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Everywhere and Nowhere…All at Once: Exploring the Role of Visibility in Rural Queer Narratives

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Following the tragedy of another shooting that happened in a visibly Queer space, this study explores how Queerness in rural spaces generates a spectrum of visibility. *Men in Place* (2019) by Miriam Abelson and *Out in the Country: Youth Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) by Mary Gray, personal narratives/podcasts cultivated by *Country Queers*, and "place histories" such as Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard which were highly visible cases of rural Queer overkill, are used as objects of study to explore the role and function of visibility in rural contexts. After exploring these rural Queer-centric narratives, I generated three thematic categories: working to preserve Queer comfort in rural spaces, identity work of rural Queerness, and fears and spaces of violence. I conclude by using the three categories to offer three implications for educational practices to complicate our understanding of Queer visibility in rural schools.

***Keywords*: Queer, rural, K-12 schools, visibility, identity, well-being**

The CNNs headline on November 21st, 2022, read: *Gunman kills 5 at LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs before patrons confront and stop him, police say (*Leveson et al., 2022). The clay-red roof displays "Club Q" with yellow, red, green, and blue squares creating a retro logo for the "adult-oriented gay and lesbian nightclub." There are panels on the outside of the building painted red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The colors of the rainbow and the Google description of the space signal a Queer space of acceptance, love, and community; however, that night five humans were murdered while 19 others were injured by an openly visible domestic terrorist. Previously, the domestic terrorist was associated with legible harm for a bomb threat aimed toward his own mother. CNN states,

> Sheriff's deputies responded to a report by the man's mother he was "threatening to cause harm to her with a homemade bomb, multiple weapons, and ammunition," according to the release. Deputies called the suspect, and he "refused to comply with orders to surrender," the release said, leading them to evacuate nearby homes. (Andone & Wolfe, 2022)

A visible domestic terrorist targets a visible Queer public space.

Raymond Green Vance (he/him)

Kelly Loving (she/her)

Daniel Aston (he/him)

Derrick Rump (he/him)

Ashley Paugh (she/ her)

A less tragic image of visibility presents itself also in current educational discourse as schools call for the removal of Pride flags and symbols from school systems. School leaders argue that Pride artifacts in schools can be considered politically divisive. This subtly tells Queer faculty and students that being Queer is divisive and, without the display of Pride, schools can hide Queerness from their public spaces. Most importantly, many of these decisions are being discussed at the local level with school boards which creates an importance of addressing how institutions, within a place context, influences the function of visibility. Removal of visible symbols generates invisible Queerness. The tragedy of Club Q coupled with the oppressive and homophobic policies in education provides windows into considering the function of binaries of being visible or being invisible.

This sense of visibility is especially important in the context of place (urban, suburban, rural, and tribal). Exploring the binary of visible and invisible requires the context of place in order to examine the function of who and how a human displays their Queerness. As Valentine (2002) argues, "…space is understood to play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities and, vice versa, social identities, meanings, and relations are recognized as producing material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces" (Introduction, para 3). A salient issue in contemporary rural studies has considered the function of Queerness when it comes to addressing inequities, safety, and movement. For example, the dominant migration narrative of rurality and Queerness emphasizes a need to move out of rural towns to find Queer communities. Similarly, rural studies also seek to disrupt a migration narrative of having to leave rural areas for opportunities and resources. These monolithic narratives highlight a need to challenge an understanding of visibility in these rural Queer studies.

However, feeling *seen* or *being hidden* creates a binary of how to fit into identities of Queer and rural. To further disrupt this binary through the lens of rurality, the objects of study in this essay will be grounding text, *Men in Place* (2019) by Miriam Abelson and *Out in the Country: Youth Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) by Mary Gray, personal narratives/podcasts cultivated by *Country Queers,* and place histories such as Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard which were highly visible cases of rural Queer overkill. By placing these texts in conversation together, the driving question becomes: How do Queer theory and space as an area of identity construction challenges the concept of visibility for rural spaces and bodies? Through this question, I hope to

provide some implications on the role of visibility in educational spaces. By examining the spectrum of visibility from *Country Queers,* place histories (Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena), and the grounding texts by Abelson and Gray, several significant themes emerged to disrupt the binaries of being visible. Based on this research, I argue that defining the role of visibility in rural communities and schools also means addressing place histories, community culture, and expanding our ideas of place within a geographical context. This argument has direct implications to research that involves Queer youth and faculty in educational settings.

Defining Terms

Rurality

Rural studies have consistently discussed the challenges of defining the meaning of rurality. It has been argued that one singular definition of rurality risks generating monolithic frames around what rural constitutes. As Longhurst (2022) argues, "At first glance, rurality may appear to be purely a matter of geography and population density, with formal definitions and designations designed by governmental bodies" (p. 10). While mostly used in educational spaces, some researchers rely on population density databases such as the National Center for Educational Statistics to scale what rural means. Following this definition of rurality, the population density maps code for rural fringe, distant, and remote. However, relying on population density as a method of defining rural, could have counties with one denser town with miles of rurality surrounding that one town. That county could lose the rural code which has greater implications for state resource distribution. Isserman (2005) describes a rural-urban typology which does attest to the issues around concepts of homogenous rural counties. Therefore, it is important to attempt to define rural as more than just population-based.

To further define rural apart from a population-based term, Dunstan et al., (2021) argue that "...rurality is not just about metrics; it is multidimensional and sociocultural" (p.72). This multidimensional approach allows for the rural definition to include local culture within that definition. For example, rural spaces are also a place for social identity development, culture, and developing epistemologies. Bell (2007) writes,

> It calls upon the connections we have long made between rural life and food, cultivation, community, nature, wild freedom, and masculine patriarchal power, and the many contradictions we have also so long associated with the rural, such as desolation, isolation, dirt and disease, wild danger, and the straw-hatted rube. (p.409)

A definition of rural may address population and distance from urban places yet it must also acknowledge the culture of rural social life such as the tight-knit communities that share values and customs. For example, in their study on methods that lead to higher graduation rates in rural school, Wilcox et al., (2014) found,

> ...although the educators in the rural schools in this study had not escaped the challenges identified by other researchers discussed earlier (e.g., increased accountability to the state, decreasing populations and tax base, increasing transiency and deeper poverty), they focused on the advantages offered by their small, tightly knit communities. (p. 13)

Wilcox et al.'s study illustrates the ways in which community engagement becomes centric in rural educational spaces.

Queerness

Queer, as a social label, is used to define any human's gender or sexuality that is outside of cis-heteronormative norms. While Queer may act as a blanket term, it is important to acknowledge the varying privileges that exist in this label. For example, a cis-white gay man still holds white and cis privileges that a Black trans woman might not have in a society that is built on power dynamics. Those intersecting identities create certain frictions when it comes to existing in a society that values some identities over others. The act of being Queer, as Sedgwick (1994) describes is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify a monolithically" (p. 9). Queerness operates in a flux cycle of identity-creating and solidifying.

Apart from Queer being defined as a label, Queer can also be used to challenge broader discourse. Luciano and Chen (2015) described their function of Queer as a "tool of incessant unsettling" (p. 192). Using Queer as a tool of unsettling a binary or a dominant discourse allows Queerness to operate from the center of the podcast, two main texts, and place histories. Therefore, Queer, a tool of incessant unsettling, provides a lens to challenge the binaries of visibility.

Visibility

The term visible in this narrative inquiry means to exist outwardly. In other words, being visible whether through symbols, language, or common knowledge, allows others to *see* a place, person, or thing on both micro and macro levels. For example, Club Q was a visible Queer space because it displays rainbow colors which many people understand as a visible symbol for Pride. Moreover, a Pride flag in a classroom might be a visible symbol for students that the space is Queer affirming. Being visible could be how a person outwardly presents themselves. For example, if a gay man paints his nails and wears a shirt that says "love wins" while kissing another man on the side of the street, one may assume that man is visibility Queer. To ground these examples, Kazyak (2012) suggests, "...one route to visibility in rural contexts is relational (via connection with a same-sex partner) rather than individual (via butch gender presentations)" (p. 841).

Relational and individual visibility begins to complicate the narrative of appearance and attraction while also queering the role of individual and public visibility.

Apart from club signs, pride flags, painted nails, a shirt, and the act of kissing, visibility can also be knowledge that others know about a topic. As a former openly Queer educator, my body might not be visibility Queer; however, my students knew that I was an openly gay man. In that temporal moment, my Queerness was not on display, but I was still visible to my students because of my prior disclosure of my identity.

Rurality and Queerness matter because there are fewer Queer resources and access to health care (Abelson, 2019; Page 2017; Ramos et al., 2014), higher rates of victimization and discrimination (Evans et al., 2014; Fallin-Bennett & Goodin 2019; Kosciw et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2012), high levels of substance abuse in rural Queer youth (Fallin-Bennett & Goodin, 2019) , and rural spaces often rely on tight-knit communities of being known/seen within their communities while reproducing norms for the community values (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Page, 2017). Therefore, Rural Queers may feel and look different within the context of visibility in order to navigate the relationship of also feeling seen and known within their communities. The relational, community, and self visibly display of Queerness generates complex feelings around belonging and mattering towards internal self and community.

Theoretical Grounding

The objects of study will be thematically analyzed with the foundation of place-based theory and Queer studies. Place-based theory is predominantly associated with educational pedagogy implications which describes how using place can influence a child's engagement with content. Smith (2002) states, "The primary value of place-based education lies in the way that it serves to strengthen children's connections to other and to the regions in which they live" (p. 594). Place explores how space and place can influence how people learn about themselves, society, and construct new knowledges in turn it allows a person to generate meaning in society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Place-based theory, outside just the educational context, operates to allow people to examine the influences of place in connection to humanity.

Apart from place-based theory, Queer studies heavily influences the exploration of the objects of study. Berlant and Warner (1995) write, "Queer commentary shows that much of what passes for general culture is riddled with heteronormativity" (p. 349). Queer studies join the conversation with Black Feminist women, disability studies, and Indigenous studies. These areas within Queer studies provide resources in intersecting labels of gender and race, temporal identities in conversation with an able-bodied society, and broader cultural conversations around gender/sexuality. It attempts to challenge the variables that Ahmed (2010) highlights in her concept of the pursuit of happiness which rewards people with social conventions, family domesticity, privatization, legal protections, and civil societies, if that person gets as close to possible to being a cis-male,

white, abled-body, middle class human. Whiteness and cis-heteronormativity being two pillars in the discourse of stereotype-threat that rural communities face. Part of the conversation in Queer studies challenges the ways in which a dominant monolithic discourse gets reproduced and influences body, knowledge, self, and society.

Listening to these two theories provides a critical Queer place concept that centers both place and Queer in tandem in order to challenge assumptions around those intersecting identities. bell hooks (2009) intersectional sense of belonging in Kentucky was described as,

> While my early sense of identity was shaped by the anarchic life of the hills, I did not identify with being Kentuckian. Racial separatism, white exploitation and oppression of black folks, was so widespread it pained my already hurting heart. (p. 7)

Black rural histories, and the current realities in some rural spaces, hold with them oppression and separatism which makes it difficult to celebrate, in bell hook's case, both Blackness and Kentuckian.

In my own subjectivity as a white, cis-gay man, I often write about my time in the river and gardening with my grandma; however, I struggled to identify as rural because of the homophobia I experienced in my rural childhood. In continuation of complicating the intersection of whiteness, gayness, and rurality, other examples are two gay men running an educational chicken farm TikTok account (TikTok's 2guysandsomeland) or Matt Mathew's "farm livin" TikTok which highlights farming culture with flamboyant Queerness. Both examples begin to challenge the assumptions of what Queerness and rurality look like in conversation together. This framework allows the objects of study to acknowledge those two variables in the context of how those identities disrupt the binaries of visibility.

Objects of Study

The objects of study are split into three categories: "Grounding Research Texts," *Country Queers*, and Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard which provide foundations of trauma in rural Queer culture.

Grounding Research Texts

Out in the Country by Mary Gray (2009) and *Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America* by Miriam Abelson (2019) were selected based on how they center narratives in their research designs while also addressing Queerness and rurality. Gray's manuscript uses rural youth as her object of study as she explores their experiences living in rural areas. Gray writes,

> To date, no studies have focused specifically on youth in the rural United States and their negotiations of a queer sense of self and the expectations of visibility that have become a feature of modern LGBT experience and popular cultures. (p. 11)

Gray's research directly explores how Queer rural youth experience visibility. Gray states,

> I bring together gay and lesbian studies of community and identity, social theories of public spaces, and studies of media reception, particular the role of new media in everyday life, to frame how sociality, location, and media shape visibility of LGBT-identifying young people living in rural areas of Kentucky and along its borders (p. 4)

Using media, socialization, and place allowed Gray to emphasize areas of visibility. Abelson's book navigates the role of masculinity in the context of place, race, gender, and sexuality through the narratives of trans people. Rurality is explored in the term "redneck" which is cited to have been used frequently from Abelson's interviewees. She states, "For most of the men in this study, the redneck was an extreme form of hypermasculinity to define themselves against" (p. 37). While exploring rurality through the term redneck produces a harmful deficit stereotype around rurality, Abelson does attempt to address how place influences being visible through interviews with nine rural identifying trans men. The interviews in Abelson's study still present findings garnered from the lived experience of trans men living in rural areas.

Country Queers

This online website features both written narratives and podcasts of Queer rural adults who predominantly discuss what rurality means to them. Their mission statement: "Country Queers is an ongoing multimedia oral history project documenting the diverse experiences of rural, small town, and country, LGBTQIA2S+ people - across intersecting layers of identity such as race, class, age, ability, gender identity, and religion" (*Country Queers*). For the purpose of this study, the three oral history interviews (2014-2016) and the transcripts of season two (2022) of their podcast were used. This included: oral histories of Robyn Thirkill (41, Virginia), Twig Delgue (31, New Mexico), Crisosto Apache (42, Colorado); and podcast interviews of KD Randle (Mississippi), Dana Kaplan (Vermont), Miguel Mendías (Texas), Sam Gleaves (Kentucky), Adria Stembridge (Georgia), and Kūʻiʻolani (Hawaii). Each of these narratives specifically explored their own rural and Queer identity. These oral narratives allow for a more holistic experience of what it means to be Queer in a rural space. While these are mostly adult interviews, the stories they exhume, are stories that may produce common experience across Queer rural humans.

Violent Place Histories'

Queer history exists with trauma, pain, and violence. For years, Queer people have been victims of overkill (Stanley, 2021). These histories expand into rural contexts through the lives of Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena. These two humans are centric to rural Queer history as their overkilled bodies have continued to exist for rural Queer people to see. Shepard and Teena were also referenced heavily in both Abelson and Gray's manuscripts.

Matthew Shepard (1976-1998) attended the University of Wyoming where he was an openly gay man. After attending a LGBT+ meeting on campus, Shepard went to Fireside, a local bar ("Our Story"). That night Shepard was abducted, over-beaten, and left tied to a fence. A few days later, Shepard was pronounced dead at the hospital. Gray (2009) states,

> The 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in the college town of Laramie, Wyoming (population 27,000), brought to the fore that city-based queer-youth social movements seemed able to do little more than pity and demonize those living outside of urban centers. (p. xiii-xiv)

Shepard's narrative lives past his body as it serves as an extremely relevant case of a visible overkilling of an openly gay man in a rural space.

Brandon Teena (1973-1993) lived in rural Nebraska as a trans man. After being publicly outed in the newspaper due to a criminal charge. Following his public outing, Teena was raped; however, no charges were filed. A few weeks later, the rapist returned and overkilled Teena by stabbing and shooting him. Gray (2009) writes, "Media coverage of the 1993 New Year's Eve murder of Brandon Teena, a young female-to-male transperson, in rural Nebraska…emphasized the brutality of their deaths against a backdrop of the rural communities in which they were killed" (p. 113-114). In Abelson's (2019) study, "...Brandon Teena's story came up frequently and tied the men's fears to rural spaces, which made for a heightened fear of vulnerability to transgender-based violence overall" (p.146). Again, Teena's life exists past his body as an example of how visibility led to a Queer rural human being overkilled.

Placing Teena and Shepard in conversation with *Country Queers* and Gray and Abelson, provides inquiry into the function of visibility for rural Queer people.

Emerging Themes: Spectrum of Visibility

After exploring the objects of study, a thematic analysis uncovered several themes on how visibility is negotiated for these rural Queer lived experiences.

Preserving Comfort

Throughout the narratives, feelings of comfortability became a central focus when it came to exploring their Queerness in rural contexts. Many of the narratives highlighted

sense of risk versus reward. Their spectrum of visibility was explored in order to remain comfortable even if that meant hiding their visible Queerness.

When asked about when he knew he was Queer, Dana Kaplan (Vermont) describes,

> I think the part of me that was the part of me that super cared about, like, what other people thought and not wanting to rock the boat, and not wanting other people to feel uncomfortable, sort of, like putting other people's sense of comfort before my own. Made it so that I didn't come out for a while…(*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 7*)

Kaplan expresses a desire to create comfort to not "rock the boat" in his rural context. In rural communities where people might be known more frequently based on fewer people inhabiting that community, a desire to not want to draw attention to oneself creates a moment for someone to question how visible they are to the community.

Apart from fostering a sense of comfort in relation to visibility, rurality itself provided some of the people comfort. Robyn Thirkill (41, Virginia), stated in an oral interview, "I want to be here. I feel a very strong heritage to this property that's been in my family for over 100 years. I want to respect my heritage, and I want to preserve this land" (*Country Queers*). For Thirkill, the land and heritage provided him a sense of comfort that urban spaces could never grant him. Remaining in rurality creates a place of comfort that is valued in tandem with their Queerness. Bell and Valentine (1995) write, "For others, it is a place of escape from the evils of the city, either as an occasional recreational resource or as the setting for a whole new way of life (communal, ecofriendly, etc.)" (p. 120). The creating comfort in rural spaces in connection to Thirkill and Kaplan led them to resist rural Queer migration.

Furthermore, Gray's (2009) book describes a scene of a few youths performing Drag in at the local Walmart with a high school Pride group. The youth would post photos online of them in Drag. After being verbally assaulted one day, the youth decided to remove the photos online. After being highly visible in Drag and posting online, an act of violence made the youth remove their visibility from the community. Gray argues, "Removing the photos makes him complicit in keeping local queer youth's boundary publics from expanding too far into and thereby threatening an imagined public sphere" (p. 113). The visibility in the public sphere created a moment for the youth to be verbally assaulted which in turn makes the youth become publicly invisible again to preserve comfort.

In Abelson's study, trans men describe their connection to rurality in the context of hypermasculinity. Abelson (2019) argues, "In these narratives, gay men exist in rural spaces but are locked into an inauthentic and exaggerated state in opposition to the redneck" (p. 45). In this context, the place of rurality may generate an inauthentic self to

seek out comfort. The inauthentic and exaggerated state also created a unique layer to how visibility functions in connection to attempting to create comfort. Therefore, when considering the role of visibility in Queer rural context a possible variable to consider is a person's level of comfort.

Production of Spaces

Another emerging theme from the narratives was how rural Queer people produce new spaces to float in between the binaries of invisible and visible. Most importantly within this theme of space, rural Queer people explore physical spaces that provide community or exploration within their own flux Queer identities as well.

In chapter five of *Out in the Country*, Gray (2009) explores how the internet created a space for rural Queer people to generate a community. These online spaces allowed rural Queer people a chance to read about others' coming out stories while also searching for similarities in the Queer community. Gray states, "Internet-based genres of Queer realness offer rural youth possibilities for both recognition and acknowledgment of seeking that recognition in places one is presumed to already be familiar" (p. 140). The possibilities of the internet make space for rural Queer youth to be invisible while also engaging in visibility Queer material. Using the internet as a platform, which is also found in the *County Queers* podcast, to produce new spaces that queer the function of visibility offers us a window into considering how rural Queer people make meaning out of new or existing places (similarly to how the youth turned a Walmart into a Drag space).

Rural spaces that lacked visible Queer spaces push rural people to seek out Queerness through movement. For example, Miguel Mendías (Texas) stated in his interview podcast,

> And, when I was like 14, he'd [his dad] take me and my brother to the gay part of Dallas, just where they had like bookstores, and a coffee shop, in the daytime. But there was 4 also like gay bars there and lesbian bars. And he would point these things out to me and my brother. And he just told us, like, "You need to see that gay people exist. And just not think it's weird, it's normal. It's not a big deal". (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 6*)

Miguel's narrative expresses the production of spaces through migration. In order for Miguel's dad to present Queerness, they had to travel to a city "gayborhood." Similarly, Conner and Okamura (2022) argued,

> Most of the rural participants we interviewed took short trips to a nearby city with a 'gayborhood.'…This involved finding a designated driver for the 120-mile ride home, though we also spoke to those who somehow made the long commute home safely. (p. 7)

Again, to produce a Queer space, Miguel and as Conner describes, must move and seek out visible Queer spaces.

In contrast, some rural Queer people did not need the visible Queer spaces that may have required movement. For example, KD Randle (Mississippi) describes rural landscape as their space they enjoy being in. Randle says, “The rural landscape, seeing trees, you know, seeing trees, seeing open pasture…seeing sunsets. It’s just these simple things and scenery that really just make me love, love this country” (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 8*). Randle does not rely on creating a visible Queer space or moving to seek out a Queer space, instead the production of space that allowed them to feel seen was just the rural landscape. The nature-centric place provided the sense of community that others may strive for when looking for highly visible Queer spaces.

Instead of seeking highly visible Queer spaces, Abelson (2019) describes how the rural trans narratives mostly seek “needs or experiences related to place” (p. 199). Abelson continues by arguing, “Trans men in both urban and rural context have received inadequate care from medical providers” (p. 198). She acknowledges that urban spaces might have more opportunities to obtain more Queer-friendly health care; however, it does provide a point of discourse around what is the value of highly Queer spaces in terms of health care and education. Overall, the ways in which rural Queer folks produce new spaces, value current space, and questions space through the lens of access to resources, generates a spectrum of visibility.

Identity Work in Rural Queerness

Following a sense of comfort and a production of space, the objects of study in conversation together, also pointed to a deep sense of identity work around Queer and rural in the context of visibility. Chan and Howard (2020) call upon Foucault (1980) and suggest, “In this lens, the Foucauldian approach tends to maximize on the ever-changing nature of sexuality. It is fluid and operates as a function of contextual, historical, cultural, social, and political forces” (p. 351). With this framework, identity work emerges as a theme around the function of visibility because of the constant flux identity development is in along with the spectrum of visibility. Following the theme of production of space, Gorman-Murray (2007) explore the role of movement in terms of identity work by staying, “…migration becomes the spatialization of an ongoing process of coming out, where each site of attachment along a migratory path momentarily grounds who one is, or was, in this process of becoming” (p. 113). Therefore, when disrupt the binaries of visibility, identity work can also be used as a source of flux because of the process of identity development.

Kūʻiʻolani (Hawaii), when asked if they ever felt like they had to leverage one identity over the other based on other understandings, stated:

> Oh, all the time. Yes. I think that's part of, like, when I talk about having a compartmentalized identity…And then in my Hawaiian community, I feel, no, I don't feel like they can, they see who I am. Yeah. I guess in a lot of ways. And, and, I also feel like they don't accept my queerness and that, or my version of queerness, you know? (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 2*)

Kūʻiʻolani describes the methods in which some people must compartmentalize their identity which connects back to the idea that identity work is in a constant state of flux. Around some people Kūʻiʻolani's feels like all of their identities are valued; whereas, in some spaces they do not feel like their identity is as accepted. Gray (2009) expresses an intersecting analysis, as well, with the story of Brandon and John W which describe how Brandon dealt with the intersections of being Black and gay while John W questioned his identity of gay in connection to BDSM practices. This also highlights how some indigenous cultures already acknowledge a third gender (e.g., mahu people in Hawaiian culture).

Sam Gleaves' (Kentucky) interview provides a complex narrative of the role of community visibility in connection to community history in a way that influenced Gleaves's identity development. First, Gleaves describes a lack of openly gay people in his community. He says, "If I'd of known, like, if my parents had had friends that were couples, you know, same sex couples, that would have instilled this whole different awareness in me that this existed in the world…" (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 4*). Gleaves process of identity was influenced by a lack of visibility in others in the community. This connects back to the idea that contextual factors such as seeing other Queer adults might have influenced Gleaves process with identity. Gleaves continues to describe his identity in context with historical influences. He remembers,

> You don't get told about, "Oh these are, there was a same sex couple and they lived in such and such area of the county and they lived there for a long time together and they farmed or they did this, and…" You know you don't have that kind of history in stories that you get in your family where we're from…" (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 4*)

Community histories whether visible or invisible influence how people learn about their own identities. In a rural community that may lack visible Queer histories, the challenge becomes how does a lack of history impact a human's identity journey.

Matthew Shepard's and Brandon Teena's stories can add to the narrative around the influence of histories in connection to rural Queer identity work. The overkilling of Shepard and Teena generated fears amongst Queer people living in rural areas. These histories expose how tragic Queer histories can challenge local place histories. Gray (2009) describes the impact of Shepard and Teena's murders by stating, "…news and film narratives placed Brandon and Matthew as young queers in the wrong place at the wrong time" (p.114). This history that is placed on rural communities, creates a visible

narrative that it was not about a sexual or gender identity. Instead, it was simply, "wrong place at the wrong time." Gruenewald (2003) questions how places and people have been harmed while also challenging who gets to and who has existed in certain places. If places do not value Queer identity, then that identity may be erased from narratives of those spaces. This erasing of identity in connection to overkill illustrates how histories can be negotiated around identity work. Oswald (2002) writes, "Identity is necessarily relational, meaning who one is in a given context is shaped in part by who or what one is interacting with" (p.341). Therefore, the objects of study point to a theme around how visibility in connection to our local histories and having to compartmentalize parts of our self may influence how people's identities develop.

Fears and Spaces of Violence

Following the histories of place and the narratives of Shepard and Teena, the final theme that emerged was how the binaries of visibility can generate fears and spaces of violence. The overkill of Shepard and Teena serve as rural Queer histories that still produce fear in the lives of all Queer people inhabiting rural spaces. After reporting the rape to police, Teena was still murdered weeks later which also uncovers the fears of Queer people in rural spaces having to rely on police or county politics for any feeling of safety or justice. Abelson (2019) noted how often Brandon Teena's narrative came up when interviewing trans men in rural spaces. She writes, "Again, Brandon Teena's story came up frequently and tied the men's fears to rural spaces, which made for a heightened fear of vulnerability to transgender-based violence overall" (p. 146). Teena's histories allowed him to live past his overkill and influence as a sense of fear in trans people who are exploring their own gender.

In Gray (2009), the students faced harassment when performing Drag at the local Walmart. Shortly after the Walmart incident the students received an email that read: "I HATE FAGGOTS. KISS MY STRAIGHT ASS" along with several others (p. 113). These high levels of bullying and harassment based on the highly visible practice of performing drag and then publicly displaying that on the internet, created a moment for harassment that was visible by *unseen* people on the internet. Abelson continues this conversation by stating, "Across the interviews, fears of homophobia, racism, and transphobia was higher in rural spaces" (p. 146). In the context of rurality, Queer people have real fears when it comes to protections and safety because of the higher levels of victimization and the levels of overkill in rural areas.

Implications for Educational Spaces

Increase Visibility

Every classroom will have a Queer student. Every school will have a Queer educator. Every school will have a Queer caregiver. Through these broad assumptions, educators, policymakers, and communities can better support Queerness in rural

spaces. The social constructs of visibility in regard to both rural and Queer identities, suggest that there is no monolithic way to *see* rural Queerness. In other words, based on some rural spaces' community norms, some students may remain in the closet for safety, or present outwardly one way while internally questioning their gender and sexual identity. Policymakers, caregivers, and educators do not have to see Queerness from another person to understand that Queerness exists in those spaces.

Addressing Bias

Teacher preparation programs and professional development in rural areas should be geared towards addressing cis-heterosexual biases in practice and policy. There is much discomfort for rural educators to engage in topics of gender or sexuality mostly due to fear of community or parental backlash (Page, 2017); therefore, there is a strong need for these programs and PD's to help educate rural educators on gender identities and sexual orientations. For example, a masculine presenting student may not use he/him pronouns. If a rural school only uses canonical text that have cis-gendered people and heterosexual relationships, such as *The Great Gatsby*, how can Queer youth see their future selves? As a resource for teachers in rural areas, over half of the thirteen winners of the Whippoorwill award, a young adult (YA) novel award with a focus on rural spaces, featured gay, lesbian, or questioning characters (Kedley et al., 2022).

Creating Inherently Safe Spaces

While having visible Pride flags and stickers in the classroom are symbols of safe spaces, schools themselves should inherently be a safe space. Schools may workshop various ways to be visibility affirming that embrace the Queer community instead of trying to create "other safe spaces" for Queer students. The objects of study also provide a narrative that Queer visibility may not always translate to safety; therefore, having various other ways to celebrate Queerness in schools is critical to Queer youth feeling loved and cared for.

For example, when discussing contemporary histories and laws, a teacher may introduce the *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* bill under the Bill Clinton administration. Operating under the assumption that human rights should not be up for debate, a teacher may ask during a discussion or writing prompt: How do policies and laws such as this one influence people's identity and sense of belonging?

In spaces where Queer visibility and safe spaces may be limited due to anti-Queer policies, online resources may be more vital. Educators may take time to learn about online resources for families, colleagues, and youth. Examples of these resources: The Trevor Project, Movement Advancement Project (lgbtqmap.org/equality-maps), GLSEN educator guides and resources, and Learning for Justice).

Discussion

As students and educators navigate their comfort levels of visibility, educators and school personnel must implement various ways to communicate gender and sexual identities in the context of rural areas. For example, if a teacher asks students for pronouns, instead of risking outing the student, a teacher could ask on a questionnaire: *Which name/pronouns do you want me [educator] to use? When I talk to your caregivers, which name/pronouns would you like me to use? If I'm speaking to other teachers or administrators, which name/pronouns are you comfortable with me using?* This guides an understanding that Queer visibility does operate in a state of flux depending on the other participants and contexts.

The work of being Queer affirming in rural spaces is not solely rooted in providing safety, which most rural Queer youth feel unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2022) it is about creating moments and spaces in which rural Queerness is accepted, seen, and valued. Independent reading allows students a chance to explore their gender and sexual identities through narrative. A focus to increase Queer-affirming library holdings in rural spaces gives students the chance and opportunity to be seen. A short warm-up at the beginning of a science or math class featuring a Queer scientist or mathematician thriving in their career as an adult, gives Queer youth the hope of a future in which they are accepted and valued. Historically, cis-heterosexual educators have used their families to create relationships with students and to humanize the craft of teaching (e.g., simply having a photo of their family on their desk); however, anti-Queer policies complicate the ability for Queer educators to do the same. By acknowledging that families in rural areas also may look and operate differently (e.g., youth raised by their grandparents, same-sex parents, youth in foster systems, multi-racial households, etc.), regardless of Queerness, the classroom can inheritably become more accepting by valuing all humans in a community.

Conclusion

Rurality and Queerness offer a critical intersectional point of identity in which visibility cannot easily fit into a binary. Abelson (2019) and Gray (2009), *Country Queers* and the histories of Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena in conversation together generate a spectrum of visibility. This spectrum of visibility operates at a variety of levels: within objects, in language and discourse, histories, within communities, online spaces, self (internal and body), in interactions, and intuitions. The Queer studies and place as an area of identity construction framework allowed the objects of study to highlight these various spaces of visibility. Through this narrative inquiry around the function of visibility, the themes that presented themselves were associated with a sense of comfort, production of spaces, identity development work, and a sense of fear and violence. By challenging the role of what it means to make some visible, these themes create points of conversation. Does a spectrum of Queer visibility in rural spaces produce a sense of

comfort to people in that space? How visibility in the rural Queer context influences and shapes the identity work process? Does Queer rural studies consider how visibility functions during the production of new and current spaces? How does fear and levels of violence in rural Queer conversations influence a level of visibility? These questions push future discourses to challenge what it means to provide visibility of a historically marginalized group in a rural context.

It is not as simple as being either visible or invisible because Queer people exist in a society deeply rooted in cis-heterosexual existence. Therefore, visibility for Queer people sometimes takes cis-heteronormativity into consideration. For example, the coming out narrative creates Queer visibility under the gaze of heteronormativity. A spectrum of visibility allows a flux of identity to be seen or unseen based on the individual. Queer rurality, with its histories, interactions, and communities offers a site of queering the binary of something or someone being visible.

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