spaces, and as places to disrupt binaries. It begins with Wollenberg's winding metaphor of a river poem about being outed while teaching in a conservative community. Tate and colleagues explore radical Queer joy in nature, complete with gay cowboys and rock climbing drag queens as powerful symbols of visibility and liberation in places where Queer folk have long been told they don't belong. And in those rural spaces, how do we come to think about towering trees versus the crooked and queer ones? That's the question posed in Schmidt's unlearning and reimagination of a forestry curriculum. Too, our bodies are part of these vast natural scapes, and Brown exposes the body's anarchy and (trans)masculinity. Here, we explore Queer-affirming care and sex education courses with one poetic and two praxis entries from central Appalachia: O'Connor advocating for place-based educational workshops centering LGBTQIA+ health needs; Kwitney describing community-based, comprehensive, and holistic sexual education curriculum; and Gottschalk reflecting on stigmatizing sex ed ("or better yet the class to dread").

The last set of chapters, ***Rooted in Discovery and Selfhood***, exemplify the aerial roots that provide strength. In their exploration of Queer joy and belonging, Barnes-Gilbert and Prock use photovoice to explore LGBTQ+ knowledge production among students at a rural, midwestern university. From the perspective of a neurodiverse Queer Appalachian and first-generation college student, Dutton's journey through rural higher education challenges assumptions encountered in these spaces. Throughout all three sections, rural Queer methodologies are in practice, and Cook and Cain use poetry from reflexive journaling to illustrate how researchers can grapple with ethical tensions and revelations in their work with and for Queer communities. In her personal narrative of self-discovery against a backdrop of religion and rurality, Dodson reveals a constellation that cannot be unseen. Perhaps in the most fitting

example of this metaphor, aerialist Smith shares his search for community and meaning from service in the armed forces to finding a home in the circus. O'Quinn and McHenry-Sorber examine the experiences of transgender rural students who grew up in religiously conservative communities in West Virginia. In a rural landscape of poems, Prime reflects on their educational journey coming of age in the rural South as Queer and gender ambivalent. A complementary reflection in the Midwest, Zrain-Negley shares a personal narrative grappling with queerness and gender norms. Trans, Queer, autistic writer, Kibble, shares "GirlBoy," their astounding tale of self-discovery, advocacy, and authenticity. The book concludes with *Hillbilly Queer* author J.R. Jamison's poem in which he reminds us that "love is the only thing to ever conquer geography."

Pictured as the cover of this text, this patchwork of rooted networks is symbolized, in strong rural tradition, as a quilt made and photographed by Queer artist Casey Anne Brimmer. Missing from this patchwork are explicit chapters on experiences for two-spirit, Latine, or religious minority rural community members. While we draw from a broad range of geographies, we did not request racial, ethnic, religious, or other demographic information of contributors or their study participants; however, we acknowledge that racial and variously abled intersections are spaces for future research.

The authors in this collection share themselves: their scholarship, allyship, personal experiences, traumas, joys, and celebrations—their rural. During the review process, we paired chapter authors and asked that they be critical friends, offer feedback, and ask questions, to share the roses and thorns and suggestions for improvements from each other's chapters. What the authors returned to each other was a thing of beauty, a kindness beyond expectation. They sent love letters and notes of appreciation. It dawned on us that their contributions are far bigger than simply a chapter for an edited collection. They are validations—*pillars*—lifting up and supporting rural Queer existence. They are pillars of pride.

Pillars of a Pedagogy of Pride

For more than 50 years, the concept of *pride* has represented the persistent and insistent recognition and celebration of the existence, dignity, equality, and visibility of Queer people. The chapters in this book do the same. As editors, we pored over and cried and laughed and learned from these chapters and questioned how we might articulate actionable, pedagogical moves that constitute a pedagogy of pride, particularly in rural schools. In the critical tradition of Paulo Freire, alongside a chorus of critical and Queer theorists, scholars, and activists, we attempt here to make practical and explicit educational takeaways from these readings. As educators and scholars, we must embrace the queering of rural literacies so that young people see not only a possible future for themselves in rural spaces but also an identity for themselves *now* and in real time. Importantly, we argue a pedagogy of pride is a philosophical stance benefiting *all* students. All students benefit from pedagogical practices designed to restore and honor humanity.

Said differently: We present pride as a humanizing and liberating practice, a pedagogy of love (Darder, 2002) inclusive of all students and all educators, a framing that demands schools be a haven of safety and emancipation for *all*. In this framing, we use Queer to encompass a diversity of identities: lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, nonbinary, transgender, gender fluid, genderqueer, two-spirit, intersex, asexual, closeted, questioning, as well as the many other

beautiful terms humans have created and use to describe their identities. As a core tenet described herein, these identities, terms, and labels are not for our debate or approval. Like names and pronouns, they are ours to accept, embrace, and honor. Full stop.

These pillars are not exhaustive. There are *endless* actions we can take every school year, every day, literally minute-to-minute choices that acknowledge and embrace Queer students. Some of these may be life changing, others life*saving*. We distill here, from the work of this book, four that we believe are accessible starting points for any researcher, any ally, leader or activist, any community member—any *and every* educator committed to the lives of young people.

Validate Queer Existence in Rural Schools and Classrooms

The existence of Queer people must be validated by and in rural schools, as evidenced by a diverse teaching staff, a multicultural curriculum celebrating difference, and a school culture where all students can thrive. Representation has long been noted as a critical aspect in leveraging cultural diversity in the classroom. With an increasingly diverse student population with intersectional identities, there is a mismatch between students and the school workforce (predominantly white, middle-class women teachers; Taie & Goldring, 2020). Important aims and strategies have been employed to diversify staff so that young people have access to Black, Latine, Native, and disabled teachers. However, rarely (if ever) is representation of Queer teachers included in these discussions of representation (acknowledging, of course, the intersecting identities with the aforementioned groups). Queer representation is important everywhere—but in rural communities, schools may be the *only* place where a young person might experience these critically important validations. Rural schools can create spaces, as seen in Anderson's (Chapter 12) and Shelton's reflections (Chapter 13), for Queer faculty and staff so they feel safe to be their full selves at work. When teachers are permitted and encouraged to do so, they in turn model authenticity. This is vitally important not only for Queer youth (out or closeted) but also for cisgender and heterosexual students who learn that Queer folks exist and thrive as rural citizens and deserve the same respect and dignity as any other community member.

As many of the contributing authors noted in this collection, rural youth can too often grow up believing that Queer people exist only in urban centers like New York City or San Francisco. Queer people have always existed in rural spaces, but short of *Schitt's Creek* and a handful of examples it is rarely seen and celebrated in comparable ways as in urban depictions of pride and Queer life thriving. Validating rural Queer existence is anti-erasure, and it is a critical driver for making representation authentic. Supporting (dare we say *recruiting!*) Queer staff is one way, but there are countless others: a thriving Pride club, safe bathroom spaces, Queer-affirming curricula, access to (dare we say a *display of*) age-appropriate LGBTQ+ books and resources in the school library, use of pronouns in school correspondence, and explicit policies that protect Queer students from verbal and physical harm. Validating Queer existence in rural schools puts into practice the ways we can say to young people: You are seen. You are not alone. Nothing is wrong with you, and there are people who care and resources to support you. *Rural* provides us the ideal conditions to build tight-knit relationships, and rural schools can be sites for validation when representation may be lacking or non-existent elsewhere.

Resist Cis-Heteronormativity and Refute Queerphobia in Rural Schools

Educational leaders, teachers, and staff must resist cis-heteronormativity and refute Queerphobia in rural schools. This pillar speaks to actions that intentionally uplift trans and nonbinary youth and sexual minority students within rural schools. From the impact of a school board policy to the way a child and their parents are greeted in the front office, rural schools can become beacons of hope and havens of safety.

Cis-heteronormative practices are commonplace in rural schools, just as they are common in most places, including, for example, in the public comments of a school board during a public hearing, and in the texts commonly read in school (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*). Schools perpetuate cis-heteronormativity in a host of ways, including how students and their bodies are regulated through classroom and schoolwide norms, as noted in disciplinary procedures, dress codes, bathrooms, school events, language, assignments, sports, and so on. Not only do these reinforce and reproduce gender and sexuality norms and expectations (see Gill's Chapter 4), but they also reinforce binaries and make it more difficult for trans and gender-queer students to feel safe at school. However, there are actionable steps to resist these structures. With the simplest effort, teachers and educators can resist binary language ("boys and girls," "ladies and gentlemen"). Educators can acknowledge Queer identities in historical figures, authors, mathematicians, scientists, and artists. We can critique each assignment given to students. Ask if the assignment reinforces or resists cis-heteronormative practices. As Day points out (see Chapter 18), school celebrations like Mother's Day or Father's Day can be tricky. What could be seen as an innocuous assignment, like having students create family trees, can be disorienting. We know family trees may not be a fitting metaphor for many children, including those with divorced parents, children in foster care, children who are adopted, and children living in grandfamilies. The remedy is not disruptive; offer several metaphors as graphic organizers to students. Some families might look like a tree of the rural idyll—others might look like what Schmidt (Chapter 31) calls the unsung heroes and queer-looking trees of untold stories. Others might look like a constellation. Some might even be a rainbow.

School administrators can employ a similar critique. Interrogate policies and practices. During traditional homecoming events, for example, ask: Do spirit days lift up all students? Can we shift from homecoming "king" and "queen" to "royalty"? Dress codes can work on the same principle. In striving for decorum, focus on the objective (i.e., fully clothed young people) rather than gender body parts. In other words, a dress code need not be differentiated by gender; the same rules about tank tops or midriff shirts can be applied to all students. Depoliticize issues related to bathrooms and facilities. If the concern is about which body is in which facility, create safe single-use facilities where young people can do their business without judgment. Cultivate and nurture a culture of care (see Cwikiel's Chapter 14) and prioritize students' humanity and safety at the forefront of these decisions. Using the bathroom is the most basic of needs; yet we hear from far too many youth that they are not safe in terms of vaping, drug use, and bullying. And for Queer kids, these safety issues are magnified, and we tragically have the example of Nex Benedict (and many other undocumented or unknown cases) as evidence for just how unsafe they can be. Eliminate politics from this discussion and give *all students* the privacy, safety, and human decency they deserve.

To allow for heteronormative practices to continue is to invite anti-Queer and anti-trans attitudes and to perpetuate systemic discrimination in the form of Queerphobia. Resisting and refuting these norms creates space for liberating and authentic learning.

Prioritize and Advocate for the Inclusion and Well-being of All Rural Youth

The well-being of all rural youth relies on a basic premise of prioritizing and advocating for their inclusion. Yet, in several chapters of this text, we learn how school policies and personal belief systems adversely impact the experiences for Queer youth, both from research manuscripts and personal narratives. Queer teachers and students cannot leave their identity outside the school building no more than *any* of us can disregard our faith, politics, race, ethnicity, and other identities. But, as educators, our primary responsibility is to keep young people safe and thriving. We don't have to understand or agree with each other but, as educators, we do have to separate church and state. We have to acknowledge and embrace differences. We don't have to ban the books that are inconsistent with our personal identities and belief systems; instead, we have to ensure their availability to others for whom the book itself might be the only proof that their existence is real. We have to approach book bans with criticality. We must use reason as well-educated professionals to push back. For example, we've never taught Edgar Allan Poe to encourage students to commit twisted, violent acts—no more than teaching a text with Queer characters has the potential to *turn* youth Queer. As educators at all levels, including educational leaders, we must be the ones who stand up against bans and policies because a ban against a book or a topic is, ultimately, a ban against a people, a life-world, or a community.

Advocacy for Queer youth and educators in rural schools can be multifaceted; keeping in mind the school may be the only place a Queer youth or educator feels advocated for in their community. From Pride related symbols in the hallway to quotes from Queer voices on the walls, to protective policies to inclusive curricula, to place-specific resources to creating spaces to celebrate identity. Rural schools can be the models of advocacy and activism through one of our most powerful tools: education. Invite Queer individuals, especially Queer rural youth, to conversations about policies or issues related to Queer experiences or communities. In rural communities, where there may be fewer visibility out Queer individuals, we must advocate for those who are closeted or questioning and disrupt assumptions that public schools only serve cis-heterosexual students. If state and federal policies, often negligent in thinking through place-conscious impacts in rural communities, target a population of vulnerable youth, rural schools may be the *only* collective voice to bring attention to place-specific issues. In order to implement a pedagogy of pride, one must be ready to advocate for the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of *all* youth, especially those who are marginalized, as we serve to fully care for their well-being inside and outside school.

Imagine this advocacy nurturing schools as havens of safety where personal politics and religion do not harm others. Actually, let's do more than imagine. Educators critiquing practices rooted in cis-heteronormativity are providing gender-affirming care and advocating for inclusion. School counseling is a form of safe and gender-affirming care. Freedom to express a style through clothing can be gender-affirming care. Allowing youth to access and read books that reflect their identities can be gender-affirming care. There are many other ways people can seek out gender-affirming care; however, in a rural community, often with fewer healthcare and mental health resources, these relatively simple acts of gender affirmation can be lifesaving. Too often, underdefined, ill-advised, assumptive, anti-trans, homophobic, and heteronormative practices and policies hurt *all* students and create hostile environments that police student bodies and freedom of expression. We must teach and model empathy by embracing difference not rebelling against it or shutting down the perspectives and lived

experiences we don't understand. When we do that, we teach fear and absolutism—culprits of hate and division. Instead, we can serve as change agents in our rural schools by deconstructing power structures that reinscribe exclusionary practices.

Queer Rural Literacies

In educational discourse, we use the notion of the *hidden* curriculum to talk about what kids learn outside the school-based curriculum. Hiding in plain sight, they are the messages communicated to young people through a teacher's actions, a school-based policy, the dress code, which flags are allowed in classrooms, bumper stickers on the cars in the school parking lot, local support of a school's mascot, and the size of a celebration when the basketball team wins the state championship. To discuss culture, the metaphor of an iceberg is often used to describe the "seen" parts of the culture—the tip of the iceberg that includes language, dress, religion, and behaviors—and the "unseen" parts of culture—the deep values and attitudes that influence that culture. The first three pillars describe what is seen, and we can certainly do more and better to have a diverse staff, to have curricula that represent and reflect *all* students, advocacy measures that first and foremost protect students, and inclusion criteria for all. These are the actions we can point to, a Pride rubric if you will, to say *yes, this school or university or community organization has practices and policies and procedures to ensure the wellness and inclusion of Queer people at every level.* Here, we provide a description of a pillar that speaks to the hidden curriculum, the unseen parts of the iceberg.

Queer, in this pillar, is used as a verb: to interpret rural literacies differently, to reject traditional notions of rurality. Rural literacies, in this context, are not the literacies of reading and writing. They are the literacies of reading the world (Freire, 1970); they are the literacies of identity kits (Gee, 2014). They are the tools for rural sustainability and ways of knowing (Donehower et al., 2007). To queer rural literacies means to reimagine rural spaces as spaces home to Queer literacies and existence.

Rural education scholars have long promoted the use of place-based and critical placed pedagogies to understand the influence of *contexts* for learning on the *contents* of teaching. Critical pedagogies of place prompt critical questions about places—who's in them, who used to be, the harm done by and to whom, its ecological wellness, political parity in the community, and so on and so forth. This pedagogical stance becomes a scaffold for learning, for making meaning from the curriculum, and to engage learners and promote community stewardship. To queer rural literacies, then, is to ensure in these critical explorations of place that Queer experiences and narratives are told and upheld.

A connection to nature, for example, is often used synonymously with a love for rural. As evidenced in the chapters in this text, this is consistent with Queer communities. While popular depictions (even historical tellings) of Pride movements focus on urban places, there are just as many stories of thriving communities of Queer farmers. Sharing these narratives allows us to queer rural literacies. Centering place within a pedagogy of pride acknowledges the uniqueness of rurality and uplifts ecological diversity and the metaphors that nature can grant us so we feel a sense of belonging.

A pedagogy of pride is prideful of the lessons learned when immersed in nature—tending to the wildlife on hobby farms, exploring creeks looking for crawfish, or plucking food from our gardens for lunch. From the lessons of rural landscapes, we learn to self-sustain

and sometimes rely on our neighbors for support. Nature provides didactic narratives that can allow Queer individuals to feel a sense of belonging in the winding rivers (Wollenberg's poem in Chapter 25) and crooked trees (Schmidt's poem in Chapter 31)—the radical joy in nature (see Chapter 26). Rural education that leverages a pedagogy of pride acknowledges natural surroundings and values the lessons learned when we work the land, garden for our elders, and rest in the pastures to feel fully ourselves. Nature gives rural Queer folks breath. Living away from urban spaces with land can allow Queer folks to be sustainable, to push back on pressures from a capitalist society, to be authentic—trees and flowers rarely care what we wear, how loudly we sing, what our bodies do when a good song comes on, or who we love.

Our rural schools may not be situated in the middle of a farm or woods, but the metaphors and call of nature can be spaces where Queerness blossoms. Let youth care about the natural environment as a way for them to learn to care for themselves. Queer folks are often put into spaces where they have to care so damn hard for themselves just to exist. Nature, as it constantly does, teaches us that transformation is just part of the universe and nothing is permanent. Therefore, within a pedagogy of pride that uplifts natural surroundings, folks may finally have space to heal, feel safe, and transform into themselves.

Conclusion: Affirm Rural Youth Lifeworlds

We are writing and advocating for *youth*. We are writing about protecting *students*. We are advocating for practices to educate *children*. We are speaking with and to the Queer educators and elders whose very existence serves as proof to young people that they, too, can exist, love, thrive, find jobs and joy and hope—because we, too, were the young Queer kids who needed to see ourselves thriving in Queer futures. We need humanizing practices and safe spaces because there are real children right now considering the end of their lives. We need these practices because when we don't actively teach love, we are actively teaching hate and Queerphobia.

In other words, it may not get better. Or, rather, Queer youth shouldn't have to wait for it to get better. When we use the future tense or discuss school policies as preparing young people *for* the real world, we diminish the very real and immediate life they are living *now*. This collection is not limited to K12 experiences, but we feel it imperative to acknowledge that young people have less agency and that we, as adults, advocates, activists, and educators, must affirm that Queer youth are more vulnerable to policies and procedures that cause harm. They are victims of sexual assault. They live with the everyday risk of a school shooting. They are at a greater risk for self-harm and suicide. It will not get better if we sit idle and remain silent. Students are required by law to attend school, yet they are told to attend and treat school like it's their job. Then, in kind, we should not expect them to work in an unhealthy or abusive environment for 12 years. Rural schools are *real* youth worlds that matter now—the rural lifeworlds that shape identities. A pedagogy of pride in rural schools acknowledges this in our literacy and pedagogical practices. As it has been said, Queerphobia has a cure, and it's education.

The first part of a root that emerges from a seed is called a *radicle*. Another fitting term for our conceit. We need radicles—a radical pedagogy of pride—to upend systemic and oppressive pedagogies.

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