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Can You See Me Now? Rural Queer Archives and a Call to Action

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PreScript: Don't Let Your Girls Grow Up to be Cowboys

Circa 1966, my little queer heart fluttered when I "saw" gender and sexual difference for the first time. Myrtle was her name, Myrtle Miles, Myrt to those who knew her, at least according to my 86-year-old aunt who seems to have gone to school with Myrtle. "She was a character," says my aunt. Code for queer, I now see. She played the guitar and sang at every Wyoming State Fair throughout my childhood. Butch. Men's fancy snakeskin cowboy boots. Men's bolo tie. Men's pearl buttoned snap shirt. Men's pants. Men's big belt buckle. Men's hair. I loved Myrtle. Myrt. I don't remember any other Myrtles in my early life. Myrtle never knew it, but she was my hero.

The exigencies for this exploratory essay are multi-variant and interpenetrating: a heterosexist if not homophobic encounter with rural National Writing Project (NWP) teachers; an undergraduate glbtq literature class that I forced into an imaginary proximity with the NWP teachers; a backlash of state-level policy to non-straight rights advocacy; the onslaught of bullying against (and sometimes murder of) those who are perceived as gendered or oriented differently from the norm; and the continued depression and high suicide rates among queer, transgender, and inter-sex youth. As I began work on this paper, several states already had or would be attempting to enact legislation that outlaws any reference to homosexuality in public schools (Utah, Alabama, Tennessee). These policy moves were being made even as federal legislation, such as the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the Supreme Court challenge to DOMA were moving forward; social media was still vibrating with news of Tyler Clementi's suicide; and, I had just failed miserably in an attempt to have rural public school teachers in a National Writing Project Summer Institute include queer stories and lives in their curricula, let alone to imagine what queering their classrooms might entail.[1] This failure haunts me every day of my teaching life.

In the essay that follows I explore rural queer issues of (in)visibility (and haunting trauma) through my own rural queer experiences and remembrances and two very different teaching moments, one with NWP Teachers (and by extension their students) and one with my students in a glbqt class on a progressive (though rural)

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campus. While the teaching moments I discuss are in reality separate, they have become merged and connected in my imaginary; one experience attempts to speak to the other. As this imaginary merging started, I began thinking, rather obsessively, about glbtq artifacts as resources for students and teachers. Thus, this essay also broaches queer archives as potentially powerful sites for queer visibility. Some of my own queer memories, like the PreScript that opens this article, disrupt the text, serving as a mini-personal archive now made public.

The PreScript represents my first "queer" remembrance. I could take up any number of moments in this memory, but it is the repetitive tension between invisibility and visibility that intrigues me. The coded "character" for queer is a denial of visibility. An absence of other "Myrtles" is a sign of invisibility. (Surely there were others?) And yet, counter to invisibility, there (here?) was Myrtle, dressed to the nines in boots and bolo tie, performing, making herself visible. Moreover, "I now see" the code. This tension haunts me—in this memory, but also in my teaching life.

Queer in Composition

My hope is that this essay adds to the relatively small collection of queer scholarship in composition studies and even more specifically to the nearly non-existent scholarship in rural queer composition. It is a humble gesture toward recovering and creating rural queer archives that may impact heterosexist and cis-gendered teaching practices while contending with the vexing issues of queer visibility and invisibility particularly though not exclusively within rural sites. [2]

Scholars have been publishing on queer matters for quite some time. It has not been until fairly recently, however, that scholars have begun to examine issues surrounding rural queers.[3] The field of rhetoric and composition itself first began to address queer issues in the late 1980s with the occasional panel and a Special Interest Group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Early scholarship included Hart's "Literacy and the Lesbian/Gay Learner," Sloane's "Invisible Diversity: Gay and Lesbian Students Writing Our Way into the Academy," Rothgery's "'So What Do We Do Now?' Necessary Directionality as the Writing Teacher's Response to Racist, Sexist, Homophobic Papers," Miller's "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone: Assessing Homophobic Student Writing," and Malinowitz's monograph, *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities*. *College English* published a special issue on Gay and Lesbian Studies/Queer Pedagogies in 2002, and in 2004, *JAC* published a special issue on queer theory and composition.

Jonathan Alexander has his hand in much of the recent scholarship. In 2009, he and David Wallace published "The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship," in which they survey and analyze fifteen years of "LGBT/queer studies and composition/rhetoric studies" (300). They note that the inclusion of queerness in the field pales in comparison to that of other diversity issues. Alexander and Wallace seem hopeful at the end of their review and analysis, and they

renew their own commitment not only to queer's "theoretical but also to its intimate and multifaceted pedagogical relevance to our work as compositionists" (318). But by 2012, however, when Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes published "Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition" in *JAC*, Alexander has decided that queer cannot be a subject for composition at all.

Since visibility is an important concern of this essay, I want to briefly review three essays that were formative for me, and that focus on the thorny issue of visibility. One could argue that much (if not all?) of the literature on queer and composition is about visibility and invisibility, directly or indirectly. The construction of the closet ensures that any of our literature addressing coming out, inclusion of queer material, or queering our teaching or curricula is in some way about queer visibility. Moreover, raising and risking queer cannot help but be about visibility since it can only be seen in relation and relief to the hetero-normative assumptions of culture. Scott Lloyd DeWitt's and Jonathan Alexander's essays published in the 14th volume of the 1997 issue of *Computers and Composition* are two of the earliest works directly addressing web technology and non-normative sexualities. DeWitt, as an out gay man wanting to form a sound theory and pedagogy for the teaching of writing in the new era of computer technology, takes up queer visibility and opposition to it on the web. His essay, "Out There on the Web: Pedagogy and Identity in Face of Opposition," stems from a concern over what his students might encounter if they choose to make visible non-straight identities. DeWitt was moved to conduct this study because, as he notes:

> Negative images of g/l/b people and lives become reality when nothing counters. In a world where people do not see real gay and lesbian people living their real lives, these negative images gain power in that they are the only representations available. These negative images are granted power that is potentially identity forming. (231)

As a teacher committed to integrating new technologies into his teaching of writing and fully expecting non-straight students to begin to use the web to create g/l/b identities, he investigates the nature of such literacies in web writing. Toward thoughtful pedagogy that takes the web into account, DeWitt reports on what he learns when he interviewed six research subjects who had created or were associated with a specific web page. DeWitt specifically asked his interviewees if they identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual on their sites and discovered that those who were "out" on their web sites signaled that through "text and design elements to represent that they are g/l/b" (236). A case of homophobic trolling endured by one of his subjects caused DeWitt to worry deeply about how some students might fare under such attack.

Alexander's essay for the same issue of *Computers and Composition*, "Out of the Closet and Into the Network: Sexual Orientation and the Computerized Classroom," is another of the field's first to note the power of the web for providing students means for probing "the relevance of sexual orientation to all students' lives, whether they are lesbian, bisexual, gay, or straight" (208). While the essay focuses more on role playing

sexual identities in networked classrooms than on information available in web spaces, it certainly points to Alexander's later work, which is some of the most thoughtful we have on queer archives.

David L. Wallace's piece in the 2002 *College English* special issue on lesbian and gay studies and queer pedagogy, titled "Out in the Academy: Heterosexism, Invisibility, and Double Consciousness" is noteworthy as ruralness and visibility intersect in this essay. Wallace shares with readers three sketches from homophobic encounters he had as a faculty member at Iowa State. The rural setting in which Iowa State resides is important enough that Wallace alludes to it more than once. Of primary interest to Wallace, however, is the way in which the three encounters he describes catapult him into coming out as a gay man, to making his gayness visible. In each case the experience is mostly positive, but nonetheless, Wallace makes clear the fear, unease, and risk he felt doing so. His hope, though, was to create a "discursive and rhetorical shift" where in "getting more traditional colleagues to be able to read texts and situations from perspectives that engage differences according to race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social positions" is possible (54). He goes on to say about his three encounters:

> from a theoretical perspective, these examples have tacitly raised the question of how one moves from object to subject status…, that is, how one speaks back to cultural narratives that write one as either visible or illegible. For lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and the transgendered (as well as for those of other marginalized identities), finding the means to speak may be the primary issue in rhetoric…
>
> Although the inclusion of queer perspectives and discourse can provide an important means for transforming culture, it would be a mistake to presume that such changes will necessarily be welcome. (65)

Becoming visible, as he suggests, has risks and certain pushback from hetero-normative culture at large.

Information and images have exploded in digital spaces in ways that were hard to imagine in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes remind us of the potential rhetorical space for digital queer archives in their recent web text in *Enculturation*, "Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archives." Alexander and Rhodes bring the classical appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos as organizing heuristics to the idea of digital queer rhetorical counterpublics. As they see it, "the online queer archive offers us a nearly unprecedented opportunity to think the body in rhetorical practice—and in this case, the queer body in queer rhetorical practice." They go on to theorize the potential of a rhetorical turn to queer archives while simultaneously creating a queer archive. This text is one of the most complex, intriguing, and groundbreaking in the field. I return to it later.

Beyond Wallace's 2002 article, conversations about rural queerness are slow to enter the field, even though rural sexuality (and violence) haunts our writing through repeated references, left unexplained or unexamined, to Matthew Shepard's death. (See,

for instance, Alexander and Rhodes "Queer Rhetorics" as well as Nichols.) In a rare article focused on rural and queer issues in the teaching of writing, Danielle Mitchell's 2008 *Composition Studies* essay, "I Thought Composition Was About Commas and Quotes, Not Queers: Diversity and Campus Change at a Rural Two-Year College," Mitchell points out that the cultural and geographic profiles of many rural community colleges include an ongoing "chilliness" and that the closet is much more than a mere "historical metaphor" (23).[4] She argues that, given the situational context of this rural profile, many educators, herself included,

> face the specific pedagogical task of using their introductory composition course as both a site of writing instruction and a critical zone of cultural contact. Simultaneously, then, the goal is to facilitate improvement in student writing while also broadening their range of cultural experiences in order to better foster diversity, making room on campus for difference—different subjectivities, different ideas, and different expectations. (23)

While things are not so hostile in my own rural, yet fairly progressive university, what Mitchell describes—the chilliness, the silence, the lack of any direct or open support for gender or identity variant students—fits the profile of our public schools here in Appalachian Ohio. Indeed, the ongoing bullying and ostracizing of students who are, or who are perceived to be, outside the gender and sexual binary would also support the rural profile that she discusses. A little over three years ago, in a town from which our Writing Project has participating teachers, a cell phone camera captured video that was then sent out on social media of a young man being beaten for his perceived "gayness." As we know, such incidents occur frequently across geographic locations. I would note, as well, in spite of the perceived progressiveness of the institution in which I work, that there remain plenty of spaces emanating a sense of chilliness. While campus and classrooms may, for the most part, be reasonably glbqt friendly, Uptown, which boasts multiple bars on each block, has no gay or lesbian identified bar. For that, a 70-mile trip north is required. Also, the prevalent bar culture Uptown sparks the typical misogynistic cat calling and harassment of women and those who identify as or are perceived to be outside the norm. And as if that were not enough, I have personally heard local teens and early twenty-somethings who live in the surrounding hills and counties plan to go "queer hunting" near campus. I can only hope that these huntings remain metaphorical, and I do confess to keeping an eye in the local paper for any queer bashings.

Recently, Garrett W. Nichols, in "The Quiet Country Closet: Reconstructing a Discourse for Closeted Rural Experiences," narrates his own past as a rural queer in an attempt to create discourses that make his own rural, closeted past relevant. He explains that,

> to be closeted in a rural community is to lack access to certain available discourses through which to understand one's own experiences. I

> recognize that the closet takes on many forms and many gradations for different people. For me, the closet was totalizing and informed by intersecting dynamics of family, community, and religion.

Nichols is unable to access his own queerness because there were no reference points within his community in which to recognize it. Poignantly, he does state, near the beginning of his queer tale (archive) that he is very much alive, is not suicidal, and has never been shot at in the woods nor tied to a fence, a clear reference to Matthew Shepard that many queers would immediately recognize (although an astonishing number of my current college students would not). As Nichols's narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that school experiences are also central to the totalizing closeting he experienced, with—as is often the case—the ever present bullying and teasing that accompanies even a whiff of something "off" with one's sexuality in rural school settings. Though never beaten, he clearly bears the memories of bullying. Moreover, issues of queer invisibility are implicit in the point Nichols makes about a lack of discursive means by which "to understand one's experiences." I firmly believe that schooling ought to provide these means. It is a matter of social justice.

Trauma Waxing (The Teachers)

While the NWP teachers I work with are painfully aware of bullying of all kinds and were generally open to thinking about teaching and social justice, raising queer issues with them did not go well. They were directly asked to confront issues of sexuality, orientation, and gender variance in their own classrooms. Our catalyst for opening the discussion was "It's Elementary in Appalachia: Helping Prospective Teachers and Their Students Understand Sexuality and Gender," an article by Kent State Professor Patti Capel Swartz that argues for integrating lgbtq literature into elementary and high school classrooms, as well as the film *It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School,* to which Swartz' article refers.[5] Only a couple of the teachers were willing to publicly state that they would consider bringing queer lives and history into their curricula. While our discussions of race and poverty seemed to emotionally tire the teachers, and there was some resistance to "dwelling" on race in discussions, on the whole they expressed a much more positive response to working on teaching issues related to race and poverty than they did to issues of gender and sexual variance and identity. Teachers were hesitant and clearly ill at ease considering queer contributions to literature, art, history, or science, let alone for inclusion in their classrooms. I had hoped to proceed to a discussion of problems related to using "add a book and stir" approaches to race or gayness, but we never got that far. They did voice their concerns that acknowledging anything outside of the bounds of heterosexuality would upset the children because gender and sexual difference can be "uncomfortable," that it would be unfair to Christian children, that parents would be upset, and because the teachers were not sure they had enough (or any) queer children in their classrooms to warrant attention. This last assertion disturbed me because in other discussions it was clear that the teachers would willingly revise their

curricula to "accommodate" immigrant and racially diverse students so that all children felt love and acceptance, even if they had only one student that the teachers could identify as such. While perhaps I should not have been unduly surprised, I was caught off guard by the firm resistance from a group of teachers usually open to experimenting with curriculum.

The NWP considers sharing best practices through demonstrations a key element of the "teachers teaching teachers" model. While I did not expect teachers to completely revise their teaching demonstrations based on our discussion surrounding inclusion of queer issues, I did expect that the needs and teaching of queer children and youth would at least be raised in subsequent discussions on diversity and teaching for social justice. That explicitly did not happen. Instead, while other kinds of difference and ways of teaching tolerance through curriculum were directly addressed in their demonstrations, there was dead silence regarding all things queer, transgender, or gender bending. The teachers simply did not allow for any sightings of queerness among their students. When we as Writing Project Directors tried to force the issue, the response defaulted to hostility and comments about their own and their students' identities as Christians.

While it was the teachers who were present in the physical learning space of the Summer Institute, I was terribly haunted by the students of these teachers—students physically absent, yet in a way, very present. For me, a dotted line connected those rural public school students to our work and to their teachers' homophobic, cis-gendered, and heterosexist responses and dismissals. We were, after all, reading, researching, and writing about how to teach literacy to their students. In this way, then, the teachers' students, students I have never met nor taught, are as much the subject of this article's excursion as are my own students. Again, I find myself returning to issues of visibility and invisibility. Queer Appalachian students were doubly denied existence, once in their own physical classrooms and again during the Summer Institute as their teachers refused to speak of them.

Interlude: Migration , Silence, Absence, Invisiblity

I have lived in rural America for all but nine years of my life, four years when I was in my twenties and the other five when I was in my late thirties. I was born and raised in Wyoming. My mother moved to Portland, Oregon, during my last year of high school, and I moved to be with her four years later. After finishing the last two years of my bachelor's degree and my master's degree in Portland, I moved to rural New England. I then moved to rural Mississippi. Four years later I moved back to Portland and five years after that I moved to Appalachia, five miles from a small rural village that bears my mailing address. My migration pattern may resemble the common rural-queer-moves-to-urban-center-for-new-and-better-life trope. But, even during the time I lived in Portland, I felt decidedly rural in my identity. I did not migrate to an urban center because of my queerness, and though I think it is fair to say that living in an urban center impacted my understanding of queerness, I have never been an urban queer. Moving to very different parts of the country has also taught me that there are considerable differences

among rural geographies and rural identities, queer or otherwise. In other words, there is not one rural queer. Geography itself plays into this. Wyoming, for instance, is far less populated than Ohio or West Virginia, and towns are spread out over hundreds of miles of land. Queer isolation is hard to overcome if an urban center like Denver is a seven to eight hour drive. Imagine this physical space pre-internet…

I teach queer composition, queer rhetorics, and queer literature to undergraduates and graduates in part because I inhabit a queer identity. Yet, neither in my college courses nor in the Summer Institutes for the Writing Project do I always explicitly "come out." But neither, I argue, do I closet myself. The fact that I do not necessarily explicitly declare my queerness in these circumstances makes some lgbqt identified people livid. They feel I am being cowardly. They feel I am betraying others who live outside the norm. They feel that my not explicitly coming out reifies the closet that is so deadly and deadening for queers. Perhaps they are right. Even I am perplexed by my contradictions, my longing for both visibility and invisibility. I present ambiguously. This ambiguity, though, is part of how I present queer. And, I would argue, that my rural sense of self at least partially shapes this. Those who want to can read and recognize queer. They do "see" me. My queerness erupts, outside of disclosure, in several ways: my playfulness; my (mostly) suppressed rage; my collection of shoes that together make up a rainbow; the books that line my office walls; the classes that I teach; and through any other number of clues, some subtle and some not so subtle. Only on occasion has an undergraduate remained "clueless." The Writing Project teachers, on the other hand, seem to misread, or not read, my ambiguity, my queerness. There seems to be no hint that queerness might exist somewhere within our Summer Institute's classroom walls. The fact that they can't or don't is part of why I argue for rural queer visibility. Yes, I am aware of my own contradictions here.

How, I can hear you wondering, can you expect to be visible if you don't come out? Coming out verbally and explicitly is only one way of being visible. Usually, within the Writing Project, I identify first and foremost as a teacher. I do so because that is in fact who I am. I orient to the world far more as a teacher in my daily life than I do through my rather complicated set of desires. As many who write about intersectionality have noted, sexual identity may not be the only identity one wishes to inhabit, or in some cases, such as race, be unable to inhabit. With NWP teachers, I forestall discussions of my identity as a queer researcher working on queer subject matter. We are starting our exploration first and foremost as teachers, and once we are teachers "together," I am better placed to traverse new territories with them. Clearly invisibility and visibility remain at war in these forays.

Whether or not a teacher (or a student, or anybody for that matter) decides to come out or not, the fact that there is a "closet" is concrete evidence of invisibility in the culture at large. Honestly, I might have opened the closet door with a different group. But as the conversations with this group unfolded, all of the directors of the Writing Project, not just me, felt that my doing so would risk shutting down their exploration rather than prying it open. It is also true that I was not looking forward to feeling more trauma, trauma that arose and attached itself to me through all of my past experiences and through the present experience of hostility and through all that renders invisible (not even viable) anything outside of heterosexuality and gender conformation. I was also not interested in having them dismiss our discussions as my "homosexual agenda." There was too much at stake. In this case, we made a strategic teaching decision. I say "we" because the other three members of the team did not explicitly "out" me and because we discussed whether or not I ought to explicitly disclose my

queer identity.

Other scholars have written about "risking queer," so beyond the above interlude I won't belabor that point here, other than to say that whether one is in any real danger or not, feelings of fear, risk, and danger are often present facts. As my interlude exposes, even those of us fairly comfortable in our queer skins, comfortable enough to write about it professionally, can still feel it.

Engendering Archives

Shortly after the Summer Institute in which I challenged teachers to discuss queer issues, Alexander and Rhodes published a multi-modal essay in *Enculturation* ("Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive" 2012) and a companion video essay in *technoculture: an online journal of technology in society (*"Queered"). "Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive" makes an argument for public archival representations of queer lives. They argue for bringing queer archives directly into the work of queer composition and rhetoric. They interweave visual queer archives into the textual argument for queer (re)imaginings of ethos, pathos, and logos. Most of the archival material they retrieve and present, however, represents urban artifacts. Most certainly web 2.0 technologies ensure that rural and suburban archival queer material can be located, but it remains far less prominent than urban queer archives. Several times while searching specifically for rural queer sites, I encountered broken links and disappointment. As those who were born into the digital age participate in the creation of archives, we can expect archival material that reflects the experiences of non-urban queers to flourish, hopefully rapidly, but currently it remains less well represented.[6] Alexander and Rhodes got me thinking about rural queer archives and the possibility of shifting the responses to queerness by rural teachers and students. This ultimately led to my asking students in a glbqt literature course at the university to create archives of queerness, based on what they felt needed more visibility. I longingly imagined a direct connection between them and their archives to the teachers, and through the teachers, to queer Appalachian youth. I will discuss these archives shortly. Suffice it to say that, while I longed for direct connections, I had at least created dotted lines between my college students, the NWP teachers, and the teachers' Appalachian students through the discussions, readings, and composing assignments in the college literature course.

Queer Rural/Rural Queer

Proposing visibility for queerness, and especially rural queerness is complicated. Mary L. Gray's book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* points out how much the role of traditional family plays in trying to do queer advocacy. Her ethnographic research reveals that, where urban queers are able to form alternative or

non-traditional family structures, this practice is by far more difficult to do in rural areas. Also, she notes that networks such as the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) are seen as forcing themselves on rural communities. It is worth mentioning that the movie *It's Elementary,* the foundation for introducing our Writing Project teachers to queer curricular possibilities, had the direct sponsorship of GLSEN. According to Gray's research, rural communities often close ranks against what they see as "urban agitators," and outside pressure. I can't help but wonder if at least some of the teachers responded to the film in this light, even though some of the schools featured in the documentary were rural schools.

Gray's research also points to issues I find pertinent. For many rural queers, staying in the family network is critical. Alternative families are less available than in urban centers. Often, being able to stay with family means keeping one's queerness as invisible as possible, or at least unable to be "read" by hetero family and community members. I intimately know this reality and thus recognize that on multiple levels it troubles my desires to make rural queer visible. As Gray's study reveals, "'Rural communities' material dependencies on structures of familiarity and the value placed on conformity as a sign of solidarity intensify the visibility of compulsory heterosexuality's hegemonic sexual and gender norms" (138). Given our reliance on the hetero/homo binary, queerness of all kinds would, it seems, escape visibility and reinforce the notion, as expressed by a teacher in the Summer Institute, that non-straight children are not present enough (code for "I don't have any queer kids and if I do I don't want to know it") to warrant any change in a heterosexist curriculum and teaching practices.

Gray's data also clearly reveal, however, that rural youth do seek digital archival material:

> A media in situ approach applied to this fieldwork shows rural queer youth prioritizing particular genres of media engagement. Rural youth used the Internet, particularly engagements with youth-spun websites and personal ads on commercial media properties like Gay.com, to confirm the existence of queerness beyond their locales and to strategize how to bring that queerness home to roost. (127)

We might ask why rural queer youth must "confirm the existence of queerness beyond their locales." In part it is because of the lack of rural queer archival material—invisibility. Moreover, it is because metropolitan queers, including academics and artists, feed anti-ruralism. As Scott Herring notes in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, the storyline that all of us are fed is that, in order to have a life, rural queers need to get on the next bus out of town, head for the city. "Recent strains of queer theory and lgbtq politics," Herring argues, dismisses rurality; the rural "(take your pick: Idaho, North Carolina, small-town America, hick) is shelved, disavowed, denied, and discarded in favor of metropolitan sexual cultures such as New York City, San Francisco, or Buffalo" (5). Although Herring goes on to argue that there is indeed a

thriving culture of rural queerness and queer artists that have critiqued the metropolitan norms, and in fact collects an archive of novels, memoirs, journals, and photographs as evidence, it still remains that his archive is one of the few. As an archive published by a university press, it also remains outside the reach of most rural queer youth. And, in my twenty-five plus years of teaching in rural America, I have come to believe that there may be less access for rural queer youth to any number of queer archives than we like to imagine.

Trauma Waning (What the Students Said)

The students who took the queer literature class, like the youth Gray studies in *Out in the Country,* know their way around the internet. As I mentioned above, I asked my class to compose queer archives in order to make visible, through image, some part of queer culture that they believe *needs* visibility. I shared with them my experiences with the teachers in the Writing Project and, likewise, shared with them how frustrated and devastated I felt with the teachers' responses. Most students were two to three years removed from their high school experiences, though there were a few first-year students; all but two or three of the thirty-four students adamantly concurred that their teachers in K-12 did not bring queer narratives, experiences, or discussion into the curriculum. Only two out of thirty-four students knew about (but had never seen) the AIDS Quilt. The majority of them agreed that in their high schools the possibility that any of them (students or teachers) might not be heterosexual, if imagined, went unspoken. The exceptions to this were students who attended urban, arts magnate schools. One straight-identified student took the queer course because she is applying to graduate schools with a focus on Adolescent Literature and felt that her own lack of knowledge and absence of experience with queer people or queer material would be a detriment to her future students.[7]

I did not require students to choose images from rural settings, nor images of identities that are marked as rural. I asked them to create archives where they believe we need visibility and to consider placing those archives in the public domain in some way. For most of them, this placing meant solely the web; but a few of them did a pamphlet drop around campus and Uptown. Against the backdrop of our discussions, which did include ongoing and explicit discussion, reading, and viewing of rural, urban, and suburban contexts, the students decidedly went in their own directions. None of them chose to do archives that could be identified as particularly rural. When they did concern themselves with geopolitical boundaries, it was usually on a global level; more often, however, they chose other thematic frameworks, such as lesbian motherhood, transgender activism, queer punk, third genders, queer athletes, black transgender prisoner abuse, and transgender and queer children to name a few.

Though I personally desired more intentional rural archives, I was pleased at how students gravitated toward images and texts that acknowledged various intersectionalities. By the time they were working on their archive projects, several of

them had indicated that they believed the best path to visibility was through marked difference. Their move to this position on difference in itself surprised me, since at other times during the semester they had spent significant time arguing that queers are just the same as non-queers and that marriage equality marked the most important queer issue. They had been decidedly perturbed at the idea of embracing stigma. We had spent a few sessions discussing Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* and the ways in which an expectation for average or sameness leads to deep stigmatization that can, literally, be fatal. However, we had also discussed complications surrounding "passing" for a number of identities, including gay, bi, and transgender identities. (Visibility and invisibility once again.) We had read Jennifer Finney Boylan's memoir, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*, the comic (and tragic) transgender narrative of a Colby College professor in rural Maine; we had viewed the documentary *Southern Comfort,* a film that tells the stories of a group of rural transgender persons in the American south, including the story of Robert, a transman who died of ovarian cancer in part because he was denied health care; we had watched *Out in the Silence,* a documentary centered on a gay high school student in Oil City, PA. In the case of both films and the memoir, rurality and gender and sexual identity are at issue; the protagonists seek the ability to pass.[8] They do not want to be visible. It is important that I tread lightly here, though, because I do not want to suggest that passing is necessarily a direct equivalent to seeking "normalcy" or invisibility. Issues of visibility are far more complicated than many of us make them out to be.

Like all categorization, the rural/urban/suburban categories are both heuristically useful and limiting. On the one hand, knowing that there are other queers who look just like you—"normal" (invisible?), just like any other rural person or, conversely, knowing that there are others who are different like you, thus forming a sort of likeness in difference—can be very affirming. On the other hand, discussions surrounding the complications around visibility and invisibility, normalcy and deviancy in different geopolitical spaces, were unavoidable in my class, since we discussed not only those texts and films already mentioned, but also viewed *Paris Is Burning* (urban black), *Pariah* (urban black) and *The Laramie Project* (rural white) as well as read Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" (rural white), Michael Chabon's debut novel *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (urban white), Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* (rural and urban white), and Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook* (a different kind of queer space altogether). The geographic mix and diverse interests of the class itself brought many possible organizing principles for their archives into play. No matter the organizing principles for composing their archives, however, students were imagining the Writing Project teachers and rural students as one possible audience. While my forcing the imaginary yoking of the Summer Institute and our lgbqt course pressured class members to invoke the NWP teachers and their students, my students seemed willing to do so with passion. Their own remembrances of fenced out queerness in school and everyday lives provided what we together came to call the

"fire in our bellies."

Creating and making public digital queer archives may do some good for intervening in discriminatory policy making, throwing queer youth a lifeline and providing rural queers access to queer experiences and to the knowledge that they are not alone, that others are out there and that some of those queers have chosen to stay in their rural homes and not migrate to urban spaces. There are complicating caveats, however. It is not just that for somebody to be visible somebody else must be willing to *see;* it is also that heteronormative structures and strictures lurk, unexposed in the everyday life of schooling.

For instance, in their "Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition," Alexander and Rhodes have "now come to believe that queerness is not simply one of composition's difficult subjects" but that it is one of "composition's impossible subjects" (179). They point out that

> A number of interrelated knowledge/power complexes make queerness impossible in composition. First, and perhaps easiest: the juxtaposition of sex and schooling forms a theoretically compelling yet politically dangerous (institutionally suicidal) site. Sex, especially non-normative sexual relations, is a never "appropriate" in the classroom. It destroys our composure. The parallel tongues of school and sex can only exist if they promise not to touch. (179)

If this is the case for Alexander's and Rhodes' pedagogical context—university teaching, *in California no less*—then it most certainly must be for public school teachers in rural Appalachian Ohio.[9] Queer, they argue, is outside of the boundaries of school composing, of writing programs that must guarantee certain kinds of skills, certain kinds of form, and certain kinds of behavior. So, too, must queer—queer visibility, queer lives, queer experience, and queer composing—be contained or excised in public schools. If the boundaries pinch like a too-tight girdle in the university, the standardizing, normativizing testing of public schools and the tightly controlled access to any information on sexuality, let alone non-normative sexualities and identities, cut off one's breath entirely. Even if I can convince the teachers I work with to "see" queerness, to be open to it in their students, they cannot view or bring digital archives into the learning space. I do mean this literally because the schools in our area block access to sites pertaining to sex, sexual orientation, etc. Clearly, teachers in our rural schools teach under very different circumstances than I do.

In this same article, Alexander and Rhodes argue that staying on the margins, actively disrupting, refusing to be "composed," has great value. Indeed it does. Theoretically, I want to linger on the margins with them. I want to urge rural queer youth to join us. The truth is, however, not only is this dangerous for real bodies, but some rural queers, like some transgender people, don't want to be on the margins, don't want to live in alternative communities even when they could create them, don't want to look or be different. Many an urban queer has angrily critiqued the rural desire to lay low, to seek invisibility, arguing that if those hicks would just get angry, flaunt

some outrage and some queerness, they could live their lives proudly out. If what is important to rural queers is getting along, being accepted by straight family and community members, and if there is no alternative family to take you in and protect you after you have provoked and unsettled, it may well be that the provocation is momentarily satisfying, but ultimately treacherous. If wearing the glitter is dangerous, then throwing the glitter may well result in homelessness at best, tied to a buck fence and left to die at worst. This simple fact uncovers the inevitable tension in my own desire to make rural queers visible and marked against heteroculture and even sometimes against their own desires. Such contradictions became part of the discussion in my lgbtq literature class as students composed, narrated, reflected on, analyzed, and imagined audiences they hoped to reach.

A Call to Action

What I have to say is not earth shattering, on one hand. In some ways it is extraordinarily commonsensical. But on the other hand, I would go so far as to say the consequences, though not guaranteed, hold possibility to be quite extraordinary, may, in fact, transform classrooms and lives, might even save lives. After all, a large percentage of homeless youth identify as lgbtq. The number of lgbtq youth who commit suicide is proportionally high. Bullying and murdering of those who are or who are perceived to be nonconforming to cisgendered and heterosexist norms continue at an alarming rate. As I finished this version of this essay, a young transwoman, Leelah Alcorn, intentionally walked into traffic on a busy interstate in Southwest Ohio and was struck and killed by a truck. Her suicide note made it clear that she did this because she felt her family and the world would not accept her. This particular senseless loss reminded me of a depressing fact that some teachers tell me they are instructed not to intervene if an act of bullying is against students perceived to be or actually associated with gender or sexual non-conformity. In this moment, the trauma I feel waxes again.

Remember that one exigency for this exploration was the resistance of National Writing Project teachers to ideas for queer possibilities and curricula in their rural Appalachian classrooms. (Many [most?] readers of this journal will not reside nor teach in rural areas, but my hope is that there is something instructive here for them as well.) The strength of this resistance alongside the ongoing anti-queer and anti-transgender rhetoric in our public, institutional, and legal spheres catapulted me into a moment of trauma resulting in this rather odd stew of concerns about visibility and invisibility for rural queers as well as a revived knowledge about the dearth of rural queer archives. My own remembrances are meant to offer readers a sense of my positionality, but also to engender a small archive that highlights issues of visibility and invisibility that continue to vex at least some rural queers, including students, especially those who are given no space in which to choose visibility without condemnation. The dotted lines of connection among the NWP teachers, their students (some possibly queer), my university students, me, and hopefully my readers, are, of course, tenuous

and to a certain degree imaginary. Nonetheless, some of you work with teachers through a variety of formal and informal programs. The dotted lines to K-12 students may well exist for you as well. If nothing else, some of the students in those classrooms may one day be your students. Or, perhaps those students have younger family members and friends still in a K-12 classroom. While we cannot generalize from the experiences here in Appalachia to all classrooms, I do contend that problematic contexts for queer and transgender students remain prevalent across national geographies.

For me then, what is at stake in the resistance of the NWP teachers I write about here is their own understanding of difference (lack of?), but also the lives of their students, those students to whom I have never laid eyes on yet feel keenly connected to through their teachers. The teaching context for the NWP teachers is much different than mine. Most of the teachers do not live and work under conditions that allow them to easily integrate queer material into their classrooms. Neither students nor teachers have access to online queer domains through school servers. They cannot access research databases with information on queerness. These rural Appalachian teachers rightly feel the terror of losing their jobs. A few indicate they might get away with teaching a young adult novel with gay themes under the auspices of multi-educational curriculum. Most indicate they don't want to. And of course, while beyond the scope of this essay to address fully, there are some important critiques of such curricular approaches. Pritchard, for instance, points to the flawed logic of the additive model (add a gay themed novel and all is well for queer youth). Unless issues of power, intersections of multiple identities and not just sexual identities, and more nuanced understandings of safety are addressed, curricular adjustments will not be transformative to the degree they need to be (Pritchard 321-322). Thus, I cannot in these current moments of trauma, expect much at a curricula level. On the other hand, teachers themselves might be willing to allow for queer existence—that is queer students—in their classrooms if the teachers are saturated and confronted with queer humanity.

Staying the Queer Course

It's Elementary is an even-keeled documentary, one that tries not to evoke emotion. It works to show, as a matter of fact, how queer can curricularly thrive in public schools. It is self-limiting in a couple of ways, however. First, I think it is open to the recent critiques of multicultural education that assume an uncritical model in that the film's primary goal is the addition of gay themes to the curriculum. Second, I suspect that to the teachers I work with it is also just one more "here is what you should be doing in your classroom with your curriculum" in an onslaught of daily dictatorial pronouncements from others. I will continue to view *It's Elementary* with the teachers for its pragmatic and ethical value; but I will also show them what my students, who a few short years ago were their students, think is important in queer, genderqueer, and

transgender visibility. That is, I will continue to ask my students to create archival material with teachers and younger students in mind. I will ask their permission to make those archives available to teachers, and I will ask them to make them available to others in public spaces, digital and otherwise. I do not fear or eschew pathos. I will show the teachers *The Laramie Project, Out in the Silence*, *Pariah*, *Two Spirits,* and the predictably sweet romantic comedy *Saving Face;* I will introduce them to the "wrong kind" of queer in *Southern Comfort*, *Paris Is Burning, Tongues Untied*, and through Brandon Teena and Leelah Alcorn. I will ask them to consider power, intersectional identities, and our own complicity in a system that literally kills non-conforming individuals. They may cry. They may be stunned. They may be hurt. They may be angry. They will surely feel manipulated. This is risky business for me and on my part. But they will be confronted with and asked to acknowledge (to see) queer lives, queer deaths, and queer humanity. And because they are teachers, they will respond.[10]

For my colleagues in composition studies, I hope for a continued awareness of the urgency for addressing queer issues in our teaching, administrative, and scholarly lives. Queer compositionists have pointed out our own dearth of queer archives and materials, including those in the ubiquitous textbooks of FYE. Perhaps what I have written here has convinced you that the majority of our students have come to us from schools where queerness is invisible, not allowed, or at best considered reasonably addressed by a single reading. Might you reconsider what role you could play in opening your curricula to a space where queer archives could thrive alongside others, examining the heterosexist, racist, sexist, and classist structures and strictures that impinge on all of us, the layers of power, the neoliberal pitfalls we are prone to? Like me, were you alarmed that only two of the university students in an lgbqt literature course knew of the existence of the AIDS quilt, let alone of the horrific racist and homophobic history that led to the quilt's creation?

As a queer teacher, a teacher of queer rhetoric, composition, and literature, I find the idea of a conscious representation of queer, genderqueer, and transgender archival material in public space to be tremendously potent—not only for what those representations mean for me as a rural queer person, but also for the potential power they possess to disrupt heterosexist and cis-gendered culture and for engaging both queer and non-queer students in public discourse around sexualities. Making queer lives visible can facilitate acceptance, empathy, and alliances. This may be particularly crucial for rural queers. Because of the complexities around rural queerness and visibility, however, such tasks may be quite fraught. As Alexander and Rhodes argue, we need to carefully consider what we do with the archival material. They also contend that while queer archives may not fully account for or "embody" the experience of queer trauma, the archives can "offer us a sense of the rhetorical practices developed in response to such trauma—rhetorical practices arising out of the specificity of queer experience and queer possibility" ("Queer Rhetoric"). I agree on both counts. Retrieving, viewing, and discussing queer artifacts provide powerful means by which

teachers and students can begin to understand the role of heterosexist and cis-gendered culture in queer and transgender silence and silencing, as well as begin to critique the role of private and public rhetorics that wall queerness out of public space, dialog, and rhetorical history. Hopefully the work that my students are willing to do will be one of the many steps needed to make visibility an option for rural queers, to open the minds of those who teach them. Rural queer archival material must find its way to our colleagues in the public school setting, into rhetoric and composition, and into the body politic.

Post Script: Trauma, Always Trauma

I'm not out, still, to everyone. Not my non-academic neighbors up in the Appalachian hillside. Not to all of my family members, though I am sure they know, or at least they acknowledge my "oddness." We just don't speak of it. There seems to be no will to do so, on either side. But nor do I hide it. My 86-year-old aunt knows. She asks questions like, "Why queer instead of lesbian?" She genuinely wants to know. She asks if it is OK if she tells people I'm lesbian, or at least bisexual. "It is easier to explain," she says. But she quickly takes the bisexual part back. She told me a story recently. She has a friend let's—call her Bonnita. Bonnita is 92 years old. Bonnita's daughter is lesbian. Even though my Aunt and Bonnita have been very close friends for decades in the very small town they live in, they have never spoken of lesbian daughters and queer nieces. Finally, last year, my aunt broached the subject by offering me up as the family lesbian, even though she fully understands that I do not identify as lesbian. My aunt recognized that the stakes were high for her friend, and she knew that in such a high stakes game I would proudly wear the mantle of lesbian. Her friend Bonnita sobbed in deep grief and gratitude. "Oh," she said, "I have never spoken of my daughter as a lesbian to anyone. Not anyone. Ever." Bonnita and her daughter are now a part of my story. A story that is most assuredly traumatic, most assuredly rural.

Notes

[1] I embarked on this endeavor knowing full well how problematic it is to assume that adding a few gay-themed stories does much to transform a curriculum. (See Pritchard, for instance.) It may in fact, reify problematic assumptions. On the other hand, I needed to start somewhere and college students have told me that it would have made a difference to them if they had been given opportunities in high school to read about gay experiences.

[2] By archive I simply mean informal or formal collections of queer material of any kind, including movies, videos, web pages, images, novels, memoirs, etc. From their position as scholars of rhetorical public space, Charles E. Morris III and K.J. Rawson argue that continuing to collect glbtq materials is vital, but to also enact queer archives the archivist must disrupt and challenge "normativizing collecting and circulating

practices of other institutions" (76). Important texts that focus on queer archives outside of the field include Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feeling* and Judith (Jack) Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*.

[3] See, for instance, the Bell and Valentine collection *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, Gray's *Out in the Country*, Stein's *The Stranger Next Door*, Howard's *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, and Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism,* and Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place,* to name a handful of book- length projects.

[4] I am inclined to agree with Mitchell that the closet remains intact in many rural settings. Halberstam complicates this, though, by arguing that the ubiquity of sex among rural gay men and a desire for gay men who have migrated to urban centers to return to rural lives "belies the closet model" (37).

[5] *It's Elementary*, released in 1996, is widely recognized as a groundbreaking film that offers teachers documented ways in which they could bring queer issues into the classroom. It also illustrates how willing and able children are to engage in issues of diverse identities. Later versions include a second DVD that presents teacher workshops on the matter.

[6] While it is not within the scope of this paper to focus on rural digital access, my own experience with issues of limited bandwidth and dicey connectivity suggests that access may impact queer rural representations.

[7] This group of students is not necessarily representative of the entire student body, of course. The course is an elective that most students take because they either self-identify as non-normative, know somebody who does, or feel a genuine desire to know something more about gender and sexuality. It is open to both upper and lower-division students from across the university. The course is listed as Gay and Lesbian Literature, although I teach texts by transgender, bi, and straight theorists, writers, and filmmakers.

[8] On the other hand, we also watched the documentary *Two Spirits*. Fred, the murdered Native American youth, is intentionally visible.

[9] Appalachian composition scholar Todd Snyder, born and raised across the border in West Virginia, writes, "Rural Appalachia had taught me how to think, feel, and believe about the issue of homosexuality. Homosexuality should not be discussed out in the open" (197).

[10] Will I come out to them? I do not know. My hope is that my queerness will be visible to them, that my difference is no longer subsumed in heterosexist and cis-gendered assumption.

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