

THE REPUBLIC OF FABULACHIA:
QUEER VISIONS FOR A POST-COAL APPALACHIAN FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Garringer: The Republic of Fabulachia:
Queer Visions for a Post-Coal Appalachian Future
(Under the direction of Patricia E. Sawin)

This thesis explores the ways in which four young white queer Central Appalachian organizers navigate tradition and change in their efforts to envision a just and sustainable post-coal Appalachian future. Based on oral history interviews conducted during the summer of 2016 with Ada Smith, Kenny Bilbrey, Sam Gleaves, and Ivy Brashear, this thesis examines their engagement with and challenges to narrow constructions of Appalachian and mainstream queer constructions of the traditional. It additionally considers their collective vision for an Appalachian Transition in which local communities reclaim decision making power about the fate of their future, and the potential to use this moment of deep economic, environmental, and political uncertainty to boldly demand a future in which LGBTQ+ people, people of color and all mountain people are able to survive and thrive in the places that we love.

To my STAY and BAM fams,
and all the young folks in the mountains dreaming of a radically brighter future.

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INTRODUCTION

“I feel like a part of being Appalachian is inevitably queer - whether or not you identify as queer. I think just the whole experience is. Because it’s very self-sufficient in some ways: figuring out your own thing to do if you live in a rural part of Appalachia. Navigating the importance of family and all the other importance that can often be associated with this area - closeness to family or being in love with this bio-diverse place that has a bunch of weird bugs and plants. I just think the whole thing is really queer.

Steph G. - several times throughout last weekend - used *queer* as a description of things that aren’t just people, and ever since then I’ve been thinking about that a lot. It’s like “Oh yeah, it doesn’t have to be a rainbow-studded belt to be a queer item,” you know? There’s different things in my life that are queer, and I think Appalachia, for real, is queer.”

--Kenny Bilbrey - Whitesburg, KY - 2016

It was early in the spring of 2011 and I was sitting in Austin’s mid-afternoon rush-hour traffic in a pink and purple-striped Dodge Van from the early 1980s. Even though we were months away from the heart of summer it was hot, and I had the windows rolled down because the van had no air conditioning. I’d been living in Austin, Texas for almost four years, and it had been just under ten years since I’d left the sheep farm where I was raised, high up in the Allegheny Mountains of Southeastern West Virginia. Ten years, and I had never stopped missing the mountains. I was constantly aware of their absence, as if their silhouettes had been tattooed across the inside of my eyelids so that I saw them every time I closed my eyes.

The traffic wasn't moving at all, and I started singing to pass the time (the radio didn't work in the van either). "It's been years now, since I left there, and this city life's about got the best of me." It's my favorite Hazel Dickens song, "West Virginia, My Home." The traffic inched forward. I kept singing. Suddenly I was crying. "Home, home, home. I can almost smell the honeysuckle vine. Home, home, home. Oh I can see it so clear in my mind." That April I moved back home and rented my neighbor's small farm house, on land that bordered the hundred-acre farm where I was raised.

After ten years of aching for the mountains daily, once I returned to West Virginia I felt a sense of completeness, of belonging, of being able to breathe deeper than I had in years. I felt an unfamiliar sureness about my place, my work, and my role in the community, and a calm rootedness and certainty that I had never felt before in my life. At the same time, after a couple of years living an hour outside of a town of 3,500 people, I also felt extremely isolated from any queer or political community. I found that while my queer friends and chosen family in New York City and Austin would always be central figures in my life - I needed to find people who understood how to navigate the tensions between loving a landscape and a region more than yourself, and existing in a space that says, "you don't belong here" simultaneously. I needed to find people who were making it work to raise queer families in *rural* spaces, people who had insight about how to date and find community as *rural* queers. I needed to find people who understood that the silence around queerness in many small Southern towns doesn't *only* feel oppressive, but instead, sometimes feels like a way for community members to navigate difference in the most respectful way for all involved. I also needed to find people who understood better than I did, the fears, the potential dangers, and the histories of violence and death that haunt our lives as rural queer people – all of which affect each of us differently,

varying according to the layers of identity of race, class, gender-identity, religion, ability, and citizenship.

I found much of what I was looking for through a regional Central Appalachian youth network called The STAY Project (STAY). The STAY Project – which stands for Stay Together Appalachian Youth – is a member-based organization, with members aged 14-30 across five Central Appalachian states¹. STAY is working to build a more sustainable and inclusive future in the region through popular education and coalition building around issues of LGBTQ+ justice, racial justice, and economic and environmental justice.

Through STAY, I found a political and queer community that is committed to celebrating regional culture and history while simultaneously pushing for radical change. In 2013 I launched an oral history project called ‘Country Queers’ to document the diverse experiences of rural and small-town LGBTQ+ folks in the United States. I began the project interviewing friends and political family members within The STAY Project, and I have returned to this close-knit network for my thesis work. This thesis draws on interviews conducted in July of 2016 with LGBTQ+ STAY Members: Sam Gleaves, Kenny Bilbrey, Ada Smith, and Ivy Brashear – all of whom were living in Eastern Kentucky at the time of our interviews. I also draw on a 2013 interview with Sam Gleaves that took place at the STAY Summer Institute at the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee.

Mainstream queer narratives have long assumed that urban and metropolitan sites are the sole spaces in which queer people are able to thrive, and therefore, that all rural queer people wish to escape to a metropolitan queer bubble of total out-ness. Many of these metropolitan queer spaces provide the opportunity for queer folks to exist almost exclusively within queer

¹ West Virginia, Southwest Virginia, Western North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee, and Eastern Kentucky

spaces – whereby their social, work, and political worlds are centered around queerness in a way that is simply impossible to achieve in small towns and rural spaces.²

Simultaneously, rural Appalachian communities have long valued an identity built around a celebration and performance of traditional music, food ways, and crafts. Rural spaces in the region have quilted together a community fabric which effectively erases the historical and contemporary existence of queer people, people of color, and histories and contemporalities of radical organizing. However, many of us who were raised in the mountains and are also queer hold our rural Appalachian places as equally important to us as our queerness – if not more so. By necessity, we are crafting new ways to navigate our region’s histor(ies) while simultaneously boldly envisioning and attempting to craft a drastically different future.

Queer rural Central Appalachian organizers and cultural workers understand what it means to exist beyond the limits of possibility that are placed on our bodies, our desires, our families, and our communities by international corporate control of our environmental and political landscapes, by local constructions of who and what belongs, and by mainstream U.S. queer narratives of success. Because of this, we understand the invented, variable, and hidden nature of the ways in which tradition works in the region, as well as the power in drawing on traditionality as an organizing tool. We maintain a critical, yet loving relationship to constructions of regional place-based “culture” and “tradition” at the same time that we use Appalachian, queer, and movement “traditions” to push for a radically more inclusive, just, and environmentally and socially sustainable future, in the mountains and beyond. We know what it means to ask for more and to imagine a reality beyond the walls of possibility that have been

² Clearly queer land projects in rural spaces (such as Ida in Tennessee) are able to recreate a kind of insulated queer community more similar to what can often be found in cities, but for the purposes of this paper I’m much more interested in the ways in which young queer people from the mountains navigate as adults the same communities where they were raised.

constructed by systems of power intent on keeping our communities – and many others we are aligned with - struggling. We see our work towards a just Appalachian Transition to a post-coal economy as directly aligned with national and international intersectional social justice movements.

Looking forward and backwards at the same moment, queer rural Central Appalachian organizers and cultural workers envision new possibilities, not only for our people and our mountains, but for Central Appalachia's role in national and international movements for justice. We exercise something close to Lauren Berlant's notion of "lateral agency" – to shift sideways, to move outside of the flattened imaginaries of "the good life", offered to us in contexts where "biopower" is operating, which are presented as our only option (Berlant, 2007). Berlant's description of "biopower" (Berlant, 2007) brings the reality of corporate control (i.e. the Coal Industry and its relationship to political power in the region) and economic and spiritual despair (i.e. high unemployment rates, chronic health issues without adequate access to healthcare, drastic death by overdose rates, etc.) in the region into view.

"Biopower operates when a hegemonic bloc organizes the reproduction of life in ways that allow political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies and their competence at maintaining health or other conditions of social belonging; thus this bloc gets to judge the problematic body's subjects, whose agency is deemed to be fundamentally destructive. Apartheid-like structures, from zoning to shaming, are wielded against these populations, who come to represent embodied liabilities to social prosperity of one sort or another" (2007:765).

Berlant ultimately argues that "lateral agency" – or an "opting out" of dominant narratives and patterns of success (i.e. through a refusal to see obesity as a crisis, or as something in need of changing) – can be performed through a refusal to work towards the creation of the "good life" or the "reproduction of life." Young queer organizers in the region shift laterally when they resist the construction of a prison touted as economic development, and the coinciding narrative that in

order to thrive they must leave; by simultaneously refusing to climb towards the theoretical “good life” of capitalist and queer achievements they are moving laterally.

In the pages that follow I will explore the ways in which Sam, Ada, Ivy, and Kenny are navigating limiting constructions of traditionality and redefining tradition in ways that make space for the contemporary and historical presence of LGBTQ+ people and people of color, while simultaneously drawing on traditional musical and cultural histories as central tools in their organizing to envision a just Appalachian Transition to a post-coal future in Central Appalachia. Additionally, I will explore the ways in which queerness and legacies of labor organizing in the mountains influence their work; enabling them to craft a radically different vision for the region’s future – one that celebrates the region’s rich cultural legacies while simultaneously opening the door for a more expansive Central Appalachian self-conception of community and possibility.

Methodology

I did not follow a conventional ethnographic approach to this project. Neither did I take a formal academic oral history approach, although my methods were influenced by studies in both. I see my work towards this thesis as part of the ongoing work of the Country Queers oral history project, which follows a community-based activist approach to oral history. In the introduction to *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* Horacio N. Roque Ramírez and Nan Alamilla Boyd explain the origins of queer oral history as emerging from “methods deployed by the new social history --- a people’s history from below --- and the related political, historiographic, and academic movements of second-wave feminism” (2012:4). While I don’t

align myself politically with a second-wave feminist epistemology – in particular due to the limiting constructions of and discussions of gender identity, as well as the white-washing of feminist spaces it is known for - I do understand Country Queers, and my own approach to oral history work, as connected to a rich legacy of community-based, non-academically sanctioned or funded, “ground up” queer oral history projects. Many of these projects were born from the new social history movement of the 1960s and 70s, and out of the necessity to document the disaster of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s.

I intentionally chose to work with a community of which I have been a part for the past six years. I did not take fieldnotes, but the people I interviewed for this thesis are peers, friends, and “movement” collaborators with whom I have worked to envision new political, economic, and cultural futures in the region since 2011. There is a depth to our shared experience and political epistemologies that results in a mutual sense of trust which enabled our conversations to move more quickly to levels of political and personal intimacy. To achieve this level of rapport would have taken much longer had I been an “outsider” – to the region, to queerness, or to the political work in which we are all engaged. There is also a shared language around social justice that we all have learned and developed through our involvement with national organizing spaces. We met through The STAY Project, and together built a shared political framework for the work we do across various standpoints throughout the region and beyond. STAY’s political philosophies have been strongly influenced by our three supporting organizations: the High Rocks Educational Corporation in Millpoint, WV; Appalshop in Whitesburg, KY; and the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, TN – as well as through a broad

network of Southern organizers and organizations which have mentored STAY members, including Southerners On New Ground and Project South.³

We continue to work together in various ways centered around goals of economic, environmental, racial, and cultural justice in the mountains. Most recently, Ada, Kenny, and I participated in the Building A Movement Institute (BAM) – a year-long process of creating a shared vision for the region’s future, facilitated by the Atlanta-based organization, Project South. We worked within a larger cohort of young Appalachian leaders, led by Steph Guilloud of Project South, Najma Nazyat of the Boston Youth Organizing Project, and Ash-lee Woodard Henderson, of Project South at the time (now co-director of the historic Highlander Center in East Tennessee). Working together within the BAM enabled us to transition beyond our shared work through STAY towards an understanding of ourselves as committed to “the work” and one another long term, regardless of our connection to any established organizations in the region.

While STAY as an organization has members from throughout the Central Appalachian region from varying class backgrounds, the people I have interviewed for this thesis all grew up with, and/or now maintain, a level of class privilege which greatly influences their experiences in the region and their thinking around future possibilities there. The political thinking and organizing approaches shared by this large network of young people in the region are largely influenced by the mentorship that many of the founding members of STAY received from important regional cultural organizations, such as Appalshop and Highlander, as well as the fact that many of the founding members attended college. There are many STAY members who have not pursued higher education and who grew up poor or working class, but everyone interviewed

³ Both based in Atlanta and doing work throughout the South.

for this thesis maintains a level of class and educational privilege which clearly influences their access to resources, language, networks, and organizing spaces.

Inherent in Roque Ramírez and Boyd's definition of queer oral history as a practice is that the narrator and researcher must share identity. "If there is not a narrator to claim that sexual space of queer historical being and its retelling, and a queer researcher to hear, record, and draw out yet more details, desire, and meaning from it, no queer oral history is possible" (2012:1). Clearly, there are many approaches to humanities research, and specifically to Folkloric and Oral History work. I am less interested in developing a claim about how we should all "do this work", than in articulating the approach I have developed over the course of four years gathering queer oral histories throughout the rural U.S. My approach draws much more heavily from cultural organizing and social justice approaches to the power of stories, and the power of communities telling their histories to one another in their own terms, than from any academic debates on the best way to do collaborative work with communities.

My method for this thesis research was not to enter into new work with the stated goal of building a collaborative project - but rather to hold myself accountable to a community of young Central Appalachian organizers and cultural workers of which I am already a part, to the work we have done and will continue to do together, and to our separate roles within that work. When unclear of how to participate in more theoretical organizing conversations, Ada Smith – whose words you will read in this thesis – told me, "Rachel, you're going to interview us all and write the book about what we're doing." This thesis, then, is my attempt to "understand [my] role" in the work, as Ada would say, and to use this opportunity to delve into the layers of past and present influences that affect some of the incredible organizing happening within Central

Appalachia in this moment. This thesis - I hope - serves as part of my contribution to our shared work.

I deliberately chose to focus on the experiences and organizing of four young white rural queer Appalachian organizers in Eastern Kentucky, again, because my ethics and politics around who tells which stories have been strongly influenced by community organizing conceptions, which posit that communities need no outside interpreters. I did not want to set up a thesis in which my focus was on interpreting the stories and experiences of queer and trans people of color in the mountains or the South more broadly – as I don’t feel that that is my role within the movement or academia. Additionally, as I am engaged with the field of Folklore - a field which traces its roots to colonial anthropological endeavors and has a long history in the United States of locating “the folk”, almost exclusively, in African American, American Indian, and Appalachian communities – I’m uncomfortable (at best) with the historic and contemporary patterns of white wealthy urban researchers documenting and interpreting the meaning of expressive culture in communities of color and poor white communities to which they have no lived connection. I don’t aim to argue that researchers should never conduct field work in communities of which they are not a part, or to ignore the real complications of doing this work in a community which you are intimately connected to. Indeed, a significant part of this project explores the troubled histories of decisions made around who belongs to a particular place and community, and who does not. Rather, I want to establish the methodological choices I have made as ones that align with my political and personal values in a way that allows me to feel that I am doing no harm through this research.

While many would disagree with Roque Ramírez and Boyd’s (2012) articulation that queer oral history must involve a queer narrator and listener, for myself I feel that those best

positioned to engage in rural queer Appalachian oral history are rural queer Appalachians. This is not to say that my other layers of identity in terms of race, class, religion, education, citizenship, gender identity, and ability (among others) don't position me (and many of those interviewed for this thesis) with a level of power and privilege that is noteworthy. Nonetheless, my lived experience in the region as a young queer person, and in the organizing work of those I've interviewed for this thesis, position me to be both participant and observer at once – without needing to engage in intensive academic conversations about how best to reach that point. E. Patrick Johnson (2008) writes of the power of shared identity in queer oral history in the introduction to his brilliant book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. “As a southerner, I have the gift of gab and of graciousness, to say nothing of the southern Baptist Christian ethos that guides my every move – despite my desire, at times, to have it otherwise. Therefore, I knew that I would be comfortable interacting with these men, and I knew that I could get them to open up to me in a way they might not open up to a non-southerner, a nonblack, or even a self-identified non-Christian” (Johnson, 2008:7). Clearly, the power dynamics and problematic (at best) histories of Northern white researchers work in Southern black communities mean that Johnson's shared blackness and Southern-ness carry a different weight than my shared Appalachian-ness and queerness do. The fact that – in both Roque Ramírez and Boyd's (2012) and Johnson's (2008) critical texts on queer oral history – the importance of shared identity between “researcher” and “subject” is a principal guiding methodology speaks to a uniquely queer approach to oral history work. As Roque Ramírez and Boyd argue, queer oral history goes beyond the common relationship between a speaking elder and listening youth, which is present in many oral history interviews, to a space of intimacy through shared experiences of

marginalization, historical erasure, and an understanding of the political power of documenting our own histories.

Though I chose to focus on white middle-class queer organizers in the mountains, I have no intention of reinforcing notions of the Appalachian region, or of rural areas more broadly, as homogenously white. Neither does this choice aim to lift up the work of white queer organizers as superior, more interesting, or more important than that of organizers of color in the region. Indeed, none of the organizers and cultural workers interviewed operate in isolation from leadership of queer and trans organizers of color in the region, the South, and the nation. On the contrary, STAY, the BAM cohort, and larger conversations around Appalachian Transition have been, and continue to be, shaped by the leadership of POC youth and elders – queer and straight, in the mountains and beyond. I chose to interview Sam, Ada, Kenny, and Ivy because of their similar age, location, and experiences as rural queer folks in Eastern Kentucky, and their roles as thinkers and leaders in the Central Appalachian region.

The first half of this thesis will be heavy on my own voice and words, and in the latter half I plan to give my friends and narrators as much room as possible to speak for themselves. I hold immense respect for Ada, Sam, Kenny, and Ivy and continue to learn from their political and cultural thinking and commitment to their work. This paper includes long-block quotes – likely much longer than in many other theses of this type – with often minimal interpretation on my part. I want the voices, ideas, and leadership of each of the young queer organizers interviewed to shine through. They bring up a lot of themes and topics which I am not able to fully engage with, due to the limitations of the length of this thesis. But, rather than cut their words into easily digestible segments which help me prove my point, I hope that together our

voices build a collaborative argument about the important role that queerness and tradition play in conversations about what comes next for the region that we call home.

The Disputed Boundaries of Appalachia, Traditionality, and Queerness

Appalachia has been defined, redefined, mapped, remapped, documented, and examined for decades.⁴ John Alexander Williams concisely describes this 200-year history, writing:

“Appalachia, more than most of the regions into which the United States is customarily divided, is a territory of images – a screen upon which writers, artists, and savants for several generations have projected their fears, hopes, regrets, and enthusiasms about America present and past. The region has been seen as both the essence of America and a place apart, ‘a strange land and a peculiar people,’ as one of the early ‘discoverers’ of Appalachia put it back in 1873” (2002: 8-9).

The American consciousness has a selective fascination with the region. National news agencies are quick to demonize and slow to humanize mountain people. Simultaneously, many Americans cling to a romantic idealization of the region which is equally damaging: a

⁴ I don’t aim to engage in defining what is and isn’t the Appalachian region. Those conversations abound, both within academic spaces and regional organizing ones. In the Introduction to *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, William Schumann writes, “Appalachia’s boundaries can be defined in numerous ways, and these ways reflect the research objectives, worldviews, and/or power positions of the individuals, groups, and institutions making claims about what constitutes the region” (2016:3). Some limit the region to the coalfields of Central Appalachia while others expand the borders from northern Alabama all the way to Maine. For the purposes of this paper I follow STAY’s lead. STAY works with-in the Appalachian Regional Commission’s designated Appalachian Counties in the coalfields of West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Eastern Tennessee, Western North Carolina, and Southwest Virginia (this map can be found on their website). The focus on the coalfields is based on a belief that while geographically and culturally there may be much in common from Alabama to Maine, economically and environmentally the coalfields are a place all their own. All of the narrators in this paper were living in Eastern Kentucky at the time of the interviews.

representation of self-sufficiency born of poverty and necessity rather than choice, remarketed as a quaint celebration of simpler days gone by. The reality(ies) of the region fall somewhere between, if not beyond, these conceptions completely - somewhere less simplistic and more contradictory, somewhere both isolated and constantly shaped by and responding to the shifting national and international economic, political, and environmental moment(s) in which we live. William Schumann explains,

“Whether defined by the intensity of poverty, the dominance of energy interests, or the persistence of unorthodox lifestyles, each of these Appalachian stories [of the 2014 Elk River Chemical Spill in WV, the 50th Anniversary of the War on Poverty, and the viral story of a Pentecostal preacher who died after being bit by a rattlesnake during a “snake-handling” church service] operated on the principle of marking regional difference from a larger, more cosmopolitan United States....The reality is, first, that Appalachia has never been fully reflected in the mirror of America’s popular imagination, and second, it has always been characterized by cultural diversities and global interconnections that challenge easy categorizations of regional identity.” (Schumann, 2016: 2).

But despite Appalachian scholars, organizers, artists, writers, and community history projects’ continued attempts to complicate both internal and external conceptions of what and who belong in constructions of Appalachian identity, a national tendency to locate traditionality in the mountains - whether romanticized idyllic notions of old-fashioned, self-sufficient quaintness, or the images of conservatism, racism, homophobia, violence, extreme poverty, and despair – holds fast.

While a sadistic over-infatuation with Appalachian despondency abounds in pop culture⁵, and has a long history within literature written about the region, there *are* many Central

⁵ Reality TV shows set in rural Appalachia, depicting poor mountain folk as ignorant, drug addicted, and violent abound in contemporary media. A contemporary example, *Appalachian Outlaws*, is a “reality” TV show which turns “sang-ing” into an extreme outlaw sport, involving high-speed chases on logging roads and violence. A young student whom I taught in GED classes told me her husband was in the show, and described how unrealistic the high-drama, high-violence version is. The historical media examples are too many to name, but *Deliverance* is commonly touted as one of the most iconic Appalachian films which burned offensive images of Appalachian otherness and violence into many

Appalachian communities facing an ever-increasing economic crisis as coal jobs dry up and the region's mono-industrial past proves itself starkly unsustainable. Many mountain communities – specifically within the Central Appalachian coalfields of Eastern Kentucky, Southern West Virginia, and Southwestern Virginia - are plagued by high unemployment rates, chronic environmental pollution, debilitating levels of death by drug overdose, and incarceration on drug charges, in addition to a decade's long pattern of "brain drain." The region finds itself facing an urgent need for economic transition. Yet there is much disagreement about what that transition looks like. Transition to what? For whom? Who gets to decide what comes next?

At the same time, the region still clings tightly to romanticized notions of a traditional past. Traditional music, crafts, agricultural practices, and ideals of community are celebrated both by local demand and as a performance of outsider tourists' fantasies of the region. These constructions of traditionality act as a form of comfort in the midst of a present that is unrecognizable with a future that is uncertain, but they also narrowly craft the region's

American's brains for years to come. In addition to TV and film portrayals of the region as one of violence, addiction, ignorance, and danger – national newspapers and radio programs often cover disasters and politics in the region with an air of condescension at best, and often down right offensive overgeneralizations and stereotypes at worst. Annie Lowrey's 2014 piece in the New York Times Magazine, entitled "What's the Matter with Eastern Kentucky", is one such piece. Her piece touts shocking statistics about rates of poverty, obesity, drug abuse, and more, and describes the area of the country between New Orleans and Pittsburg as "the smudge of the country" (Lowrey, 2014). Kentucky-based writer Silas House responded to her piece in his stunning essay, "I am that Smudge" (House, 2014: Courier Journal), writing: "I will be the first to admit that that article possessed statistics that cannot be denied. But what good are statistics if the reporter using them does not acknowledge or use or even know the history surrounding them? Statistics are only as good as their context. I cannot imagine going into a country I do not know and having the audacity to write about it without knowing my facts, without having worked hard to understand the history of the place and its people, without having the ability to give the joys and sorrows of an entire culture historical context.... Down Home is a wound and a joy and a poem, a knot of complication that scholars and reporters have the audacity to assume they know with a little bit of research. But you cannot know a place without loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between. You cannot understand a complex people by only looking at data — something inside you has to crack to let in the light so your eyes and brain and heart can adjust properly" (House, 2014).

representation of itself in a way that excludes the contemporary presence and historical existence of people of color, rural and small-town LGBTQ+ people, and radicals.

Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin write, “the invention of tradition is selective: only certain items...are chosen to represent traditional...culture, and other aspects of the past are ignored or forgotten. In sum, traditions thought to be preserved are created out of the conceptual needs of the present” (1984:280). Inherent in the process of creating traditions, then, is an exclusion of voices, memories, and perspectives that would destabilize its foundation, or disrupt its apparent “truth.” Erased from local community constructions of tradition, rural mountain queer folks are also invisibilized within mainstream narratives of queerness.

Mainstream queer narratives have long assumed that LGBTQ+ folks raised rurally have only one option by which to achieve a life of liberated out-ness – the assumed definition of queer success: escape to a metropolitan gay mecca such as San Francisco or New York, or in recent years any number of smaller cities across the country, from Atlanta to Minneapolis to Portland to Austin to Durham. Jack Halberstam coined the term “metronormativity” as a tool for naming the force of this collective construction of queer possibility, and its limitation. “The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of coming out tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’ is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy”, Halberstam writes (2005:36). Building on Halberstam’s oft-quoted conception of metronormativity, Scott Herring adds that:

“racial, socioeconomic, and aesthetic norms inform metronormativity, including what Jose Esteban Muñoz terms the ‘normative ideal’ of whiteness, ‘an image of ideality and normativity that structures gay male [and lesbian] desires and communities’ and ‘is reproduced transnationally through print advertising.’ To the racial and corporeal norms

of such privileged whiteness, we could add the socioeconomic norms of the middle classes and the aesthetic norms of urbanity, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism” (2007: 344 -345).

The erasure of rural queer existence happens not only within rural communities’ constructions of traditionality and identity, but also within “liberated” queer metropolitan spaces. Queer urban communities are equally as responsible for the erasure of rural queer presence as the small towns in which many country queers survive and thrive are. In the new addition to the field of rural queer studies, *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, the editors write:

“Metro- and rural normativity become dependent on one another to signal a form of modern sexual achievement-or a distinct, notable lack of it. Modern urban sexual achievement becomes an azimuth of queer visibility upon which the homophobia clinometric slides increasingly toward the rural. Metrosexuality knows who and what it is based on: its temporal, social, and geographic distance from the heteronormative. Through this construction, what the rural imagines about itself and the ways it is imagined discursively proffer the erosion of visibility and tolerance as one heads north, east, south, or west from the metropole....The rural queer lacks visibility not only because of local hostility, but also because the absence of visibility is required as a structural component of metronormativity” (Gray, Johnson & Gilley, 2016:13).

Halberstam’s, Herring’s, and Gray, Johnson and Gilley’s writings on metromormativity, queer anti-urbanism, and queer rurality bring Raymond Williams’ conceptions of the processes through which hegemony functions into clear focus. Writing of tradition in relation to hegemony, Williams argues:

“‘Tradition’ has been commonly understood as a relatively inert, historicized segment of a social structure: tradition as the surviving past. But this version of tradition is weak at the very point where the incorporating sense of tradition is strong: where it is seen, in fact, as an actively shaping force. For tradition is in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits. It is always more than an inert historicized segment; indeed, it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation. What we have to see is not just ‘a tradition’ but a *selective tradition*: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then

powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (1977:115).

These limited and hegemonic constructions of rurality broadly, Appalachian traditionality, and national narratives of queerness open the door for many questions about the lives and political frameworks of the young rural LGBTQ+ Central Appalachian organizers I interviewed for this thesis. Based in a region that views its traditional “heritage” as sacred - and yet also narrowly crafts the traditional in such a way that the presence of LGBTQ+ folks and people of color is all but invisibilized – how do young queer Appalachians interact with notions of tradition and traditionality? How do they celebrate the region’s rich traditional culture while simultaneously pushing for change? Is the simple choice (when one has the privilege of choice) to stay in the mountains as a young queer person inherently political? If a commonly assumed rural queer “tradition” is escape to an urban center, are there country queer traditions? What does it mean for a region that has historically denied the existence of queer folks that young LGBTQ+ organizers are at the forefront of organizing work directed at bringing about a just economic transition to a post-coal future? And, how do queerness and legacies of labor and environmental organizing in the mountains influence young LGBTQ+ Appalachian organizers’ contemporary approaches to their work?

Constructions and Contestations of Tradition in the Mountains

Folklorist Henry Glassie begins his chapter titled “Tradition” in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* with the following: “Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past. A continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present,

linking the vanished with the unknown, tradition is stopped, parceled, and codified by thinkers who fix upon this aspect or that, in accord with their needs or preoccupations, and leave us with a scatter of apparently contradictory yet cogent definitions” (2003:176).

Appalachia’s constructions of traditionality are inseparable from histories of folkloric scholarship in and on the region. The rural mountain folk (along with African Americans – specifically in the rural South – and American Indians) were seen as bearers of traditional values, knowledge, and practices. Jane S. Becker describes the process through which late 19th and early 20th century folklorists waged countless experiments in preserving “national culture” which they located in Anglo-Saxon traditions found in the region. “In the southern mountains, well-to-do and educated women established settlement and folk schools, where they encouraged what they considered the most valuable aspects of surviving Anglo-Saxon culture expressed in the ballads, dances, and handicrafts of impoverished rural mountain communities. In many cases these reformers introduced new – or reintroduced presumably traditional – crafts, music, and dance” (Becker, 1988:28).

And folklorists were, in large part, responsible for early national perceptions of the region as backwards and old-fashioned, as well as the early construction of a whitewashed and overly simplified region. Becker explains: “Settlement workers and ballad collectors alike were fascinated by and encouraged aspects of mountain culture that survived from old English traditions. This image of white mountain folk – as isolated bearers of obsolescent English traditions – was marketable to the rest of the nation. Articles in popular magazines made frequent mention of mountain traditions. As the singers of traditional ballads and crafters of traditional arts, the southern mountain people were embraced as an American folk culture that preserved pre-industrial values but were comfortably Anglo-Saxon” (1988:35).

In the current moment it is impossible, and likely besides the point entirely, to attempt to separate historical “outside” forces and “insider” attempts at preserving and claiming certain Appalachian traditions over others. Traditional music, crafts, and agricultural practices are firmly rooted both in local self-constructions and national understandings of the place, no matter where you draw the boundaries of Appalachian place-ness – and they remain firmly rooted in an understanding of Appalachia as white, homogenous, and of Anglo-Saxon origins.

In *Appalachia Revisited*, Yunina Barbour-Payne (YEAR) explores the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ performance of Affrilachian identity. “The term *Affrilachia* was coined by Frank X. Walker to signify the presence of African-descended people within the region of Appalachia. The word rhetorically both references and reclaims the racial and cultural diversity within the region, acknowledging a history of invisibility experienced by African Americans in Appalachia” (2016: 45-46). Barbour-Payne goes on to explore the ways in which fans and online commenters debate whether or not the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ performance of songs long associated with a Scotts-Irish heritage were “authentic” based on their position as black performers.⁶ Not only is the region more racially diverse than many mainstream conceptions would posit, but there is also a wider range of identities across political affiliation, sexual orientation, race, nationality, gender identity, class, and many more layers of our identities than is commonly represented.

“Appalachia is a region made up of embedded cultural traditions, only some of which are amplified, distorted, and circulated in the popular media. It is also a region of cross-cultural, political, economic, and environmental interconnections that transcend specific locales. Appalachian places are often mixes of political conservatism and progressive activism, persistent poverty and enormous socioeconomic potential, and immense natural beauty amid unnatural ecological waste” (Schumann, 2016: 9).

⁶ This questioning of authenticity denies the contemporary and historical existence of Black Appalachian musicians in the mountains – of which there is a rich history.

The selective process of marking white Scots-Irish crafts and musical histories as traditional to the place erases the historical and contemporary existence of indigenous communities, African Americans, immigrants, and many more. Despite Appalachia's realities of racially, ethnically, sexually, and politically varied realities, popular non-academic constructions of traditional Appalachian-ness continue to erase the existence of people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, immigrants, and politically "radical" people. Given that the constructions of traditional Appalachian-ness erase their existence – historically and contemporarily – how do young queer Central Appalachians conceive of tradition in the region? And additionally, since the psychic power of "tradition" is so strong in and about the region, how do young queer organizers navigate these conceptions of tradition at the same time that they are bending, shifting, transforming, and expanding understandings of what is "traditional" in the mountains?



Figure 1. - Sam in his backyard in Berea, KY on July 20, 2016.⁷

Sam Gleaves is a white cisgender self-identified gay male. He was 23-years-old at the time of our July 2016 interview. He was raised in Wytheville, Virginia, and currently lives in Berea, Kentucky, where he has lived for the past six years since moving to attend Berea College in 2010. As a musician and songwriter who plays and writes old-time and traditional music, Sam thinks a lot about issues of tradition and change. He has studied with old-time musicians throughout the region, and believes in the preservation of musical forms. At the same time, he writes songs which reflect his experience as a young gay male in the mountains, and therefore challenge more “traditional” themes in mountain music.

⁷ All photos by the author.

Sam and I became friends in 2012 through our shared role as Steering Committee Members for the STAY Project. In July of 2016 when I reached out to see if he would be interested in talking with me for my thesis research, he welcomed me to his home on the outskirts of Berea, Kentucky. We hadn't seen each other in three years, and it felt like a true Fabulachian family homecoming for me. I spent two nights in his guest room and he cooked me elaborate meals and took me for walks in the soft summer of Berea. We caught up and visited on the porch and at the kitchen table. I would have loved to sit and listen to Sam picking and singing during our visit, but I'm not a musician, and Sam has told me more than once that he's less interested in performing *for* people than in teaching and sharing, and singing *with* people. And so, we visited over food and walks instead. Because of Sam's deep connection to traditional music, I was curious how he would talk about his associations with the concept of tradition. When I asked Sam how he thinks about the word "tradition" he explained that his understanding of the term is constantly conflicted – that he finds himself, daily, in the process of balancing his love of traditional music with his frustration with traditional values in the mountains.

"I think of tradition in two contexts I guess, and the one that I think of favorably and that I'm most attached to is related to traditional arts and folklore and traditional music. Ever since I was about 12 years old I've been playing traditional music and a lot of mentors older than me - and also my age - have been really generous in sharing a lot of knowledge about our region's music and the stories - of the people that made it and what it's built from. And [they] gave me a place to belong in a music community, because we all loved these old songs and tunes that had been handed down, and had - each generation adds their own purpose to the music, and why they identify with it, why they choose to carry it on.

So that's one context in which I think of tradition and which has really given my life a lot of meaning and has sort of given me a compass, or a lens to see the world through. This music, that's really what I think of it as. And so that's my favorable context of tradition.

And then I think of...the tradition that is, norms, and that is, "This is how we've always done it so we're not gonna improve it and we're not gonna change it and if someone's excluded then they're excluded." Or that kind of thought of tradition. Like a 1950s sort

of way of looking at our social structure. That also comes to mind when I think of tradition.

And some of those conservative, deeply rooted problematic things about tradition are also present in the traditional music world. Or just in, in Appalachian culture as I've experienced it, or Southern culture, or just...rural culture all over the world.

I'm sure that a lot of people struggle with tradition and change. People struggle with how they assign meaning to the way they were brought up and their heritage and what they feel like is right, or the pattern they were given to approach the world with, and then their individuality and, who they want to be as a human being and how it may or may not fit into that pattern, you know?

So I see that, I've experienced tradition as both an affirming beautiful thing - that I feel like I'm able to express myself through, through traditional music - and I've also experienced it in struggling to find myself, around some of the cultural contexts that I grew up with."

-Sam Gleaves, 2016

Sam holds both a deep respect for the potential of finding healing and a sense of cultural belonging within traditional arts at the same time that he holds an intimate understanding of the ways in which conservative constructions of traditional values are often used to legislate anti-LGBTQ+ laws and ordinances. This ability to understand the complexity of a region's self-construction, to celebrate traditional culture while simultaneously pushing for change – while shared by the majority of Appalachian country queers – is not limited to our region. Surely queer folks across the entire world navigate the tensions between celebrations of histories and traditions of community self-expression at the same time that they understand the ways in which many touting the preservation of such traditions believe that queerness is a “new and sinful” plague. Yet I am certain that, especially in the United States' South, queer folks' understandings of the complicated, messy, tangled roots of our pasts – filled with violence and heartbreaking beauty – shape our presents as Southern queers: both filling our lives with distinctly place-based

experiences and meanings, and limiting our possibilities for survival. According to the Funders for LGBTQ Issues 2011-2012 Special Report, the South is home to more queer people than any other region in the United States. While cities like Atlanta and New Orleans, Durham and Richmond have thriving queer scenes – we are scattered throughout every rural stretch of country – on red clay or rocky mountain soils, sandy loam and piedmont dirt. We are here, and we always have been.



Figure 2. - Kenny at Joe's Drive-In & Chicken in Isom, KY on July 19, 2016.

Kenny Bilbrey echoes Sam's complicated relationship to the conflicting roles of tradition in their life. Kenny is white and self-identifies as transgender and queer. Kenny uses gender neutral they/them/theirs pronouns and was 24-years-old at the time of our July, 2016 interview.

Kenny works as the coordinator for the STAY Project, and also grew up in Wytheville, Virginia. In fact, Kenny and Sam became friends when they were both in middle school. I met Kenny at the STAY Summer Institute in 2013, which took place at the historic Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee. It was the same summer that I launched the Country Queers Oral History project, and I first interviewed Kenny on a paisley couch in a Highlander dorm next to a buzzing refrigerator that August. We've since become close friends, and Kenny also agreed readily to help with my thesis research when I asked if I could talk to them in 2016. Our interview took place in the studio apartment they rented at the time in Whitesburg, KY. Kenny is a devout Dolly Parton fan, and the wall was covered in images of her likeness. After our interview they drove me twenty minutes up the road to the tiny town of Isom, to have lunch and take pictures at their favorite fried chicken place: Joe's Drive-In and Chicken. Two men were unloading a delivery truck as I took pictures of Kenny in the bright sun. One of the men walked past me, pushing an empty dolly back to the truck, and caught my eye, a smile creeping across his face. He glanced at my camera, and then at Kenny posing next to a painting of a cartoon chicken on the side of the building. "What - is this place special or something?" he asked me.

"Yeah! Of course it is!" I said, though I'd never been there before, and hadn't gotten my food yet. I'm sure he read us as "not from around here" – indicated by my fancy camera and flashy red cowboy boots, Kenny's hip sunglasses and button-up Wrangler shirt. We clearly were not from there in this person's eyes due to a multitude of ways he read us, including: class privilege, my lack of accent, the way we were dressed, and our queerness – which might not even have been registered as such. Neither of us were raised in that county, or even that state; no one knows who "our people" are. So, in many ways, he was right. While we claim a relationship to the Appalachian region as a whole, we *aren't* from *there*. Even in the process of

exploring rural queer Appalachians' sense of belonging in the region, we were reminded of our not-belonging in that moment.

When I asked Kenny what comes to mind when they think of the word tradition, they articulated a complicated relationship to the word – a simultaneous fondness and resistance to various truths housed within the boundaries of the term. They also found it hard answer the question of what tradition is, and I realized as they talked that I would have had a hard time too. “I don’t know, ask Sam” Kenny said after I continued to reframe my question in a variety of ways to try to make it more tangible. Despite Kenny’s self-doubt about their grasp on an accurate definition of the word, they articulated a love-hate relationship to the concept that echoes Sam’s.

“I think in Appalachia we could talk about a lot of things. I think in my personal life that includes music, that includes, you know, standing in the kitchen while Papaw’s taking forever to finish the prayer because he says “Dear Lord” and “Dear God” after every word [laughing]. He’s like [deepens voice, thickens accent] “Dear Lord, please...” you know, and it’s sweet! Cause he’s very encompassing: he gets all the sick people in the world, he goes through the list, which is important! Special church shout outs, you know. Not making fun of that either, it’s a fun thing to think about for our family, but – I respect when people do that – but anyway...

Sometimes it’s a really beautiful thing and [it’s] a thing you can do with other people. And then sometimes it makes me cringe, when it’s thinking about traditional values.”

--Kenny Bilbrey, 2016



Figure 3. - Ivy on Sam's porch in Berea, KY on July 20, 2016.

At the same time that Sam and Kenny navigate conflicting definitions of, and relationships to, traditionality through music, family, religion, and queerness, Ivy Brashear articulates extraction as a traditional process in the mountains. Ivy was 29-years-old at the time of our July 2016 interview. She is a white cisgender self-identified lesbian. Ivy and I also met at the 2013 STAY Summer Institute at Highlander. I haven't spent as much time with Ivy as I have with Sam, Ada, and Kenny, but I'm always struck by her way with words. Ivy is a poet with a particularly powerful way of articulating realities of life in the region. She argues that rather than conceiving of extraction as connected only to industries and economies in the mountains, we instead need to understand extraction as a process of robbing Appalachian communities of agency.

“I would start by saying that, extraction in the region is not limited to extractive industries, so it’s not limited to coal, it’s not limited to timber or oil and natural gas, that it’s really about extracting labor and extracting wealth and extracting images. It really is a 300-year history. So, I just finished my master’s thesis and it was about Media’s relationship to the region, and whether or not images that have been extracted about Appalachia have had any sort of impact on how people in the region feel about themselves and their culture, like what does that – what does that mean, what does it look like?

So in doing that research it really became clear that over 300 years, people who have been in power and who have controlled the power, in the region and outside of the region, whether it be politicians or local elites who have all the money and the influence, or the coal industry, or the timber industry, have really worked very hard, and very intentionally to create this narrative of the place and the people as being a throw away place, and a throw away people, and people who don’t really deserve to do anything other than coal mining, for instance. And so over this 300-year history of this narrative being told over and over and over and over and also being recycled in times of economic upheaval, what I found was that, it really does have an impact and that impact is that people feel like all they are good for is what they are given from people who have all the power and the money.

So extraction is more than this one industry, it’s really about extracting the power and the agency from the people, so that they feel like they don’t have that power and agency to make any sort of decisions for their life and their communities for themselves. That they have to just keep taking all of this crap that they’ve been given and settle, really settle for these extractive industries that, for at least 150 years in terms of coal, have been really harmful, really detrimental to the environment and to public health, to wealth creation and building, to community development and economic diversification.

It’s really sort of been like relying on a mono-economy in this way in a place that is a sacrifice zone for the 1%, is really harmful in a lot of ways. And it sort of gets you to this point now where, you know the coal is running out, it’s not economical for companies to mine the coal anymore, like it’s more costly, and so they’re not gonna spend the extra money to do it – they’re gonna go where it’s cheaper. So we’re at this point now where we’re sort of left in a lurch, really, and our backs are against the wall and it’s sort of like, what do we do now? We’re being left behind again by this industry that has consistently left us behind. Over generations.

So I’m making it sound really sad and harsh and...it is. The reality is we’re in this really urgent moment of what do we do, and people are - because people in the region are so connected to coal as a heritage and a cultural aspect of life and they really identify with it as a piece of who they are, there’s really this process of grieving that’s happening and disbelief and depression about...like these 12 stages of grief – it really is happening in the region and we’re seeing it play out where people just feel really hopeless and despondent almost about what does the future hold? What are we gonna do?

But, at the same time, we're in this moment of great opportunity and awesome possibility, where there's really amazing work that's happening and people are doing really awesome things and really trying to redefine what the region is and does and who the people are, and how they exist in this global economy, and what the possibilities are, how wide open it truly is. And so, we're sitting in this moment of great despair, but also great opportunity, which is a really interesting place to sit. Especially being somebody who's from the region and has never known a time when coal wasn't the be all end all, and wasn't the only thing that people were investing in. To be in this time now where powerful powerful people – like Hal Rogers, who is the most powerful of the powerful when it comes to Kentucky politics – when he's standing up in a public forum and saying things like “Coal mining is gone, it's never coming back, we have to do something different” – that's incredible! That's an amazing moment to be a young person in, where we can have this sort of impact on the future in a way that we haven't been able to have before. It's like doors and windows and floodgates are open to us now.”

--Ivy Brashear, 2016

Ivy's work, both political and professional, with the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) focuses on expanding narratives of possibility and power in the region. She articulates how a large part of her work within the Appalachian Transition movement centers around shifting conversations around what is possible, away from a conversation of coal as traditional and the only possibility, towards a revisiting of traditional Appalachian crafts and agricultural practices that are celebrated within the region. Because Ivy's professional and organizing work are inseparably tied to discussions about how to shift narratives away from “Coal as King” towards broader possibilities, I asked her what she thought about the relationship between coal and tradition. Coal has a pervasive psychic power over the Central Appalachian region, and over Eastern Kentucky specifically. Its influence extends beyond its market value, silent and invisible. Its presence infiltrates many parts of life in Eastern Kentucky: chemicals seeping into the water, coal money seeping into politician's pockets, coal companies building new baseball fields at struggling rural schools as a representation of how much they “care,” a framing of Obama's “War on Coal” as the sole reason for the struggling

economy (and the thinly veiled racism that accompanies this message), as well as a manipulation of the reality of coal's declining accessibility in the region by corporate media campaigns.

"I think even if you have no connection to coal mining whatsoever in the region –a lot of people still feel this really strong connection to - not necessarily the industry - but the idea of coal mining, and the fact that this has been what we've done. There's this really proud history in coal mining and treating coal miners as if they are military service people – you know, they have provided a service to us and we should honor and respect them, and that's true! We should honor and respect their work because it's not easy, it's really hard and lots of people have put food on the table and sent kids to college working in the coal mines. And there's nothing to be sorry about for that, or ashamed of for that, and we should definitely honor that history, and honor the people who have worked in those jobs.

But people are really connected to it, and it is really viewed as and seen as a cultural piece of who we are, just a piece of the fabric of who we are as a culture, as an Appalachian culture.... The "War on Coal" framework really did not help at all to get people to think about coal mining as a really important piece of our past, but not our future. But, I think when you talk about coal mining, it's so charged now, that people in the region who feel this really strong connection to it feel really personally attacked. They feel like their way of life is being attacked and threatened. They feel fearful about what that means and what the future holds, cause they just haven't known anything else but coal mining - by design - but that's where they are.

So, I think, right now people are really feeling this tradition of coal mining is really being threatened, by people who don't understand and don't want to understand, and so there's a lot of animosity that comes out of that toward people that either aren't from the region, or are, but are advocating for something else.

And it's just this clinging to a piece of who they are, or what they feel like is a piece of who they are, and not wanting to let go of that. And that's real. We have to acknowledge that and address that in the work that I'm doing, and others who are doing similar type[s] of work. We have to figure out a way to address that, because I don't think we really have yet. I mean, we use a lot of messaging of like "Coal mining was really important for our past, it's not going to be important for our future." But, it doesn't really resonate with people and it's something that we have to address, cause people are really feeling it. When I go outside the region and I talk about coal mining declining, people are like, "Oh that's great!" And I'm like, "Well, let me just peel back some of these layers for you and talk about what this really means for people and how it really emotionally hits a lot of people and what that means in the work that we're doing." We can't just tell coal miners to transition to renewable energy jobs, that's not gonna work. It's deeper than that, and it's more emotional than that."

--Ivy Brashear, 2016

Central to Ivy's conceptions of traditionality in the region then, are the realities that extractive industries maintain widespread political and cultural power; not only through constricting narratives of possibility, but also through the processes of limiting access to resources, opportunities, and health and wellbeing for Appalachian people. Just as traditional as Appalachian music and crafts is a tradition of environmental, political, and social exploitation and manipulation of the land, animals, and people in the region by corporate elites.



Figure 4. - Ada and her truck outside Appalshop in Whitesburg, KY on July 20, 2016.

Ada Smith is a white cisgender self-identified queer Appalachian dyke. She was 29-years-old at the time of our interview in July, 2016. Ada and I met at Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts during the fall of 2006, when I was a senior and she was a freshman.

Her accent and connection to home made my heart swell with homesickness when I first met her, but it wasn't until I moved back to West Virginia in 2011 and got involved with STAY that we really got to know one another. Ada was born and raised in Whitesburg, KY where her parents helped found Appalshop in 1969. Appalshop is a non-profit organization which, according to its website, "[enacts] cultural organizing and place-based media, arts and education to document the life, celebrate the culture, and voice the concerns of people living in Appalachia and rural America." Appalshop's early founders and current staff have consistently worked to directly challenge and respond to the national gaze and misrepresentations of the region. Appalshop has been a formative wellspring of place-based community organizing focusing on the power of Appalachian people telling their own stories in their own words. When I asked Ada what the word tradition makes her think of she spoke about the power of language, and the complicated legacies and transformations in meaning that are constantly happening to and through our words.

"I haven't been doing much [thinking] about the word tradition, but I have been doing a lot of [thinking] about the word heritage. Which, clearly they kinda are on the same coin, I guess. I really believe in cultural traditions. And I believe in acts of ceremony and ways of being in the world and with people. I think that stuff is really strong and important, and clearly can be divisive, right? So, I think the word tradition is not the problem to me, and I can think of a lot of traditions that are really important to my day to day life, really important to my organizing, really important to my community of people.

I think where I've been trying to [think about this more] is in Appalachia there's traditional music, old time music, right? And there's a whole conversation about what that is, what it looks like, blah blah blah, and yet, for instance, I've had really hard conversations with some of my friends about the fact that, like we have a traditional music school in this county that lasts for a week and up until recently, many of the instructors weren't traditional musicians from Eastern Kentucky. They were teaching ways to play fiddle and ways of playing banjo that actually weren't of the traditions of this place, and so what does that mean? How do you make sure you pass on how people historically have passed on ways of music, art, spirituality, etc.? How do you make sure that keeps happening, while understanding that culture is not a static thing, right? And that even the act of the traditional ways of passing on music or stories, of me telling you, you repeating, us doing it over and over again - what's always gonna happen is that the

way I do it and the way you do it are different! And it moves and it transforms and it becomes its own thing.

So, for instance, we talk a lot at Appalshop about the fact that we are creating cultural sustainability, not cultural preservation, and that the importance is that a way of life has the ability to sustain itself, and yet, it's not like every aspect of culture is good. Right? So I think to me, words like culture, tradition, heritage - they are active words, they are not these static things. And yet, regardless of how people are using them or not using them, we all have to acknowledge how powerful they are. Like, I don't even know if I think anything else is more powerful than what falls under culture, which to me is traditions and heritage. I just really think culture is what truly shapes what is or is not happening.

.... That being said - I've stopped using the word heritage at all. I still use traditions, and I don't think there's any way to stop using culture, but I have stopped using heritage because I just...I feel like at this point, it's been so misused that anytime you use it it just means a bunch of stuff that you don't mean it to mean. And I think that specifically has to do with racism."

--Ada Smith, 2016

As a core founding member of STAY, and the long-time unpaid coordinator, Ada's political thinking has helped shape the political philosophies of the STAY network. Because she was raised in a "movement family," and became connected to Southerners On New Ground and other Southern multi-racial leaders as a teenager through her involvement with the Highlander Center, Ada has brought an analysis of racial justice to the STAY Project which continues to guide the organization's work. This isn't to say that Ada alone brought a commitment to racial justice to the STAY network or to regional movement spaces; Ada's continued mentorship by, and movement relationship to, central queer and trans leaders of color in the South more broadly has shaped her thinking around issues of racial justice. However, it does feel important to name Ada's consistent commitment to racial justice in the region, and her dedication in particular to centering conversations about whiteness and racial violence in contemporary conversations around Appalachian Transition.

Narrow constructions of traditionality in the region serve not only to erase the presence of rural people of color and LGBTQ+ peoples – but also of violence towards them. As Sam, Ivy, Ada, and Kenny articulate, the designation of quaint old-fashioned crafts and musical practices as “traditional” also serves to erase the histories and contemporary realities of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and environmental and economic vampirism that thrive alongside radical traditions of labor organizing and community resistance. An understanding of Appalachian traditionality that takes into account not only our musical, crafting, and agricultural traditions, but which also reckons with additional, less-told histories and contemporary realities – those of Klu Klux Klan and neo-Nazi activity in the mountains, of radical cross-race leftist organizing in the region, of various communities of color’s immigration to/and from the region, of white colonial genocide towards native people, of queer punk scenes in the mountains, as well as back-to-the-land communes - would do much to create a broader definition of Appalachian-ness that includes all mountain people.

“Do we even have any queer traditions?”

“Rachel: Are there queer traditions?”

Kenny: I don’t know!

Rachel: That’s ok! I’m just curious, like, is that even a word that we talk about in queer spaces?

Kenny: I feel like not because there’s so little, like... I think in particular in this region, there’s just so little documented [history] – I mean, I think there’s things people do and have always done to take care of each other, but I wouldn’t necessarily see that as tradition, it’s just sort of like practice.”

--Kenny Bilbrey, 2016

In *Queering the Countryside*, a greatly needed addition to the field of rural queer studies⁸, the editors raise a concern that goes beyond questions of metronormativity within queer spaces. The larger question they raise is, what do we even mean when we say rural? How do we define a space so geographically, economically, culturally vast? And what values and meanings do we subconsciously assign to the vastly dynamic non-urban reaches of the United States?

“Put simply, ‘rural America’ is strange. Some might even go so far as to say it is queer. At the very least it is complicated, and at times downright confounding, at least for a concept that is as supposedly commonsensical and familiar as the idea of rurality is often imagined to be. It is simultaneously everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. It is ever-present and yet a thing of the past. It is at once archetypically American and atypical of America. It even shrinks (as a percentage of the overall population) as it expands (in real population numbers). Rural America is strange as well in the sense that it has come to represent many qualities that a lot of the people who live there (wherever

⁸ Ironically, this field of study has long been dominated by queer scholars – including Halberstam – who live in major coastal cities, and therefore have little understanding of the lived rather than theoretical realities of rural queerness; the complexities and contradictions, as well as harmonies and moments of alignment in our lives as queer people in rural spaces.

‘there’ is) simply do not possess, including whiteness, deeply rooted American nativity, and, most importantly for our purposes here, heterosexuality. Indeed, for all that the term ‘rural’ does connote in the context of twenty-first-century American culture, one thing that it is almost never used to signify is gender or sexual diversity. On the contrary, when most people talk about ‘rural and small-town values,’ they are referring at least in part to a culture of sexual conservatism that is generally assumed to be intolerant of gender and sexual diversity at best, if not overtly sexist and homophobic. (Johnson, Gray & Gilley, 2016: 4)”

The reality of mainstream queer conceptions of success as dependent upon escape from the farm for the bright glittering lights of the city extends beyond Appalachia as a region, to a national conception of the spaces in which queer people are able to thrive. For a paper exploring, in large part, the ways that young queer organizers are navigating, contesting, building upon, and reinventing notions of traditionality – I was curious to know what, if anything, Sam, Ivy, Ada, and Kenny would recognize as queer traditions. They named themes of reclaiming language, space, and histories as traditions of queerness, in addition to traditions that are more familiar in traditional mainstream constructions of rural queer experience.

Ivy shared a story that aligns more closely with metronormative themes and concepts, but also raises the important truth that rural queer experiences often differ drastically based on generational divides.

“We have a dear family friend - a good friend of my mom’s growing up - who is a lesbian, and who lives with her partner in South Carolina. And she has this really different perspective on living in rural places as a queer person than I do, being a much younger person. And it’s because she grew up in this time of total secrecy and total, “We don’t talk about this. This isn’t something that happens.”

I can distinctly remember her telling me at some point when I was younger, “You are not gonna be able to live in Kentucky and be an open queer person. You’re gonna have to move to another place, a bigger city, even outside of Kentucky.” Which, Louisville is like one of the gayest cities I’ve ever been to, you know what I mean? So, it’s interesting for me to sit now, where I am as an adult...wishing that I had known when I first came out as a teenager, living in Eastern Kentucky – wishing I had known about these pockets and

these communities of people who were from my place who were queer people. And wondering what I would have thought about that and how I would have felt about that.”

--Ivy Brashear, 2016

Ivy’s quote helps us to understand that, in addition to a queer tradition of escape by some rural LGBTQ+ people, there is also one in which all evidence of rural queer existence or possibilities of survival in rural spaces are erased. Among the forty-five rural and small town LGBTQ+ folks from throughout the United States who have shared their stories with the ongoing oral history project, Country Queers (of which this research is a part), almost every one of them who are over the age of thirty reference the ways in which queer folks who *did* live in their communities were offered acceptance in exchange for silence and secrecy.

I myself remember clearly the first time I heard the word “lesbian” – whispered through hands over mouths in the middle school gym. It was 1999 in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, and I had no idea what this word meant. It was being used in reference to a Department of Natural Resources officer who had come to school – in full army-green buttoned down uniform and military-looking boots, brown hair cut close to her head – for career day. I lived on a 100-acre sheep farm an hour away from a town of 3,000 people with no cable TV, before the days of easy internet access in the mountains.

“She’s a lesbian” a classmate whispered.

Picking up on the tone of disgust, I replied, “Ew!” And then, after a pause, “What’s that?”

I don’t remember the explanation; I’m sure it wasn’t very kind. I do remember that I beelined it to the “lesbian’s” career day session, and stared rudely at her – so much so that I burned an image of her uniform, her boots, her haircut, and her swagger into some deep and secret place

in my then-adolescent brain. It isn't that there weren't queer people in rural spaces in the 80s and 90s of my childhood, or the 1880s and 90s. It's that, specifically in the rural South, the way communities navigated queer presence was through a feigned oblivion.

Ada shifts away from this "traditional" metronormative view of queer histories involving community building centered around cities, and talks about a queer tradition – across geography and generation – of storytelling. Ada argues that when queer people find one another we name our personal histories, memories, and "roots" in a way that is unique to the particular experience of queerness.

"So, I think – obviously as somebody who works at a cultural institution. I don't think of traditions as only in a queer context, but definitely when I think about organizing within the region, or being here and living and continuing to be a part of the region, I think about a lot of what I would call queer traditions that really matter a lot. And have supported me and my organizing, have supported me and my relationships. For instance, I've been in this six year long relationship with this other queer person, and I feel like we still come out to each other all the time. The other day me and him were on a walk and he was telling me about this experience he had when he was like in 5th grade or something.

And, I think that kind of storytelling process – of things that were really hard or fine or good or whatever – I think that's a tradition [in] the queer community. To talk about another moment where you realized your queerness. You're always remembering those moments, or always telling those moments. I think those are really important, and I don't feel like that happens within the straight community. They don't have a tradition of like, "This is when I first knew I liked the opposite gender" or "This was the first moment I realized I was in a sexual experience." I mean like, kind of, but not really, not in the same way.

I feel like queers, even if it's not about who you liked, you remember the first time someone thought you were a different gender, or – all of that stuff. So like, for instance to me, that's a tradition, that we do and we're a part of and we're not stopping and really matters."

--Ada Smith, 2016

Here, Ada articulates a form of meaning making through collective storytelling that she sees as uniquely queer. She goes beyond the overly-documented importance of coming out

stories in queer spaces to talk about the ways in which queer people trace the threads of our queerness through our lives before and after any traditionally recognized moment of outing ourselves. In our 2013 interview, Sam also spoke to the importance of language in rural queer traditions. He described the creation of a new word to name rural queer Appalachian identity in a way that bridges the gaps between the identities of Appalachian and queer – which, he described, are often represented as incongruous.

“I made some friends who are country queers. And we started thinking, ‘Well, we’re Fabulous and we’re Appalachians, so we’re Fabulachians.’ And so that all came together and we clung to that word and used it, and used it, and used it, and used it when we first combined it, because it set something right in ourselves. It announced that we were fully human. That we were whole.”

--Sam Gleaves, 2013

Ethan Hamblin, a dear friend of Sam’s, long time STAY member, and country queer himself (raised in Gays Creek, Kentucky!) – worked with Sam to organize STAY’s second annual LGBTQ gathering in 2013, which they named the “Fabulachian Youth Gathering.” It is from Sam and Ethan that I first learned the term and with whom I most closely associate it. People often laugh when they hear the word, but the creation of new terms through which we attempt to name our identities in a way that feels more holistic is a tradition of marginalized communities – and in this case, the queer community specifically.

Debora Kodish writes of folklorists’ abandonment of the word “authentic” due to its complicated past and its brokenness as a concept. She argues, though, for the preservation of this term, and for a new understanding of the concept of authenticity – not, as a process through which outside experts are given the authority to authenticate traditional arts, but rather as a vision of liberated arrival for communities experiencing inequality.

“In the context of inequality (and terrible times), authenticity is not merely a rhetorical strategy or an abstraction. When you cannot recognize yourself in the way that you are treated and in the names that you are called – but when you still have a hope, a belief that you are not what they say you are – authenticity can be a name for a space where you can breathe. Examples of this deep and compelling need for recognizable acts of naming, for justice and freedom, are of course legion.... Authenticity is sometimes felt more keenly when it is denied” (2011:36).

Sam’s quote above demonstrates a need for the reclaiming of language so that we can not only recognize ourselves in the names that we are called, but rather demand that we be called by the names we choose for ourselves: as Appalachians and as queer folks. In our 2016 interview, Sam added to these earlier observations about the power of creating new language to hold our identities; and talked about resilience as traditional both to mountain people and to queer folks in the region.

“What immediately comes to mind is my friend Carrie Kline, who’s a wonderful oral historian, lives in Elkins, West Virginia. She and her partner Michael did a series of interviews with LGBTQ people from West Virginia, which Carrie turned into a staged reading, a drama production, called *Revelations*. And it celebrates the resiliency of LGBTQ people. And so when I think about resiliency, I think about tradition, because I think that there is a tradition of people being resilient in Appalachia, and I think queer people especially so...I mean the ones that I have known. Especially the ones that wanted to live in their home communities for most of their lives.

I’ve been really fortunate to have some older gay friends - either mentors in the music world, or just community members that feel like family to me. I think of one older friend of mine whose out, and he deals with, just misunderstandings about who he is all the time. Like in bars or wherever, where like these straight...pretty gruff country dudes - that he’s able to relate to because he’s so funny and he’s so effervescent and he’s a person that you’d want to know! So then he deals with these misunderstandings and these disrespectful things that get said, or just like, heteronormative things, or misogynist things, or whatever - he’s also like a real progressive person politically.

So he’s dealing with all this B.S. that he encounters on a regular basis with this humor and self assurance and you know this beautiful – you know it’s a defiance! But it’s a subtle kind of defiance, in that it’s just...it’s a knowledge, a deep knowledge of who he is

and what he's about and what he believes. And...he's not gonna let that be challenged, by what anyone else thinks."

--Sam Gleaves, 2016

Ada and Sam speak of powerful queer traditions of community building through the ways in which we tell stories, claim new languages of identity, and navigate non-queer rural spaces with self-assured defiance. Kenny brings up an equally important but less positive tradition: one of isolation in the mountains for queer folks. While the extent to which representations of mountain isolation from the greater world as well as representations of rural queer life as defined exclusively by struggle are grossly exaggerated, the reality of unique rural challenges – specifically for transgender and gender-non-conforming people in the mountains – is undeniable. Kenny spoke of a tradition and current reality of isolation from resources of support, including health care and mental health care for rural mountain people in general, and specifically for queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming folks in those spaces.

"First of all...access to quality affordable healthcare for any person in this county and in so many rural areas is horrible! You know, so many people don't have access to health insurance, there's very few doctors, a lot of healthcare providers that come in here come here from somewhere else and are getting like paid to be here in this specific place for a certain amount of time and then they leave and they're not invested in the place, they're just coming cause it's, you know, they get money to come do a job and you know just aren't really sticking around.

[As for trans folks...]

I struggled for a very long time to find a physician that I felt comfortable with just as a primary care doctor. There's a nurse practitioner in town and I won't say her name - but, she has taken very good care of me. Like I hadn't been to the gynecologist in 7 years and my sister had cervical cancer when she was 17 so it's just like, I very much needed to go but I just, like I couldn't do it, I couldn't go....

I'm lucky to find this one person in this one place, but she still doesn't have resources or education on these [issues] - she's been willing to be, very kind to me and patient and,

trying to figure out where she could refer me. But it's still - she's like, we could send you to Louisville, which is like 4 hours away from here, or Lexington which is 2 ½ or Knoxville which is 2 ½.

And so, yeah, maybe it would be possible for me to get out and go to that every now and again, but I'm lucky enough to be a person who has a full time job and health insurance so that's the only ways that I'm able to do that is because I have access to these certain things, but so many people don't and that makes it even more difficult."

--Kenny Bilbrey, 2016

It's worth noting here that access to safe and affirming health care for trans and gender-non-conforming people is often hard to come by in cities as well, in addition to the fact that – as Kenny explains – access to quality affordable healthcare is an issue that extends far beyond the region and the specificities of trans healthcare. There is, however, a unique experience of isolation from healthcare for trans and gender-non-conforming people in the Appalachian region that is in urgent need of attention.

Kenny and Ivy's stories about historic and contemporary struggles faced by LGBTQ+ Central Appalachians, and Sam's celebration of Fabulachian resilience help us craft an understanding of the ways in which rural queer Appalachians understand queer traditionality. Ada adds to our understanding of queer traditionality by articulating her opinion about why so many young queer Appalachians are central figures in social justice movements in the region. Ada argues that a lived experience of oppression calls many queer folks to social justice work, thereby positing that activism in and of itself, is a queer tradition (if not a mainstream "gay" and "lesbian" one).

"For the most part, in my opinion, queer folks in this country, whether you're rural or urban, understand the complexity of oppression, and so I think there's no question in my mind about why so many queer people in this country right now are leading tons of fights about how structural oppression works and what it means for people to stop it. Because I think they get it from an instinctual level and get that for my life to be better, your life has

to be better, you know that it's not some solo-ed, let me just win this one little thing, game. And, I think that when I think about so many young queer people even within the Governance Project leading it, I think about a lot of what it's meant for us to have known each other and built relationships over years, that weren't necessarily about whatever we're doing right now.

And so I think there's a level of how queerness tends to build community that becomes really important in political struggle - that political struggle also builds community in particular ways, but I think queer folks know a lot about holding each other, about helping each other out, about figuring out how even within tough times we work it out? And so I think queer folks bring a lot of that...knowledge and experience to the table during these times, and I also think that there is no mistake to me that within the South, right now, there's a lot of queer folks leading organizing efforts, because there has been some specific investment, and historic mentorship by older queer folks.

And then I also think that - I feel like there is something about, the intrinsic-ness of ...most of us in the kind of 20, 30s even 40s [age range] have not been in a movement moment like we are right now. And I think these moments are really exciting...and hard. And I think what is again intrinsic about queer people is that we're used to and feel comfortable in the subversive and so I think there's a lot about what does it mean in a moment in our country when there is so much tension, to be able to still stand up and be out and demand, call for, speak for new spaces?

And I just think that, in my experience, specifically queer folks of color, know how to do that more than anybody else, cause they've had to do it their whole fucking life. And so, there's no question or mistake to me that that's who's in leadership. So I think that's also true in rural areas, it's not, different. We used to attacks, we know what they look like, we know how to navigate them, we know, you know it's, and of course it doesn't mean it's not hard, and it doesn't mean it's not whatever, but as I said before we know how to, like, hold each other a little bit."

--Ada Smith, 2016

Again, Ada calls our attention here to the ways in which race and queerness intersect, arguing that queer and trans people of color are best positioned to lead the movement in these uncertain times due to their understanding of how to demand space for their existence in a society determined to destroy their bodies through legislation, state sanctioned violence, and policing. We can see a whole range of processes of creating and reclaiming space as queer

tradition in the mountains and in queer space more broadly defined. From Sam's articulation of the need for a word within which he could feel "whole," to Ada's articulation of queer community as something which teaches us how to hold space in a way that we need personally as well as collectively in social justice spaces, we can see themes of reclaiming histories, language, and spaces; finding and creating space for queer and political community to exist; and becoming visible to one another as rural queer traditions in the mountains and beyond.

Appalachian Transition: Queer Visions for a Post-Coal Future

With an understanding of the ways in which these young organizers conceptualize traditionality – both within the Central Appalachian region and within queer communities more broadly – behind us, we can shift now towards the political work they are doing to envision a more sustainable, inclusive, economically and environmentally just future in the coalfields. But first, in a paper which argues that queer organizers are central actors in shifting conversations around economic transition in the region, it's important to define what we mean by Appalachian Transition.

Ivy's work with the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) is centered specifically on Appalachian Transition communications work. I asked her about the work she does at MACED around Appalachian Transition as well as what some of those visions for Economic Transition to a post-Coal economy look like.

"Ivy: We call it Appalachian Transition, which is the communications that we do that's focused on economic transition, and how do we move - not necessarily move beyond Coal, but - how do we transition into an economy that's more diverse, and more local,

more sustainable, more just and equitable for more people. And so it's really about attacking – not attacking, that's not the right word - it's really about adjusting the narrative and shifting the narrative that's existed in the region for 300 years, that says that, "We have coal mining and that's all that we have, that's all that the region is good for, that's all the people are good for."

We're trying to shift that narrative to say "Actually we can rely on these really great assets that are local, like arts and culture, and local food and entrepreneurship, and we can build from those an economy that is more just and sustainable and equitable, and that really will create a foundation for an economy that isn't exploitative, and that can support the region and the people far into the future. Unlike the extractive economies of the past." So my work is about that narrative work and about how do we shift that narrative and how do we talk about the economy differently and the future of the economy differently.

Rachel: Could you talk more about the idea of Economic Transition? What are some of those visions for moving beyond Coal?

Ivy: Well, I mean I'll start by saying that this whole idea for Appalachian Transition really became intentional about eight years ago. The war on coal narrative had just started and was just damping up in the region and becoming this way for politicians and powerful elites to sort of control the narrative about what was possible, and so, there wasn't really anybody who was countering that in any real concerted way, and so MACED and KFTC⁹ and some other folks who were doing this kind of work - social justice kind of work, economic justice work in the region - came together and said, "What are we gonna do about this? How do we counter this messaging and how do we counter this framework, so that people don't think that [coal is] the only thing that is possible and the only thing that exists?"

And so they came up with this idea and this framework which is Appalachian Transition, and it really is based on a vision that is really bold and really courageous and really far reaching, not easy at all to attain, but one that is attainable, that's very real. It's really rooted in the idea that the region holds all of these assets that we can build from that are very real, and are almost ingrained in the value system of the place. So like: our local heritage and culture and arts, this idea of hardworking people who are really committed to their communities and really want to build up their communities and help their neighbors, local foods. All of these things that have sort of been what we talk about when we talk about the culture of Central Appalachia.

And so we're saying, "Yes! Absolutely. We can use those to build an economy that

⁹ Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) is a grassroots organization of 10,000 members across Kentucky, from rural and urban spaces, across identities such as age, race, class, and gender. According to their website KFTC uses "core strategies, from leadership development to communications and voter empowerment, to impact a broad range of issues, including coal and water, new energy and transition, economic justice and voting rights."

works better for this place and for us as people and you as communities, you can use those things. This is a part of our culture...this is who we are and this is what we're gonna do now." So it's that whole idea of building from what we have, using what we have to move the economy into one that is, not extractive. That instead of being extractive is building from within and building from who we are as a people. And being really intentional about being inclusive in that as well, like, since this interview is about Country Queers, thinking about how do we make that really inclusive for all aspects of life in the region? For queer folks, for people of color, for folks who are low income and aren't local elites who are controlling all of the decisions.

So, we're working as MACED and we're working with other partners like Kentuckians for The Commonwealth, and Appalshop in Whitesburg, and lots and lots of others on trying to figure out how do we do that, how do we approach it, and how do we do it? And...the core tenant of it is that we're building from what we have, we're building from our own assets. We're not trying to be something we're not, and get above our raising and put on airs, and be somebody or a place that we're not. We're really just trying to be who we are, and use that to be non-extractive, and non-harmful to the people and the place."

--Ivy Brashear, 2016

Many organizations in the region have launched Appalachian Transition initiatives in an attempt to tackle the question of what comes next across a wide array of entrepreneurial and agricultural formats. In late 2016 Appalshop and the Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College launched a "Mines to Minds" technology training program. The program offers two accelerated certificate programs options in either: "Systems Administration (IT Networking and Support) and Multimedia Design and Implementation (Designing, Creating, marketing, and branding using High Tech Creative Software tools and websites)." As their website explains "our partnering employers are growing and have potential employment opportunities available for students going through these Accelerated Certificates. That means there are jobs waiting for you to go through Mines to Minds."

Additionally, the Highlander Research and Education Center in East Tennessee has just welcomed in it's 2nd year of Appalachian Transition Fellows. The Appalachian Transition

Fellowship Program places fellows throughout the Central Appalachian region with organizations that are committed to a Just Transition in the region. As they explain on their website:

“Central Appalachia is engaged in a period of economic transition. While industries related to coal and labor-intensive manufacturing have historically provided the region’s economic base, their presence in Appalachia is declining. This decline has allowed new economic sectors such as clean energy and local food production to emerge. While the decline of previously stable industries brings with it significant economic instability, it also offers Appalachia the opportunity to focus on the long-term well-being of its people and its communities. This economic transition allows regionally-based industries to prosper while also protecting and supporting the environmental and social well-being of the region.

Our ability to make this transition a reality depends upon increasing the capacity of organizations and stakeholders working to address the systemic problems of the region. Acting upon that conviction, the Appalachian Transition Fellowship (AppFellows) seeks to increase the connectivity and capacity of Appalachian institutions and leaders while fostering a deep understanding of the complexities and opportunities needed to create a just and sustainable Appalachian economy.”

The 2017 Fellows have been placed at organizations working on projects with a wide variety of goals and strategies including sustainable tourism and local foods based economic development campaigns, among others. But not everyone is convinced that these small scale approaches will bring adequate jobs quickly enough for the current unemployment crisis in the region. Kentucky’s 5th Congressional District Republican Representative Hal Rogers has been active in recruiting a \$444-million-dollar federal prison to be constructed on a former Mountain Top Removal site in Letcher County, KY. Representative Rogers and many local planning boards tout the new prison as economic development, citing the possibility that 300 new jobs will open in the county once the prison is built. For many in Letcher County prisons are not the economic future they are looking for. Ada and Kenny are both members of a new organizing

group formed specifically in order to fight the construction of this prison called the Letcher Governance Project. Ada describes her current political work fighting the construction of the proposed prison.

“My newest leg of political work or whatnot, within rural places in my community is this stuff we’ve been picking up around the Letcher Governance Project, and the main focus of that currently is opposing a federal prison that is supposed to be built here, under the narrative of economic development.

And so, what’s interesting to me about that work is it’s very brand new, there’s a clear battle to be fought right now, but I think it very much connects to things that I’ve been doing long term that have to do with how white folks connect to broader communities of color whether they’re here or not, how, the ways that racism is structural, and how people in poor rural communities actually can be decision makers for what happens, and that they can be a part of deciding their own futures, and that we don’t just have to accept what is given to us.

And so the Letcher Governance Project harkens back to some work that happened in the early 90s in this county, that was about uncovering political corruptness within local government, and then, trying to elect local officials that were responsive to community versus just being an official that did whatever you thought should happen, or your people thought should happen, but really brought in community input. So, the Letcher Governance Project as I said is just getting off the ground, we’re still figuring it out, there’s a lot of work to do, but I feel like it really thus far is connecting a lot of my understandings about how, race moves in this country, and what are, what are some ways to have conversations about racism in a place where people don’t feel like race exists, while also giving space for people to help make decisions about their future. Whether that comes to getting some political corruption out or not, we don’t know yet, but I would be shocked if it does not. But the main goals to me are around deciding our own future through community input, and, having some hard conversations about how we participate in the larger national conversation right now, specifically, around black and brown bodies.”

--Ada Smith, 2016

This is an important moment in Ada’s articulation of the work that the Letcher Governance Project aims to do. She’s sees the work as twofold. There’s a very local process of increasing community agency and ability to decide what the future of the region looks like – rather than simply accepting the extractive and violent mono-industries which corporate elites

offer as the only economic possibility. And, there's the equally crucial process of figuring out how to have conversations around race and racism and the responsibility white people have to fight white supremacy. This poses a unique challenge in a predominantly white and poor rural community; a community where the lack of economic options has been blamed on communities of color by political rhetoric and media hysteria which has placed the responsibility for the dying coal economy on the shoulders of our nation's first Black president and his "War on Coal" and on the shoulders of immigrants for "stealing our jobs." The goals of a just economic transition in the region for the queer organizers interviewed here, are not only about increasing community power and agency to determine our own futures, but also to do what few have successfully done in movement history nationally: to engage rural predominantly white communities in the fight for racial justice.

"I was talking before about my sheros. I definitely see our work in the context of, what does it mean to have a federal prison coming to you, when in all technical ways it's positive for our community: we get jobs, we get sewer and water infrastructure, we get a big bunch of investment, like, what's the negative, why wouldn't you be for it? Even though, we of course know that the prison system is insanely messed up, insanely racialized, and that actually being a prison guard is not a good thing and it really screws up people and families who have to be in those kinds of jobs. So I think again, most of the Governance Project are not people who would take those jobs [in the prison], but I think the question continues to become - just like some of my sheros that were miners wives, or property owners, or just women in community who were seeing what was happening, the devastating results of mining - is that, as white people in a community who can look out and see what prisons are doing, our role and job right now to contribute to the injustice of that is to not have another one built!

And so to me it's again: understanding who we are, understanding the system, and what our role is within that, and knowing that even if we can't stop it that we are not a part of just letting it happen, and that there is clear public resistance, to the idea that prisons should be economic development! They should not be economic development they should never even be framed in that context.

Prisons because we have to lock up people who are doing intense things? Ok, let's argue about that. But they are not economic development, and that is not the role of them. And I

don't even wanna participate in the idea that that is the type of investment that people here want. Cause it's not. People feel like it's the only thing offered to them, but it is not the investment that people want. And, I also don't think anyone here wants to be in a position where their job relies on someone else being put behind bars and someone else fucking up. There are people here who'd do those jobs, but I don't think anybody dreams that like, how I'm gonna make a go for it for me and my family is by having a gun and a badge and making sure this person behind bars stays behind bars. I don't think people grow up dreaming that that's gonna be their job, and that that's gonna be the way they support their family. So, I don't know, I just, I think we can think bigger and better."

--Ada Smith, 2016

Ada's vision for a just Appalachian Transition, then, is one in which local Central Appalachian people have a say in deciding what the future of their communities look like and have options which allow them to support their families without having to enact violence on the landscape where they live, or on other humans incarcerated within their communities. Her vision is one in which just sustainable economic development goes hand in hand with a conscious fight towards racial justice and equality. And it's a vision in which white people in the region own our historic and contemporary role in supporting and enacting white supremacist violence – and actively choose to work towards an Appalachian future in which all people who are connected to those mountains can feel at home, safe, and welcomed and like we have what we need not only to survive, but to thrive.

While Ada has moved out of her leadership role with in the STAY project, the role that STAY has had in shaping many young Central Appalachian conceptions of and relationships to social justice work in the region is important to visit here before moving on. While STAY isn't exclusively focused on Appalachian Transition campaigns, much of the thinking around current fights such as those of the Letcher Governance Project, was influenced by STAY's original goals. Ada articulates STAY's early vision below.

“While I was in college myself and 3 to 4 other people started the STAY Project as a network, a regional network that could have a certain amount of political message, communication, voice and muscle. So, that has been a leg of work that since I’ve been home I’ve been pretty engaged in and only recently really released from - having to do with my age and just the reality that it needed to have its own legs that didn’t have to do with me. I think that work was all about making space. Making space for young people to be at the table, *numero uno*, in any type of conversation, and then making space for some conversations specifically about how racism and homophobia were affecting who was a part of our future as a region or not.

And so, those were the main two purposes. From that, of course, there was a lot of: how do we get joy around each other, how do we connect with one another, how do we build up our skills? There’s a lot that came out of it, but the whole point to me was around creating, pushing out some space for those identities: being young, and being queer, and/or a person of color. I think there’s variations of how well that’s gone, but our first goal around the importance of young people - the message has definitely been received. There’s not a conversation in our region now that young people do not get brought up, that there isn’t some consciousness around it. I don’t think there’s been as much moving on the dial as I was hoping, but it’s definitely shifted.

I don’t think our work around racism and homophobia has moved in the region as much as it should have. There’s a whole crew of young people now that are definitely way more conscious of the oppression that’s happening and what that means in our communities, but there has not been as much of a shift, structurally, organizationally, tactically. And I think first off, this was not the first time these conversations were happening, and two that it’s – young people is vague enough that they can decide what young person [they want to be involved] but clearly when you start talking about queers and folks of color, it becomes a lot more uncomfortable for certain people.”

--Ada Smith, 2016

To be clear, STAY is certainly not the source or the center of racial justice organizing in the region. On the contrary, Ada specifically names that STAY has been less successful in work around combating racism than we have hoped to. However, it feels important to acknowledge that STAY was formed with the intention of pushing out space for queer youth and youth of color in the region, because despite Ada’s feeling that the work around racism and homophobia hasn’t moved as much as she’d hoped since STAY’s founding in 2008, STAY *has* operated as an introduction to social justice for many young folks throughout Central Appalachia – and the

power of having a space created by and for young people in which the importance of talking about and creating space for queerness and racial justice in the region is central – shouldn't be underestimated. While it may not have led to significant structural and tactical change yet, the reality of an increase in young Central Appalachians' consciousness of and commitment to fighting homophobia and racism in the region is important.

Kenny now works as the Coordinator for the STAY Project, and at the time of our July 2016 interview they were living in Whitesburg, KY in Letcher County where the proposed prison is slated to be built. Kenny is also a central member of the Letcher Governance Project (LGP) and I asked them to explain in more detail the prison proposal itself and the specific actions and campaigns that LGP has launched in response.

“So the USP, United States Penitentiary at Letcher County it's been a prison that Hal Rogers our congressman has been fighting for 13 years to get here. So first of all it's a 13-year-old idea, it's wanting to be built in a remote location in the county where there's a lot of trouble with figuring out, well where's the water gonna come from for this prison? It's on an old mountain top removal site and there are folks nationally talking about this, and they're selling it as like a toxic prison, or whatever, which is not something that we necessarily agree with because the site – and I could have this wrong but I'm pretty sure it hasn't been mined in 40 years. You know, it's got a healthy wildlife population, the water isn't gonna be good but the land itself is not toxic. And so a lot of the national groups are saying “It's cruel and unusual punishment to send prisoners to toxic eastern Kentucky,” and I remember one thing that Tanya said one time, she's was like “Honey, we've tried to convince them about that about seemingly innocent white people for the past 10 years and it doesn't work. Like do you think that people are gonna finally like,” she was like “I wish, I would hope and pray that people would, but you know, it's not gonna work, that organizing isn't gonna work and it's not going to appeal to local folks...”

Rachel: and it's both, it's really offensive, it's really insulting to the local community from this national perspective.

Kenny: And that was just on like sort of a punk flyer, but still it's like...well...I don't wanna talk about specific organizations or whatever... And we appreciate the work that

they're doing. It just stands true for every national and then local perspective, is that they're often very different and have different interests.

This is the only proposed federal prison in the country, right now. We think that there's been a lot of pushing by Hal Rogers to get this done and from the Letcher Planning Commission which is a group that just invented themselves. And they've been doing work around economic development for awhile, and they've been trying to get this prison here for that long. But, one thing that we decided to do was to stand up and do an action at the Shaping Our Appalachian Region aka SOAR Summit in Pikeville, KY, which is a partnership of this non-profit entity SOAR that was created by Hal Rogers and Governor Steve Bashier to talk about how to move forward eastern Kentucky's economy and basically is saying broad band, heavy technology... You know, it's just the same [thing]. Bringing in new mono-economies, and when people push and say no we don't want this they don't listen.

Their whole theme of their conference was the SOAR Innovation Summit and so we stood up and help up a banner that said "Prisons Are Not Innovation" - first thing in the conference when Hal Rogers started talking. We also used a hashtag campaign called the #Our444Million because that's how much money is being allocated to build this prison, 444 million dollars. And so a week before the action - you know we didn't tell anybody we were having the action - but we launched this campaign asking people - sort of explaining the situation, like, "this has been proposed, we know that communities are equipped with ideas and why don't you share here, like what would **you** do for your community with that much money?"

And that was stemming from a brilliant campaign that youth in South Atlanta did with Project South called #10millforreal about 10 million dollars for policing in their schools. They did a similar thing, they asked other people, "what would you do, 10 mill for real on policing?" So, there's a connection there that needs to be acknowledged. But yeah, people wouldn't choose this if there was a lot of other options presented. It's just like, they're being promised jobs in a community where there's not a lot of jobs for people.

And a federal prison is different than like the state prisons that are just across the county line in Virginia where they, you know there's different employment qualification for a state prison than a federal prison. Would people in this county even have the skills [to get hired]? Like you have to have police officer experience or whatever it would be. So who would actually be qualified for these jobs? But those kinds of questions are not being addressed by the county.

--Kenny Bilbrey, 2016

Ada and Kenny's articulation of the goals of both STAY and the Letcher Governance Project demonstrate the ways in which they view their work as connected to larger movements

for social justice: including the Movement for Black Lives and an understanding of the ways in which Appalachian exploitation is inherently connected to the violence towards black and brown communities in the U.S. and beyond. Ada and Kenny's political epistemologies begin to map a queer intersectional approach to Appalachian organizing – influenced by and influencing larger movement conversations around racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice – and the overlaps among them throughout the South and the nation.

In their imperative new essay “From the Coal Mine to the Prison Yard: The Human Cost of Appalachia's New Economy” Melissa Ooten and Jason Sawyer trace histories of prison-as-economic-development projects in rural counties throughout Appalachia and the nation. They cite a study conducted by Mosher, Hooks and Wood which studied all prisons built in the U.S. since 1960 in an attempt to better understand their impact on employment growth.

“In rural counties, in terms of both income per capita and total earnings, counties without a prison experienced faster economic growth.... In faster-growing rural counties, they found no evidence of prisons making a noticeable impact on employment. In slower-growing counties, ‘prisons appeared to do more harm than good; new prisons in these counties actually impeded private sector and total employment growth.’ In an earlier study, Hooks, Mosher, Rotolo, and Lobao analyzed data on every rural county in the United States, those with and without prisons, between 1969 and 1994. They found ‘no evidence that prison expansion has stimulated economic growth. In fact, we provide evidence that prison construction has impeded economic growth in rural counties that have been growing at a slow pace’ (2016: 176).

Ooten and Sawyer echo the sentiments of Kenny and Ada in regards to the pattern through which prisons as rural economic development ask rural communities to become implicit in the over-incarceration of black and brown bodies, in addition to pitting rural predominantly white Appalachian communities and urban predominantly black and brown communities with many shared realities of historic underinvestment and disenfranchisement against one another, limiting possibilities for cross-race cross-geographic collaborations of building power and

solidarity – at the same time that rural white communities are positioned to benefit from the construction of new prisons (if anyone does).

“In terms of isolation, exploitation, limited economic prospects, and high unemployment numbers, the urban communities of color that most of these prisoners call home share many qualities with Appalachia. White notes ways in which both white Appalachia and urban communities of color have been conceptualized as internal, exploited colonies. Both face geographic isolation and exploited labor markets. But the continual use of white privilege to thwart class alliances across racial and ethnic boundaries means that if anyone benefits from the prison economy, it will be white communities. If the prison economy creates jobs, those jobs will overwhelmingly be held by white men, and since inmates are figured into the population of the area in which their prison is located, it will be white communities that benefit from greater government resources and political clout since prisoners, for all official purposes, now reside in rural, white-majority areas” (2016:172).

It is this, precisely that Ada Smith expressed in our 2016 interview when she said “as white people in a community who can look out and see what prisons are doing, our role and job right now to contribute to the injustice of that is to not have another one built!” Ada speaks in that moment of the responsibility of rural white anti-racist people to fight against a system which offers (limited and mostly mythological) benefits to white people in exchange for their complicity in the racist mass-incarceration of black and brown people through the prison industrial complex. Ooten and Sawyer conclude with the stark claim that:

“In short, the prison economy represents the most exploitative system of supposed economic gain yet to enter Appalachia. Appalachians are promised jobs and economic revitalization for their communities, yet few locals ever work at these prisons. Counties expend enormous resources to attract prisons, yet more than one has faced bankruptcy as it becomes clear that prisons cannot solve the generations-old structural economic problems of the area. Some scholars of Appalachia have described the region’s status as that of a ‘colony’ because of the history of resource extraction, which primarily benefits outsiders while causing great human and environmental damage to the region itself. This extraction of resources continues with prisons, given their reliance on extracting and imprisoning people of color from urban centers, further fracturing those communities while literally depopulating them. Even if the new prison economy offered economic prosperity – and it does not – surely no moral economy could be sustained, as the very system of prison growth in Appalachia implicates whole communities in furthering a

supposed economic growth strategy based on generating an ever-growing racialized prison population at a time of historically low crime” (2016:172-173).

As of the date of writing, the prison is slated to be built, but construction has not yet begun. And, the Letcher Governance Project is more determined than ever to shut it down.

Mountains, Traditions, and (the slow process of rural) Change

Although the work of STAY and the Letcher Governance Project are some of the most dynamic ways through which young people are engaging in shifting conversations and expectations for possibility in the region – we can see a wide range of more subtle forms of resistance which are also essential components of queer change-making in rural Appalachia. The simple act of staying – resisting the metronormative migration narratives and patterns, living quietly but openly in the place that you love even when messages abound telling you you don’t belong in a particular place, for example are the sure clear signs of a particularly rural mountain approach to change-making. I asked Kenny if they think that choosing to stay (when one has the privilege of choice) is a political act that has power in and of itself.

“Yeah, and I see that as a question where you can sort of separate it and look around and there’s different parts to it. I don’t feel like I can stay in the community that I grew up in because of who I am and what that would mean if I was who I am in my old community, at least not right now. I can make the choice to be there and fight that which would also be a political decision but it’s just not something that I’m able to do.

And then I also think that being visibly queer and young and living in a community in the region that you grew up in is a political decision. And I make a lot of sacrifices, and that’s what pisses me off so damn much whenever people say like, “all the young people are leaving, and there’s no young people in this region,” cause it’s like actually, no! There’s a lot of young people that are living here and a lot of them don’t get the choice to whether they’re gonna live here or not and that’s a real thing, and I am making a choice to live in this town, where I have built community that isn’t my family, that allows me to be who I am.

And I think that, being out in certain spaces is political, even just saying things, I'm a volunteer DJ on the community radio station here, and there's a guy that came in after me. And right after Pulse,¹⁰ I said something about...the queer community, and I said we in some way. I didn't even realize that I had outed myself in some way. And he came in and he was like "I'm so proud of you for just sayin that." And I was like, "What? What are you talking about?" and he said, you know, "You said this and this." I was like "Oh yeah, I guess, yeah."

But it was just ways that I didn't even know that people are paying attention, which is kinda weird but is still, you know I think it's political that I said that. And you know I think, I just think that being alive and existing in a world that says, you should or shouldn't like be in this particular space and be this particular person at the same time – I think that that's always political. By like saying like, fuck you! I'm here...and I'm queer...and I'm here to stay."

--Kenny Bilbrey, 2016

Katherine Schweighofer's essay "Rethinking the Closet: Queer Life in Rural Geographies" examines the ways in which understandings of "the closet" in queer space rely on "binary divisions between public and private space and visibility and invisibility" which leave no room for the navigation of privacy and visibility that rural LGBTQ+ people experience (2016: 223). Schweighofer ultimately argues that this binary between "out" and "closeted" isn't applicable to the complexities of rural queer existence, and as a binary – seeks to stabilize "outness" as something that once it happens, there's no going back. Rather, Schweighofer argues, the process of coming out is a continuous one; one that happens over and over again (2016: 230).

The realities of rural queer folks varying abilities to "pass" (as straight, or at least as gender-conforming) must be acknowledged here. Many gender-non-conforming (gnc) and

¹⁰ The June 2016 mass-shooting at the gay bar - Pulse Nightclub - in Orlando, Florida.

transgender (trans) identified rural queer folks become hyper visible in these spaces and are unable to choose when and how they “come out”, or to predict the sudden aggression and violence that many gnc and trans people experience in public bathrooms - from cities to isolated gas stations, and everywhere in between. Someone such as myself, on the other hand, is able to fly under the radar enough to make people comfortable. My short hair and slightly androgynous way of dressing isn’t beyond the normal realm of gender expression in a region full of hardworking “tomboys” and so, my politically and socially conservative coworkers in rural WV public schools where I worked prior to grad school, didn’t have to acknowledge queerness when interacting with me.

Schweighofer goes on to argue that rural life is simultaneously extremely private and public, and that rural geographies provide endless expanses of people-less space in which to explore queer desires.

“The closet model, in its strict adherence to in/out, private/public divides, does not allow for these sorts of [non-metropolitan and non-binary] queer spaces, and this limitation suggests that the closet model is not only metronormative but also homonormative, reinforcing a notion of gay life as striving toward a heteronormative married consumer lifestyle. If the closet is a major structuring element in identifying LGBT communities, and it cannot conceive of queer geographies, then it also cannot imagine the queer identities and communities that circulate in those spaces. Queering the rural closet allows us to imagine that two farm boys having sex in a back field are using both the public *and* private elements of that space to create their own gay community, even if it is one that is difficult to align with dominant notions of LGBT community centers and pride parades” (Schweighofer, 2016: 230-231).

As Kenny’s quote above demonstrates, the process of accidentally outing ourselves can, in retrospect, feel like a moment of political action; even though the traditional conception which posits that premeditated political intent must be inherent in activist actions doesn’t hold true in these instances. These slower, quieter moments of intentionally or unintentionally outing ourselves do become part of the activist work that we as rural queer Appalachians do.

In addition to the ways in which we see even our existence in spaces where we are made to feel we don't belong as resistance, we draw on local legacies of resistance in regional labor organizing and musical histories to approach our work. While Sam is friends with and in "movement spaces" with all of the folks featured in this paper and many more, his work looks notably different than a direct community organizing approach. Sam identifies very strongly as someone who plays traditional music. Traditional music has been claimed in limiting definitions of Appalachian culture, and, at the same time there is a long history of blatantly political anti-capitalist traditional music coming out of Central Appalachia, and the Eastern Kentucky coalfields in particular. I wanted to know how much Sam identifies with regional legacies of "protest music" and how he'd understand his music as a part of change making, if at all.

"Rachel: Part of what I'm interested in is thinking about how a lot of my favorite people in Central Appalachia who are young people are queer who are doing work to envision, imagine, actively create a pretty different kind of future - whether in terms of economic, or socially, inclusivity - than what we think of as sort of traditional, you know? Even this idea that coal mining is a traditional job here, that is shifting, that is going away, there's gonna need to be something else...Do you think of yourself or your music as political? Or as activism? Or about sort of creating change, or? Would you not think about it like that at all?

Sam: I think, music in general has the potential to create change, but I think it's up to the listener to internalize a story, to open themselves up for a song - to really listen, to take it in and see how it relates to them, and what they think and what they believe. And be willing maybe to step into a different person's skin.

I've had more reactions and more conversations with people about a song that I wrote called *Ain't We Brothers*, which is about an openly gay coal miner, who really bravely stood up against discrimination he faced as an underground miner in Kanawha County, West Virginia. His name is Sam Williams. And so I wrote his story in song, based on just a great news article that I read by Jason Howard - which is called *Gay and Underground in West Virginia* and I don't know that it's been published widely. But, I read that, and I was so captivated by his story, because he was the first openly gay working class male representative that I knew of that was still working in his occupation as a coal miner.

I have realized now that I did know openly gay working class men from Appalachia that worked in all kinds of different occupations, but for some reason it was surprising for him

to come forward because he was an underground coal miner and that's such a machismo occupation. But he did come forward and speak really bravely about his experience, so I was inspired by him and I wrote this song from his perspective, not even really thinking about – that was sort of a bold thing to do. I mean if he felt like I had misused his experience. But he didn't, I mean I've met him now and played the song for him and he's said affirming things, that have meant a lot. But also, I've had more people tell me that they thought about that song, or that it reached them in some way. Especially, queer people from the mountains. And one person told me "I never thought that I would hear the sound of the music that I grew up with and this story of who I am as a queer person in one moment, in one song." And so I thought about that, and what really it speaks to is the power of the story.

The song is just a vehicle for the story. I do try to emotionally relate the song when I'm singing it, but I don't, in some ways I don't feel like I'm a part of it. I feel like I'm just relating the song for someone to hear that story, which is important to me. And so then, when someone tells me that they have taken it in, and it made them think about something differently, then I think, "This is a small, this is a little bit of progress." In that, even if it's only in the sense that someone was taken away from their troubles for a minute, to think about who they are, who they have been, and where they are now. I think that's what art helps us do is make sense of who we are and what's happening. And so that's what I want to do, that's like, the human mission of what I feel like most artists want. That's what I want when I'm listening to music in a lot of ways, and so...that is activism I guess in some way, in that I'm being deliberately open about being gay and caring about the queer community, and trying to tell some of those stories, but it's also, it's almost like the story is neutral.

It's like, this is a real thing, like men are in love with men in the mountains and that's a real thing that happens, and it, they have beautiful normal lives. But they're extraordinary in some ways, because all people are extraordinary. But also because they're not like everyone else in their community and they've made a way for themselves that's not the way that everybody else in the community has had to go. So it's like: it's very ordinary, it's very extraordinary, the stories. And then you tell them, and then it's up to the listener what they do with it. So I'm always hesitant to say "I'm out to voice social issues in my music." But that's how you explain it to people, I mean that's like the elevator version, that's what we would say, like "I care about giving voice to social issues in song or whatever." But then what you really want is for someone to consider a different perspective. A lot of it is not me on a political mission trying to change people's minds about anything, but it's like, can I create something that we would want to listen to and may benefit from?"

--Sam Gleaves, 2016

I next asked Sam what calls him to the music, what keeps him committed to it, and he articulated a sense of home within traditional music that, when combined with the desires to shift and expand definitions of what and who are Appalachian, gets us closer to an understanding of the ways in which a navigation of and interaction with “the traditional” is a central part of the political and cultural work that each of these queer Central Appalachian organizers is doing in the mountains.

“Well [the music] helps me. Traditional music, writing music, the process of singing and playing, the friendships I’ve developed with people – well the kinships, really, that I’ve developed with people – these deep relationships that you form with people playing music, with my mentors, and my peers, and even my partner – the music is just woven into everything that I do, and mostly, every thought that I have. And I just think it, it becomes a part of your ethos, or maybe I’m not even using that correctly but it’s just like, it’s an integral part of my being. I think everybody oughta have something like that. I feel like I can rely on music for so many things, for expression and for guidance, and this way to relate to people. This music, traditional music, taught me to care about my culture in a way that I don’t know that I would have without it.

I know I wouldn’t have gotten involved in the Appalachian Studies community, had it not been for music, I don’t think. I wouldn’t have been drawn to that, and I wouldn’t have, I don’t think I would have cared as much about storytelling and oral history and all those things if it hadn’t been for music, either. So it’s been a conduit for me to find out piece by piece, who I am. It’s a connecting thread for a lot of the parts of who I am and trying to make sense of all that, and relate to the world. So, that’s the personal reason.

And the reason that I choose to keep sharing it and make that such a big part of my life is because I want other people to have that experience that I have had, and the joy - to experience the joy of this, of the traditional music, and also just the joy of hearing a song that you can relate to. And how that takes you away from the everyday bullshit of our experience, and just the sorrow and the struggles that we have to deal with. This music can give you ease from that, and it can also, make you appreciate – traditional music especially I think and the stories that surround it and the people that I have know that play it – make me appreciate how extraordinary every day life is. You know?

A lot of the practitioners of traditional music that I have know are these really welcoming hospitable people, so I think about the home, or connecting to a home landscape through the home landscape so much, it’s bound up in that for me. So, it’s like if your role models are musicians who are really welcoming kind caring people and so many of my mentors are, and I loved their music, and I was fascinated with the way that they learned it and the people that they came from, the place and the communities they came from, it’s

like – Oh, I sort of wanna, I wanna emulate that in some way, or I’ve realized that people in my family were that way – they may not have all played music, my grandmother does, plays piano and clarinet and sings beautifully mostly religious music in her Methodist church where she goes. This music has made me realize the beauty of everyday life, and the dignity of rural people and the I mean there’s just so many things like that that it has led me to discover.”

--Sam Gleaves, 2016

In big-picture organizing conversations with STAY members and regional organizers more broadly there is a shared understanding of the need for cultural work to be central to any political movement in the mountains. Young queer Appalachian organizers are not unique in this stated commitment, and again, much of the political mentorship and education that influences our movement thinking comes from Southern leaders of color – historically and contemporarily. Yet, there is something inherently STAY about an understanding that we cannot make change in these mountains without our musicians, our artists, our writers and storytellers leading the way.

There’s a long history of musical resistance in the region, and in particular in the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky. Sarah Ogan Gunning, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Florence Reece are among the most famous political songwriters of the area; and it isn’t hard to see a connection between the political frameworks of these coalfield women and the political frameworks of the young folks I’m writing of here.

Sarah Ogan Gunning wrote a song called “I hate the Capitalist System” in the 1930s in response to her life as a daughter, and later wife, of coal miners in a company town in the coalfields of Kentucky.

“I hate the capitalist system,
And I’ll tell you the reason why:
It has caused me so much suffering,
And my dearest friends to die.

Well I know you all are wondering
What it has done to me.
Well I am going to tell you
That my husband has TB

Brought on by hard work and low wages,
And never enough to eat,
From going cold and hungry,
With no shoes upon his feet.

My husband was a coal miner
Who worked hard and risked his life,
Just trying to support three children,
Himself, his mother and wife.

Well I had a blue-eyed baby
Was the darling of my heart.
But from my little darling
Her mother had to part.

While the rich and mighty capitalist
Goes dressed in jewels and silk,
My darling blue-eyed baby
Has died for the want of milk.

Well they call this the land of plenty,
And for them I guess it's true,
For the rich and mighty capitalist,
Not for workers like me and you.

Well what can we do about it
To these men of power and might?
Well I tell you, Mr. Capitalist,
We are going to fight, fight, fight” (antiwarsongs.org)

Anti-corporate, anti-politician, and even anti-capitalist political sentiments have been a part of the musical legacy of Eastern Kentucky since at least the 1930s. Sam Gleaves writes traditionally-inspired songs about contemporary issues today, and as he mentioned in his quote above – he wouldn’t call them protest songs. Rather, he hopes his songs invite people to think

about something from a new perspective. While Sam's songs are less blatantly anti-capitalist than some of Sarah Ogan Gunning's, he follows in Gunning's footsteps, in that he tells a story of the realities of life in Kentucky from a perspective that resists and critiques systems of power which aim to limit the rights and opportunities of mountain people.

In 2013 Sam wrote a song called "The Golden Rule" in response Kentucky House Bill 279, a religious freedom bill which passed in March, 2013.

"If I was a preacher, I'd ask in Jesus' name
For God to love all children and no one be ashamed
I'm asking you good preachers to lead your church with grace
For if God had made you different, you could be in my place.

In my God's Bible, you can read it all.
"One who loves another, they have fulfilled the law."
When the hate is spoken, this I know is true:
Do unto others as you'd have them do to you,
Do unto others as you'd have them do to you.

If I was a politician, I would not turn and run,
I'd know the rights I'm giving belong to everyone
I'd listen to my people and represent them all.
If I was a politician, love would be my law.

Consciousness is building to make this country proud,
We'll fight for our freedom, I believe I feel it coming now.
When the hate is written, this I know is true:
Do unto others as you'd have them do to you,
Do unto others as you'd have them do to you" (samgleaves.com).

Sam's songs – and those of many other queer Appalachian song writers carry on a long legacy of songs directly engaged with issues of equality and justice in mountain communities. While the topics have changed, the medium – using traditional music for the purposes of creating change – has not.

In addition to legacies of political songs inspiring morale and speaking truth to power in the region, is a long history of women organizing for economic justice. A question I always ask in Country Queers interviews is “who are your sheros¹¹?” Ada talked in great detail about the importance of bell hooks’ work and criticism on helping her develop her own feminist thinking – and the power of having hooks move back home to Kentucky for young people in the region. Ada then spoke directly to the legacy of women on the front lines of union organizing in Eastern Kentucky.

“And then, I think finally, this is weird or whatever, but I think finally, I think a lot about Widow Combs and a lot of other older women in this area of the country that literally put their bodies in front of machines. And just that whole history of women being on front lines around union fights, around strip mining. like Sarah Ogan Gunning, like that whole crew. I think of them as one crew of people that I get a lot of strength from, and think a whole lot about like, just because you are not a miner, or whatever that like you are in community with people who are struggling with something and therefore you have to stand up and fight and to win.

And what different roles – how it’s really important to understand who you are, and what your role in something is, and therefore what you can do that other people can’t do – and I don’t think I would have learned from anywhere else – that what does it mean to have a grandmother in a dress and a bonnet have to be dragged off a piece of property by the police versus some wide eyed bushy tailed kid. You know what I’m saying? I mean it’s just...**different**. and I feel like that whole crew of people within the history of this region and resistance, I feel like you just learn a lot from in terms of understanding their place and role and strategic direction because of that.

And yeah they were quote unquote directly affected but you know they weren’t going underground and they were still fighting for mining rights...I just think it’s interesting that it was all women, but also interesting that they were fighting some very particular battles, that weren’t necessarily about what was happening to them and their bodies.”

--Ada Smith, 2016

¹¹ a feminization of heros

Ada's previous quote that the role of white folks in this time is to find their place in the fight for black lives, in relation to the work that the Letcher County Governance Project is doing to stop the construction of the prison there, directly connects to what she speaks of here: that a legacy of Appalachian organizing, in her mind, is to understand that systems that exploit and oppress people in your community – even if they don't directly impact your body and your role in that community – must be dismantled by everyone in that community in order to win. Ada's political framework then, which understands her community as broader than the county or state where she was born and raised, possesses a view of community which includes communities of color across the U.S. – and represents a modern-day interpretation of Widow Combs' actions to stop the coal companies that kept her community members suffering.

Conclusion

On the campaign trail Donald Trump promised he would “bring back coal,” and much of the national post-election media coverage placed the blame for Trump's win on the Central Appalachian coalfields. Despite extensive evidence that coal can't come back – not due to Obama's environmental restrictions, but because it becomes less and less profitable to mine due to decreased accessibility and the prevalence of cheap natural gas – Trump's promise to bring back coal jobs did in fact buy him votes in the region. While the scapegoating of poor Appalachian communities as the epicenter of Trump's racist nationalism is excessive and nowhere near a nuanced enough analysis for the complexity of contemporary American politics,

it's important to acknowledge the relationship between Trump's rise to power, his aggressive anti-environmental policies, and the contemporary economic crisis in the coal fields.

At the time of writing, a mere eighty days into his presidency, Donald Trump has already taken steps to overturn environmental protection rules signed by the Obama administration and is positioning to drastically cut funding to the Environmental Protection Agency.¹² And yet, no matter how much Trump boasts about his plans to bring back coal, the boom is long over in the mountains. Central Appalachia still faces an urgent need for new economic development and neither loosened environmental regulations or a new federal prison can solve the problems of rampant unemployment and poverty in the region. Now, more than ever, the region needs innovative and sustainable economic development that looks towards the future while drawing on our rich cultural pasts.

As Sam, Ivy, Kenny and Ada articulate, there can be no conversation about Appalachia and its future that is disconnected from the region's historical self-conception, external representations, and an intimate engagement with various layers of the traditional in the mountains. Each of the queer change-makers interviewed for this thesis is actively engaged in the process of pushing out space to make room for identities generally erased from Appalachian conceptions of self. Each one of them is engaged in the process of reclaiming language, stories, and histories of rural queer Appalachian existence, and re-inventing languages and visions of an

¹² According to an article written by Ben Wolfgang in The Washington Times, Donald Trump "signed legislation undoing the Interior Department's "Stream Protection Rule," which was proposed during the final days of the Obama administration" on a February 16, 2017. Additionally, according to an online article written by Hiroko Tabuchi for the New York Times on April 10, 2017 "The Trump administration's proposed cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency budget are deep and wide-ranging. It seeks to shrink spending by 31 percent, to \$5.7 billion from \$8.1 billion, and to eliminate a quarter of the agency's 15,000 jobs."

Appalachian future which hold space for queer folks, people of color, and those generally made invisible in our communities.

Additionally, as young people raised in a region with a long history of misrepresentation by national media we find ourselves in a unique historical moment in which those same media sources have decided that the region's "uneducated white voters" are the heart of "Trump Country" - ignoring the complexities of class and geography that led to Trump's rise nationally. We understand the radical power in highly documented communities reclaiming their own stories. This thesis is my attempt to put that vision into action in a tangible way through my graduate studies. By working with a community of which I am and will continue to be a part, learning from their leadership and wisdom at every step of the way, and attempting to represent the work that we are doing back to our larger network of Appalachian change-makers – I hope that this thesis allows us to celebrate some of the progress we've made and examine details of the unique political epistemologies we've created together. I hope that ultimately, this thesis supports the ongoing work we do, and serves as a record of our particular vision which future generations of Appalachian organizers can draw on in the days, months and years of struggle to come.

As rural queer Appalachians, we've lived the contradictions held within constructions of the traditional: whether those constructions be a metronormative narrative of rural queer escape, an Appalachian narrative of Scots-Irish cultural dominance, or a national narrative that represents rural space as universally conservative, homogenous, white and heteronormative. We understand the hegemonic power of constructions of tradition as well as the healing that can be found in claiming subversive language, songs, rituals and narrative structures as traditional.

We envision a just Appalachian Transition as a process which looks at the environmental and social implications of new economic possibilities not only for our own communities, but for the world at large. We envision an Appalachian future in which working Appalachian people aren't asked to choose between having a job at all and doing work that goes against their values. We envision an Appalachian Transition in which community-based campaigns around racial justice in the mountains go hand in hand with campaigns to develop new economic possibilities.

In addition to daily navigations of limiting constructions of tradition in the mountains, we also understand the power in traditional culture and arts. We claim the parts of traditional arts and culture that guide us home, that tie us to rich legacies of community resistance and self-sufficiency, while rejecting those that hold us back. Our critical love for the place we call home allows us to celebrate its uniqueness while pushing against its stubborn refusal to open its arms wide. We stay, in opposition to every one who has ever told us we have to leave to find happiness and success. We demand a future in our communities, in our region, in our country and our world in which staying in the communities that raised us is as good an option as leaving, in which staying doesn't mean you won't survive, but that you are able to thrive. We demand an Appalachian Transition that values the dignity of our people and our land, as well as the people in communities affected by the toxic prison industry, and the fracking and coal industries elsewhere. We claim a sense of belonging in a place that tells us we have never existed there. And we fight like hell for a future in which queer youth, youth of color, and all mountain youth grow up not with a sense of doom, but instead with a sense of expansive and liberatory possibility.

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