

ABSTRACT

SIMONEAUX, BRENT. *Queer Literacies*. (Under the direction of Dr. Susan Miller-Cochran).

Queer Literacies is a public ethnography of southern queer experience. Blurring the lines between journalism, creative non-fiction, academic writing, and even travel writing, it describes the mundane experiences of a community coming together to self-publish a magazine full of queer stories, a 17-year-old learning to do drag in his rural hometown, and a gender-queer designer learning to talk about their identity. Through all of it, literacy learning is at the center, sustaining queer lives in places where, at least historically, they were never meant to survive.

Queer Literacies

by
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CHAPTER 1:
QUEER LITERACIES

Megan and I were walking through a neighborhood just off of main street in a small, southern town. There were no sidewalks, so we walked in the middle of mostly empty streets, talking as we wandered around the neighborhood, step by step, word by word. “Growing up in the South,” she tells me, “queer kids were few and far between, so as soon as you found one, you guys were instant besties. Or if you started hooking up with one, you guys would follow each other around wherever because you needed that—what’s the word? That bond.”

Megan was in her mid-thirties now and, even still, she needed that bond. *We* needed that bond. Which was partly why we were walking and talking and going on about being southern and queer. She had just moved back to the South from the west coast two months earlier and, aside from her wife, she didn’t know many people in town. Just like when she was a queer kid growing up in the South, she was once again trying to make room for herself however she could.

We met a few weeks earlier at a kickoff meeting for a local queer magazine that we were making. One by one, we gathered around a large table at the back of a coffee shop in Greensboro, North Carolina and as it came closer to starting time, Chris Kennedy, the lead editor of the magazine, welcomed everyone. We began introducing ourselves by our name and our preferred pronouns—he/him, she/her, ze/hir, they. Our preferred pronouns, those preferred ways of talking about ourselves, of being acknowledged by others, were a way of creating who we were. And that was the whole point. Language conventions be damned. With the people around that table, you could be something and create something that aligned with your experience of the world. He/him, she/her, ze/hir, they—one by one, we went around the crowded table, speaking ourselves into existence.

Chris told us that in a few weeks, we'd start working on the second issue of the magazine. The first issue, completed a year earlier, was all about queer experience in schools—it was called “School’s Out” and it was a success. A big success, even. A lot of the stories were created by people from the local community, many of whom had returned to the table we had gathered around that night. They had spent months creating their own work and reading through the dozens upon dozens of submissions that they had received from all over the country.

Their work had paid off. The magazine launched at a crowded celebration in Greenboro, with a dance party and live readings from some of the writers. Hard copies were distributed around town and they were slowly starting to make their way into school libraries. It was also attracting a lot of attention online. It had received over 100,000 hits to the website in the first year and a half. But perhaps most importantly, it was something that people in the community had created by themselves, something that came from their own lives. And it was something they were proud of.

This year’s issue would focus on sound, Chris told us, and we’d be experimenting with voice, music, and noise to create new material for the magazine. That’s part of why we were all there—we were gathered at the coffee shop that night to brainstorm ideas for the new issue: What problems were we facing at home, at school, in our families, in our communities? What did we want to include in the magazine? How do we bridge politics with music? What were we good at? What did we want to learn? And what exactly was queer music anyway? Was it music by queer artists? Was it music about queer experience? What exactly was it?

As the evening went on and we shared our ideas and experiences, it became clear that pulling so many people together was chaotic at best. There were so many voices, so many talents, so many questions and different perspectives that it was nearly impossible to wrangle the energy. Sustaining and focusing that energy over the next few months as we did the hard work of pulling together a magazine would be challenging. It wasn’t clear exactly how many

of us around the table would stick around for the season—people often get excited about new things and then move on. But it was clear that everyone—whether they did it with the magazine or not—everyone wanted to make some noise.

As the group started leaving the table and making their way out of the coffee shop, Megan introduced herself to me. During the meeting, I told a few people that I had always wanted to work with audio, but had never really done it before. I had this idea of interviewing queer folk in the South, creating short audio portraits and posting them online for others to listen to, maybe including them in the magazine. It was nothing more than an idea and neither of us had any idea what we were doing. But Megan was eager to make it happen. She wanted to be my partner in crime.

That's how we began walking and talking and going on about being southern and queer: we were creating something together. I would interview her. She would interview me. We'd tell each other stories about growing up in the South, about love and loss and fitting in. We'd talk about our families and religion and people who helped us along the way. When we were finished, we'd stitch it all together and release it into the wild for others to hear.

As we were walking down the middle of that empty street, Megan told me about how, when she was 14, she knocked on her mom's bedroom door and said, "Mom, I'm gay."

"You're what?" her mom asked. "I'm gay. I think I'm gay," Megan told her.

Megan went back to her bedroom and shut the door. Two hours later her mom knocked and asked if she'd like to go shopping with her. They ended up at Baskin Robbins and, over ice cream, her mom asked if she had a girlfriend. As Megan tells me this story, she tells it with such matter-of-factness, such ease—not the tragic friction that might be expected. You can even hear fondness in her voice. "You have to meet my family to understand," she kept telling me.

She grew up in a big city in the South with queer people all around her. She spent a lot of time in restaurants around the city and half the cooks were queer. There were even these two they called The Flower Girls, two queer lovers who did the flowers at a lot of the restaurants. She had hung out in gay bars when she was young and she would lose herself on the dance floor, moving to the electric guitars and synthesizers of the Cars.

When she was 16, though, she realized that she couldn't be in the South anymore, even in the big city she grew up in. She was at that "very, very sensitive age," as she describes it, when "you have an idea of who you are and what you want to do and where you want to be and you can't actually make that come into fruition with ease." At that age, the life you know to be yours is too grown for you—at least for now. Even with her mom at Baskin Robbins. Even with all the queer cooks. Even with The Flower Girls. Even with gay bars and dance floors and the Cars.

"It's hard enough being a teenager," she said, "so I knew I had to break away and get out." That was it: Megan left the South. And like so many queers before her and after her, she left for one of the coasts, blazing out west to Arizona and then finally to Portland, Oregon.

Almost twenty years later, after marrying a woman and buying a farm in Portland, she found herself back where she started—in the South. This time, she was following her wife, who had gotten accepted to graduate school, got an apartment, and moved away. It was meant to be just a short amount of time apart. But Megan decided to join her and this meant leaving the farm for the season, renting the house, and moving to a brand new city where she didn't know anyone. Which is why she was working on the magazine. She had found herself once again looking for that—what's the word? That bond.

"Just being here these two months, the smell of the pine needles, the way that people interact—and don't interact, purposefully," she says, "Ya, it just reminds me I'm getting

snippets of my childhood.” Megan has a deep reverence and respect for the South and its culture, but there’s still something that makes her hesitate, something that doesn’t sit quite right with her. “For all of its beauty and grace and really cool culture, there’s still a lot of that old negative things that really do exist even now. It blows my fucking mind,” she says, putting an extra punch on it.

We looped back around to main street and ducked in and out of tiny shops, interviewing each other. We stopped in a hardware shop, talked to clerk for a while, and tried on boots. We climbed up a hill and eventually got in Megan’s car and drove in no particular direction. We saw an old building a few miles outside of town and pulled over on the side of the road, parking in a gravel lot nearby, getting out of the car, and standing by the road.

There’s a bit of silence as Megan takes a bite of an apple, which she had pulled out of her car on the drive over. After almost three hours of talking, what was there left to talk about? What was there left to say?

Megan takes the audio recorder from me and asks me about people who have played an important role in my life.

I told her about Tina, my high school teacher who, in addition to having a knack for telling good stories, was this wonderfully queer woman. It was a thing I couldn’t name at the time though. The word queer wasn’t a word I knew when I was 16, mostly because I grew up the son of a military man in the 1990’s. No one asked. No one told. And all that not asking and not telling meant that I didn’t have a vocabulary to speak about it. I knew queerness through experience and desire, not language.

Tina—Ms. Miller, as I called her back then—she was unsafe in all the right ways. Just being in class with her, being near her and listening to her tell stories, listening to her life—that was enough. I recognized something so familiar in her. She made so much sense to me. With

her, I could write what I knew to be true, putting into language what I had, until then, only been able to intuit.

Megan and I handed the recorder back and forth a few more times, and we eventually made our way back to main street, saying our goodbyes, promising to meet again, and traveling in opposite directions toward our homes.

A few months later, Megan would organize a community dinner to raise money for the queer magazine. She would spend weeks talking to local farmers, gathering promises for vegetables and meat, provisions from a community, from the dirt and hands of those around us. She would cook a sold-out dinner, prepared in the kitchen of a thrift-store-turned-museum, and the community young and old, gay and straight and queer would gather around tables, elbow to elbow, fork to fork.

She would leave the South after that dinner and go back to the west coast for another season on the farm. The South, for all its beauty and grace, just wasn't for her.

I've been spending a lot of time with queer folk in North Carolina. I've been playing bingo with drag queens in long eyelashes, in ballrooms lined with long, skinny tables. I've been learning how to tell queer stories from the South with nothing but words and images and a whole lot of grit. I've been talking with gender-queer migrants who left the South and set off a dust storm behind them, only to return to the place that formed them. I've sat on porches and at kitchen tables, and I've wandered the streets of towns big and small, going on about being southern and queer and learning how queer folk make room for themselves within their communities.

In the last three years, from 2013 to 2016, my research has brought me into the lives of queer folk and the places they inhabit. It's taken me into the basement of a Methodist church to watch as teenagers learn drag, into a thrift-store-turned-museum as a community learns to make a magazine about their experiences, and into the life of a gender-queer migrant as they learn to talk about their identities—all against the backdrop of the southern United States. The South.

Like other parts of the country, the South had been reeling from ballot measures and court cases that determined the ever-changing legal status of same-sex marriage. The last three years have been a roller coaster of legal decisions and reversals. And slowly, cases were making their way to the Supreme Court. On all sides, the country was waiting for a final decision to be made one way or the other.

North Carolina was one of the final states in the South to fall (or stand, depending on your perspective) in a wave of constitutional amendments that explicitly defined marriage as heterosexual. On May 8, 2012, just before I had begun fieldwork for this project, the citizens of North Carolina voted in favor roughly 61% to 39% to amend the state constitution to define marriage between one man and one woman. ARTICLE XIV, Section 6 of the North Carolina state constitution would read: *Marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this State.*

North Carolina was the 30th state to adopt a constitutional amendment of this sort and it was the last of the former Confederate states. And all of this was despite an existing statute that had already banned same-sex marriage in the state. The state Senate passed that 1996 law with a 41–4 vote. The vote in the state House was 98–10.

Just as in 1996, it turned out that elected officials were overwhelmingly in favor of the 2012 amendment and so too was the voting public. But of course, we didn't know this in the time

leading up to Amendment 1, as the constitutional amendment became popularly known. Driving around my own neighborhood in Raleigh, the state capital, it felt like the amendment wouldn't pass. In yards all across my neighborhood, sign after sign read: vote against. It felt like cars were plastered with bumper stickers that read: vote against. Sprawled across social media were the messages of friends and co-workers and politicians who voiced their opposition: vote against. With all of this full-throated support around me, it felt like the amendment would be shot down in voting booths, and North Carolina would remain the final southern state without such a constitutional amendment.

But, of course, the state is made up of more than my neighborhood. Outside its capital and urban centers, in rural counties and suburbs across the state, North Carolina was overwhelmingly in favor of Amendment 1.

When the amendment passed, a key group of its supporters made national news when they celebrated by eating wedding cake. A photograph of outspoken supporter Tami Fitzgerald, head of Vote for Marriage NC, gleefully cutting a big wedding cake quickly spread across the internet. Fitzgerald is quoted as saying, "We are not anti-gay, we are pro-marriage. And the point—the whole point—is that you don't rewrite the nature of God's design for marriage based on the demands of a group of adults" (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). The whole thing felt personal to a lot of people. The wedding cake, the use of religious rhetoric, the overwhelming majority voting for the amendment. It was just the latest tension-filled moment within the political and geographical divide across the state. And all of it felt personal. How could it not be personal?

When Amendment 1 was overturned two years later in a Virginia federal court, something had changed for sure. People began to recognize that none of this was finished, that perhaps everything was about to change, that despite our neighbor's voting for the amendment, someone higher up would intervene. And then finally, in 2015, the thing that so many in the modern gay movement had fought so long for finally happened: marriage equality. Justice

Anthony Kennedy's pronouncement not only legalized same-sex marriage across the United States, it was an affirmation of dignity:

It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right. (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015)

With those words, same-sex marriage was legalized across the United States of America. Justice Kennedy's words—*it is so ordered*—resounded like the strike of a heavy gavel. It was the outcome of years and years of court cases, of marching in the streets, of ballot measures and public debate.

These big moments of ideological collision, played out in the courts, in the media, in the assembly halls of state governments—these moments are often the ones we see and pay attention to. For a brief moment, everyone is talking about people like me, people like Megan, people like those I've been walking and spending time with. Suddenly, a light is shone on the ways that we have sex, the types of people we love, the families we choose, and the lives we build for ourselves.

The experience of forging a life in the middle of these collisions—this is what queer experience has been. Amidst all of this turmoil, all of this back and forth in the media, all of this sometimes humiliating hyperbole, queer lives have gone on quietly. In bingo halls, in bedrooms, in churches, in high schools and all the spaces in between, queer lives have gone on. I want to know how do they do it. How do *we* do it? How do queer folk make room for themselves within their communities?

My very simple answer is that the process of learning how to do incredibly mundane things—things like putting on makeup, telling stories, and talking about ourselves—is fundamental to queer experience. In short, activities such as these are literacies, shaped and

defined by the communities we live in. And the process of becoming literate significantly shapes who we are and how we relate to others.

This is a dissertation about how literacy comes to matter in the lives of queers and queens—and ultimately to us all.

This dissertation blurs the lines between journalism, creative non-fiction, academic writing, and even travel writing, purposely zigzagging across genres to tell the unremarkable stories of queers who stay in the South and those who pass through it. Before I get to those stories, though, we need to clarify a few things. We need to know what I mean by *queer*, what I mean by *literacy*, and what happens when you cut and paste those two words together: *queer literacies*.

The word queer means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Sometimes, the word is used as slang for homosexual, a way of saying *he's a little different* with a wink. At worst, the word has been used as a term of homophobic abuse, a word that can knock you over, leave you breathless, and do more damage than any fist. Since the late 1980s, though, the word queer has, for many people, taken on a more neutral, or even positive meaning. Think of the rallying cry of activist organizations such as QueerNation in the early 1990s: *We're queer! We're here! Get used to it!*

The way the word fires off in so many different directions—from seriously offensive to rallying cry for the oppressed—can make it feel off limits or inaccessible to lots of people, especially if they don't identify as queer themselves. A few months ago, a friend asked me why I say the word queer so much. She didn't blink, looked me straight in the eye and asked: *Isn't that word offensive? I was told to never say that word.* The short answer is that, yes,

said in the right way, under the right circumstances, the word can do serious damage. It carries a lot of weight and often packs a mean punch. And for this reason, she seemed to be implying, it's just not a word that people—polite people? straight people?—should say.

This is one reason why so many who would call themselves queer, including myself, have such a troubled relationship with the word at times. When I'm talking with strangers, and even with friends that I've known for a long time, the word often sits uncomfortably on my lips. It's not that I'm ashamed of the word or that I'm afraid of their reaction. It's just that it's not an easy word to talk about.

I've heard this over and over again from other queer folk during my research. Using the word queer to describe yourself often puts you in a teaching role, educating a sometimes eager, sometimes scared, sometimes confused student. The strange look, the misunderstanding, and the follow-up questions—there's always another question—all mean you have to stop and explain yourself. And for someone whose life is always scrutinized, always outside, always different, stopping once again to explain who *you* are to someone who has never been asked to explain who *they* are, can be exhausting. "It's draining," someone told me on a porch one afternoon, speaking of the way he has to stop and explain himself all the time.

Most of the time, it's just easier to tell people that I'm gay. Almost everyone knows what it means and it feels like a stable concept in American culture (even if it's really not). It's also relatively easy to fit me into that category. I am, after all, married to another man. I am white and solidly upper middle class and live in a young, up-and-coming city. At first glance, I don't necessarily disrupt what a lot of Americans expect from a gay man. So when I tell people that I'm gay, the conversation almost always moves forward with ease. No questions asked. No explanation necessary.

This is why I claim the word queer with such tenacity and then, in the next breath, will hide it away like a light under a bushel. Like many others that I've been spending time with, the

ways that I speak myself into existence are different with each encounter. In those tenacious moments when I speak myself as queer, though, I pry the word open and lay it out for all to see.

The word can unsettle who you are to yourself and to other people. And this is, in many ways, the whole point. The word queer is downright unsettling.

So, when I say the word queer, I'm borrowing the definition that queer theorist Judith Halberstam uses: "Nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in time and space" (6). Though admittedly convoluted, this definition gets at something that is seen over and over again in queer studies, an overarching theme for those who claim the word as their own: being queer means embracing a way of life that isn't normal. It means resisting predetermined ways of being and living. It means shattering the usual categories that we use to define ourselves—and in the process, questioning the very system of categorization upon which "normal" is predicated.

You see, the normative logics and organizations that Halberstam refers to above are simply the normal or usual way of doing things. For example, in mainstream American culture, normative logics and organizations of family and coupling, those that are considered "normal," would include one man and one woman coming together in life-long marriage. The purpose of the marriage is often tied to procreation, to having children at a reasonable age. It can seem benign, this normative organizing of marriage and family.

It's easy to take behaviors such as heterosexual coupling and long marriage and procreation as normal because they are the outcome of particular logics and belief systems that many rarely have to confront. Organizing ourselves in this way is, after all, what many would consider a healthy, productive way of life, one that leads to happiness and longevity, and positive contribution to society. But that's the trouble with normal. It is so ingrained in our

culture that it begins to appear natural, as if we've always done it this way. It has this insidious way of becoming invisible, as if life has always been organized like this.

It may be unintended, but these logics and ways of organizing our lives aren't just descriptive. They're *prescriptive* as well, determining what *should* be. When I say that something is "normalizing," I mean that it prescribes behavior. Those who deviate from the norm are often seen as outsiders, unproductive, strange, and even harmful. Normal, in other words, has a gravitational pull. You can't see it, but you can feel it as you circle around. And it takes a lot of effort to resist.

That's why queer is unsettling—it takes the very things that have become so invisible and natural to us and calls into question the logics that make them possible. It forces us to see them for what they are. A queer way of life sees the gravitational pull of normal and takes flight in another direction.

So, when I say that I've been spending a lot of time with queer folk, I mean I've been spending time with those who recognize normal for what it is and intentionally live their lives in another direction. These are folks living lives outside of normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in time and space. To varying degrees, these are folks who are living their lives outside the normal binaries of gender and sexuality—masculine/feminine, gay/straight. These are folks who refuse to label themselves in traditional ways, challenging normal ways of life by living their own existence.

One of the questions that I came back to over and over again when I was spending time with someone was *What does queer mean to you?* I wanted to know what they mean when they say the word queer, what calling themselves queers means to them, what a queer way of life looks like, and how they even came to understand themselves as queer in the first place.

When I asked these questions, some of them made a distinction between Queer (capital Q) and queer (small q). To them, Queer referred to the body of academic scholarship that has gained traction within many academic circles, especially since the 1980s and 1990s when scholars began using the word Queer to organize themselves. Scholars such as Judith Butler, Jasbir Puar, José Muñoz, Eve Sedgwick, Lisa Duggan, and others have emerged as the vanguard of Queer Theory, as it's called. This way of thinking has crossed disciplinary boundaries and legitimized itself as an analytical framework, always by its very existence challenging assumptions. Perhaps because they see Queer as being largely an academic pursuit, one person told me that Queer was “more high-minded, theoretical, and even confrontational.”

In contrast, queer (small q) means something very different to them. It's simply a way of talking about their own lives in very practical terms. To them, queer is basically shorthand for a way of being in the world, of being creative with what you've got, and doing what you can to live a life outside the boxes that are placed on you from the outside. In fact, there are entire groups of teenagers and twenty-somethings—precisely the ones that I've been spending time with—who have never read Butler or Sedgwick or Muñoz or any other queer theorists. These figures and theories mean virtually nothing to them, even as Queer Theory may be silently influencing their lives from far away. And yet despite their unfamiliarity, they call themselves queer and live their lives in strikingly radical ways.

Judith Halberstam captures this sense of queer—queer as a particular way of living—when he writes about it as a way of life. While “born this way” has become the watchword of the modern, popular LGBT movement, a way of saying *this is who I am, I've always been like this, and I had no choice*, Halberstam wants us to understand that being queer is less about *who you are* and more about *what you do*. In fact, for Halberstam, *who you are* is an outcome of how you spend your time and how you organize space. In truth, this queer *way of life*, these “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices,”

as Halberstam calls them, are very attractive to a lot of people (1). They have the potential to open up new possibilities and new ways of life.

So much of what draws people to call themselves *queer* is wrapped up in this sense of possibility. Halberstam writes that “Part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (2). So, normal be damned. Whether out of necessity or choice, queers have claimed this way of life because it offers a sense of the future that opens up instead of closes down.

If we take Halberstam’s proposition seriously—that queerness is a way of life and the outcome of activity rather than an innate quality or a way of having sex—we can begin thinking about what exactly organizes queer lives. *How do queers spend their time?* It’s an incredibly mundane question, but if we focused on the lived experiences of those who self-identify as queer and build a very situated, particular, and contingent understanding of a queer way of life, we might begin to understand what it means to live a life that actively resists the gravitational pull of normal.

When we talk about literacy, we’re usually talking about reading and writing. Most of us learn the alphabet as children, deciphering syllables and sounds as meaning makes its way from the page to our heads. We begin inscribing strange lines, our hands awkwardly squiggling ink on the page or thumbing pixels onto the screen. And soon enough, though often with a certain amount of trial and frustration, these lines begin to take on meaning in

the exchanges between us. It so happens that these lines help us to do very important things in the world, things like voting in elections, reading the news, and making our ideas travel widely. When we say that someone is literate, we mean that this person has mastered, or least become proficient at, deciphering and inscribing these strange, important lines. They have learned to read and write.

Just like the word queer, literacy means different things to different people in different places. Tracing how the meaning of this word changes, particularly in academic circles, we begin to see how it changes over time. Though somewhat arcane, these not-so-subtle definitional differences have a serious impact on how we understand literacy. In short, literacy is fiercely contested territory. And the way that we define literacy is incredible important.

Throughout the 1950s-1980s, linguists and anthropologists such as Jack Goody, David Olson, Nancy Torrance, and Walter Ong wanted to know if literacy changed how people think and if it had an effect on culture. In other words, they wanted to understand what happens to people when the written word is introduced to pre-literate people and how those changes affect their ways of life. To find out, they often performed studies that helped them isolate literacy and see its effects. Goody traveled to places like Africa and Asia, observing cultures in various states of literacy development and writing extensively throughout his career about its effect on cultural practices such as law and religion. Others, like Olson and Torrance, studied children before, during, and after becoming literate.

Reading these books today, they sometimes read like strange artifacts of a bygone era. Even just thumbing through the chapter titles of Goody's 1968 collection *Literacy in Traditional Societies* conjures images of the European researcher traveling to observe "primitive" cultures as they develop: Implications of Literacy in Traditional China and India; Uses of Literacy in New Guinea and Melanesia; Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana. But it's also easy to see where he's coming from and why he did what he did. If you're going to

understand the effects of the written word on culture, one way to do so is to understand “pre-literate cultures,” as Goody called them, and then compare them to literate cultures. By comparing the two—and even finding cultures that are in the midst of changing—you can begin isolating distinct cultural features of each set. It’s not a pristine method, by any means, but comparisons like this can give us a pretty good idea of the consequences of print-based literacy. From these studies, Goody is able to argue that literacy leads to the development of logic, the distinction of myth from history, the emergence of skepticism, and the ability to challenge and reinterpret social dogma.

Walter Ong follows a similar line of thinking in his now-famous book *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the Word*. For Ong, oral cultures can be characterized as formulaic, conservative, and situated. Literate cultures, on the other hand, are thought to be analytic, abstract, and objective. There was something about detaching thought from the speaker and making it concrete that changed the way we think. Ong writes, “By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attach, writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved in all else, somehow self-contained, complete” (132). By stripping the spoken word of its context, you could, in essence, lay two written texts side by side and examine them critically outside of the social context in which they were uttered. Oral communication is always fleeting, always changing, always disappearing in the air. But when you pin it down, make it stay, look at it closely, you can analyze it. You can start doing things like differentiating myth from history.

For scholars like Goody and Ong, literacy is essentially a technology. To them, literacy is an autonomous actor that *does something* to the way that we think, the way we know the world, and the ways that we organize ourselves. The premise underlying these writers and thinkers is that literacy is a neutral force, an unaffiliated actor.

This way of understanding literacy, of course, has an underbelly and its critics have called into question the premise that literacy can be neutral. Perhaps the most vocal of these critics

has been Brian Street, who has for many years encouraged us to see how literacy situated within social contexts. For Street, literacy can never be detached from the social, political, and economic forces that surround it. Literacy, in short, can never be neutral.

Since the late 1970's and early 1980's, Street has written extensively about what he calls the *ideological model* of literacy. In his 1984 *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Street writes that "Technology is... not a neutral 'thing' that arises out of disinterested scientific inquiry... It is itself a social product that has arisen as a result of political and ideological processes and institutions" (65). Literacy, in other words, the outcome of political and ideological formations, very particular ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Elsewhere, Street writes that literacy is "inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" and that it is "[wrapped up] in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination" (*Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, 7). What he means by this is that it is often those who already have power who determine what counts as literacy and who might be considered literate. Which is why Street urges us to "[take] nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking 'whose literacies' are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant" (*What's New in New Literacy Studies*, 1). In short, there's a very convenient forgetting or unseeing—even if unintentional—happening when talk about literacy as an autonomous actor. What ends up happening is that communities that rely on other forms of literacy that do not necessarily fit within the dominant definition of literacy, can be deemed less literate and therefore excluded.

What counts as literacy is incredibly important. For scholars like Street, what counts as literacy is expansive and it would be more accurate to talk about *literacies* instead of *literacy*. So far I've been writing about literacy solely as reading and writing alphabetic texts. But if we define literacy a bit more expansively, like so many literacy scholars now do, we see how literacy and literacy learning is dispersed throughout our lives in ways we may have never

thought of. Literacy scholars such as Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell define literacy as “the skills and practices needed to gain knowledge, evaluate and interpret that knowledge, and apply that knowledge to achieve a particular goal” (4). Reading becomes the ability to gather and process knowledge. Writing becomes the ability to transform that knowledge for a particular purpose. And texts are various.

Literacy, those ways of gathering and transforming knowledge, is expansive and literacy learning travels to situations outside of schools and classrooms. In fact, lots of people are talking about coding literacy right now, the line of thought being that inability to read and write computer code—C++, Python, Java Script—leaves us at the mercy of those who are creating the digital world around us, unable to participate as anything more more than a consumer. Being able to read and write programming languages is often touted as a 21st-century literacy.

We could say the same thing about a lot of the skills we use every day. I even have a cookbook on my kitchen shelf called *Vegetable Literacy*. It’s a book that helps terrible (but aspiring) cooks like myself understand different types of vegetables and how you can combine them with other ingredients to make new dishes. In other words, it’s not just about following a recipe. It’s about understanding the basics of vegetables—their flavor profiles, what they pair with—enough to make something new. It’s not just about rote memorization; it’s about the ability to create.

Even with all of these different types of literacies around us, the written word still holds a very important function in our daily lives. Expanding the definition of literacy doesn’t mean that alphabetic text is unimportant or that it no longer matters—it’s just that it’s not all that’s out there. The key isn’t to have one correct way of reading and writing, but to be open to all the possible ways that knowledge-making takes form in our lives.

To understand how literacy is situated within a social context, literacy scholars often use two terms to talk about literacy: *literacy events* and *literacy practices*. Literacy events are situations or activities where literacy plays an integral role. Think about the texts that you send to your friends, perhaps to coordinate a night out. For that exchange to take place, both of you need to understand how your phones work and you need to be able to decipher and produce various symbols—letters, emojis, images. All of these actions help to instigate the night out. The types of literacies involved may vary from situation to situation, but these exchanges could not occur without literacy. It's interesting to think about how many interactions involve literacy in one form or another, how many of our daily exchanges just simply couldn't happen without being literate. Our lives are, indeed, infused with literacies.

Literacy practices are a little more difficult to understand because they're a little more difficult to see. In broad terms, we can define literacy practices as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives” (Barton & Hamilton, 6). Literacy practices are forged between individuals, shaped by social processes that are locally situated. Unlike literacy events, literacy practices are intangible and involve people's awareness of literacy, how they talk about and make sense of literacy.

To return to the texting example, think about all of the unwritten social norms that inform how texting takes place. When is it appropriate to send or answer that text message? While driving? While eating dinner and conversing with others face to face? What's an appropriate amount of time to wait before you answer the message? How long is too long? This example illustrates a key element of literacy practices: they shape literacy events through implicit understandings. In other words, literacy practices regulate the production and distribution of texts. Literacy practices inform or, to put it more strongly, orchestrate how literacy events unfold. Like a careful dance, they choreograph how the literacy event takes place—all in unspoken, implicit ways that we often don't even think about.

There's another term that literacy scholars often use to talk about literacy: *literacy sponsors*. Deborah Brandt defines these as "agents, local and distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain some advantage by it in some way" (Sponsors of Literacy, 166). In other words, these are agents that, in one form another, have a stake in literacy learning. Brandt sees literacy, in part, as the outcome of political and economic forces. In her book *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt tells individual stories of literacy learning and how they're connected to large-scale economic development. These stories remind us that "literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes" (Sponsors of Literacy, 167). While scholars who have adopted the *ideological model* of literacy have tended to focus on local communities, Brandt encourages us to look at global forces.

"What appears to be a local event," writes Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton, "also can be understood as a far-flung tendril in a much more elaborate vine" (347). For them, literacy is far reaching. It has far-flung tendrils. And as much as we may want to control and shape literacies at the local level, they are often the outcome of forces outside of our control, a symptom of larger economic or political forces. There's only so much that a local community can do to carve out or redirect these trade routes. While there's certainly opportunity for resistance, we are, in many ways, at their mercy.

We might therefore shift our attention to include not only what people do with literacy, but also what literacy does with people. There's a balance between the *autonomous model* and the *ideological model*, a give and take. My understanding of literacy is *both/and*, not *either/or*. So while literacy may not be an autonomous actor, it certainly has an effect on local communities.

I've carried all of this history, all of these definitions with me as I've been walking and talking with southern queers over the last three years. I've been looking for the literacy

events that play an important role in the lives of queers and queens—and I’ve been observing how those events are choreographed. Although I’ve had my shoes on the ground, looking mostly at local communities, I’ve looked up every now and then to see how literacies are shaped from afar, how queers lives are affected from the outside, many times through media, politics, and economic practices.

The words *queer* and *literacy* may seem like strange bedfellows. And they may, in fact, be just that. But I’ve been dredging up so much recondite thinking about both of these words because I think that literacy holds a key to understanding queer experience in the South. Conversely, I think that queer experience in the South holds a key to understanding literacy.

The thing is: when we talk about queer experience and the American South (if we talk about it at all), we tend to focus on silence and isolation. We often talk about southern queers as victims—of homophobic laws, religious bigotry, depression, self-harm, and violence. The stories we most often tell about southern queers are stories of endurance and eventual migration, if you’re lucky.

This phenomenon is part of what scholars call *metronormativity*, a myopic focus on urban centers as liberating meccas of sexual identity. Halberstam writes that metronormativity “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities” (36). In other words, queer visibility, the degree to which queers claim (or are able to claim) their queerness in public, is often associated with big cities. Urban queers are out and proud, free to live their lives apart from an oppressive and silencing rurality. Non-urban queers are largely silent and in the closet. Because of this visibility, urban gay/lesbian culture is often thought of as the norm for all gay/lesbian culture to aspire to.

The dirty truth about LGBT culture is that it can be just as normalizing as straight culture, increasingly so as gay/lesbian culture becomes more and more culturally accepted. As effective as identity politics have been in securing rights for gays and lesbians, it has the unfortunate outcome of normalizing LGBT culture. By identifying yourself as something particular—the gay community—and then coalescing around that identity, you define what that identity is. At the same time though, you’re defining what it isn’t. With identity politics, there’s often a will toward sameness instead of difference and the center of it is often big cities like New York and San Francisco.

Metronormativity helps us understand one of the central problems with the way we often talk about queerness: We don’t talk enough about how queer lives are sustained in non-urban areas—places like the American South. In their book *De-centering Sexualities* (2000), Richard Phillips and Diane Watt write that the geographies of sexualities “tend to be polarized, focused on sexualized metropolitan centers such as New York and Berlin,” essentially eliding rural sites and subjects (1). So when literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner developed the term *counterpublic*, the public that he imagines is essentially an urban one. And George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, arguably one of the most popular works of gay history, is just that: a history of urban gays. Not gay Des Moines. Not gay Raleigh. But gay New York.

Scholars in many disciplines have begun filling that void with description, trying to understand how queer lives are sustained in the not-so-empty space outside urban centers. Published in 2001, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* was the first book-length queer history of the South. Author John Howard relies on firsthand accounts of men who explained who explain their lives through oral histories. Howard found that rather than congregating in public places, as often happens in urban areas, southern gay men rely on circulation. Similarly, Mary Gray has written extensively about youth and queer visibility in Kentucky.

Her book *Out in the Country* details the work of creating and sustaining a queer identity in Kentucky, mostly with and through different types of media.

I think another part of this story—a key part, in fact—is literacy learning. Part of being queer in the South is figuring out how to do things, figuring how to gain knowledge and interpret and apply that knowledge when it feels like your way of life is so different from those around you. The process of gaining this knowledge, of *becoming* literate often forges social ties and relationships that sustain queer life.

It's unfortunate then that the same myopic focus on the urban in queer studies occurs in literacy studies as well. With few exceptions, neither queer studies or literacy studies have been particularly good at taking the rural, let alone the South, seriously—at least historically. In other words, we could very well apply the term metronormativity to literacy studies just as we can in queer studies.

Literacy scholars Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell have written about this precisely and have called on other scholars to pay attention to what they call *rural literacies*, which they define as “the particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining lives in rural areas” (4). Sustainability has become the watchword for those who study rural literacy. Like other scholars who write about rural areas, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell mean sustainability in the economic sense of the word. The story of rural areas is often one of economic decline and decay, which causes job loss, declining education, and emigration to other areas that are more economically prosperous. Rural literacies, for them, are those needed to “pursue the opportunities and create public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities” (4). In other words, these are the literacies needed to keep your community alive.

Sustaining life in rural areas isn't just about economics though. These stories we often tell, about southern queers as victims, queers as leaving, queers as invisible, queers as beaten

down—these are symptoms of a life unsustainable. While very real and very important for us to talk about openly and honestly, southern queer victimhood isn't the only narrative available to us. It begs the question, what does a sustainable life look like for queer folk in the South?

In all this walking and talking and going on about being southern and queer, I've come to understand that queer lives are sustained by literacy learning, at least in part. People like Megan, people like me, people like the drag queens and gender-queer designers I've been spending time with make room for themselves within their communities, in part, through *becoming* literate. I've learned that, despite the narrative of victimhood that is often most available to us, queers in the South are also visible and connected, actively shaping their lives and their communities. This active shaping is done, at least in part, through literacy learning. This is an incredibly mundane way of understanding queer literacies and, as we'll see later, queer literacies are often fairly unremarkable.

The following chapters detail how literacy comes to matter in the lives of queers and queens—and ultimately to us all.

Before any of those stories can be told though, I want to explain how I've come to know what I know. In other words, all of the claims that I'm making about queer literacies have grown out of ethnographic research. The next chapter explains how traditional concepts from the ethnographic tradition, concepts such as the *field site*, have evolved over time. I also detail what traditional ethnographic practices like *participant observation* and *interviewing* look like when a queer writer turns his focus on his own community.

CHAPTER 2:

APPRENTICE

George must have known that his grandmother's thrift store would get really, really cold. The building was basically wood and plaster. There were no ducts threaded through the building, pumping heat into corners and crannies. So when winter snapped, the building would trap yesterday's weather in its rafters and bones and keep it there for days. The only refuge was the room full of jackets and sweaters on the second floor, the fortunate fruits of years and years of collecting.

When his grandmother passed away, George took over the building and turned it into a living museum called Elsewhere, a place where the artifacts of his grandmother's collection—the bolts of fabric, toys, clothes, army tents—are used to incite creativity, play, and community action. There are weekly dinners, artists-in-residence, community workshops, and all the laughter and play and random props you'd expect from an old thrift store. But all of this shuts down in the winter. It's just too cold. Other than of a small polar bear team that works through the cold months (yes, they call themselves a polar bear team), the building stays mostly vacant from December until the end of March.

There was this day in April when the weather was warm and the museum was prying its doors open. I had driven out to Elsewhere because George and his team had planned a parade through the city to mark this exact moment, a moment when yesterday's warm weather was starting to get trapped inside the building and activity was starting to kick back up again. The parade would let the city know that the museum doors were opening again, that the community was welcome to come in, play, and participate. It was a way to be seen, to celebrate, and to say hello to people on the streets. It was a once-a-year grand opening.

I hadn't been at Elsewhere since I worked on the first issue of a queer magazine called *I Don't Do Boxes*. Chris, an arts educator at the museum, had started the magazine as a youth-led, grassroots platform to tell queer stories from the South. We met every week in the building and used the space to collaborate. With Sylvia's collection at our disposal, we taught each other how to tell stories—*our* stories, queer stories. And we built a magazine from the ground up. There was chaos and play and creation.

The drums kicked up on the street and everyone took the cue to come outside. Lots of people had put on clothing from Sylvia's collection. There were strange hats and wildly colored dresses. All those bodied costumes spilled onto the sidewalk in front of the museum, a strange arrangement, a loose collection, a of jumble of people holding signs and cheer.

Snare drums hoisted and hooked to their hips, the drummers swung their drumsticks up and down on tightened skins. The beat reverberated off of main street, bouncing off buildings and pavement. The noise, the people—it was all a commotion. People came out of stores and restaurants to watch the strange gathering of people moving like a disorganized river through the streets. We marched—dancing, moving to the beat of the drum line. We handed out candy as we passed people on the streets. We waved at cars passing by. Some of them honked their horn. The beeps made everyone cheer even more. It echoed and echoed off of buildings.

We went down the main drag and then swung over into a grassy area just a block or two off the path. The drums stopped for a minute and everyone took a rest. And then out of nowhere, people began dancing. A coordinated, choreographed dance. To music blasting out of a portable speaker that appeared out of nowhere. At Elsewhere, everything is an opportunity for performance and surprise.

On our way back to the museum, I finally had a chance to catch up with Chris. We had only loosely kept in touch since we worked on the first issues of the magazine together—it had been almost a year since we had seen each other face to face.

The summer before, we had spent an afternoon together in Raleigh. He had come to the city for the day and had called to see if I wanted to meet up with him. We met in a park on that hot summer, southern day, said hello, and immediately started moving—walking and talking and going on. We had spent the entire day zigzagging across the city on foot and, eventually, we ended up at a bar downtown. We ordered cheap beers and made our way through the inside-afternoon darkness, out onto the sunny patio where smoke somehow filled the outside air.

Somewhere in all of this, we lapsed into conversation about what we were both working on. I stammered on about literacy and southern queer experience like I did during those summer months, stuttering, backtracking, trying to explain what I was looking for but didn't quite yet know. The whole thing was inarticulate in those days.

What I wanted to tell Chris, though, was that the thing I was looking for was probably right in front of us. I had a hunch that the queer magazine we worked on was really all about literacy learning and that by coming together as a community to tell queer stories from the South, we were, in a way, making room for ourselves within our community. I wanted to write about the magazine and Elsewhere and the lives of the people who worked on it. I needed to tell Chris that I wanted to write about *him*.

But I didn't tell him any of this. Not this time. And not even the next time I saw him. Or the time after that. Instead, I stammered on, tongue akimbo.

There were so many awkward and uncomfortable moments here. Moments that, as a writer, I just want to hide away and pretend like they never happened. I knew the weight of what I'd

be asking: I wondered if he trusted me enough to write about him publicly. I wondered if he would feel like the only reason we'd been spending time together was for my own selfish gain. I wondered if he knew what he'd be getting himself into.

I knew that at some point, we were going to be sitting in a bar before a drag show at 9:00 p.m. and he was going to forget that I was writing about him. I knew that at some point, we were going to be three hours into an interview and our legs were going to get tired and we were going to be exhausted and he was going to forget that I was listening, that I was remembering what he was saying. I knew that one day I was going to write about all of this and, like a memoirist, I was going to tell the family secrets. And no matter how many consent forms he signed, no matter how many times I pushed the record button in direct sight of him, no matter how many times I reminded him—he was going to forget that he was letting a writer into his life and soon that writer would be letting everyone else in too.

What I told Chris on one of our walks, and what I eventually told everyone else that I worked with, was that I had hunch about literacy learning and queer experience, that I was interested in studying our work on the queer magazine. My own experience had told me that literacy and queerness might be connected, but I didn't know exactly how—or if it was anything more than a hunch. At the end of the day, I had a question and I needed other people to help answer it.

The problem with studying literacy is that it never sits still—it's a process of always becoming literate. And as much as literacy learning happens in public spaces where others can see it happening, it also happens in personal and private spaces like the bedroom, on an

iPad, in conversations with friends. Imagine watching how-to videos on YouTube when you can't sleep at night. Or the exchanges between drag queens in the dressing room before a show. Or the intense conversations that happen in a closed editorial meeting.

To understand the role that literacy learning plays in the lives of queers and queens, you have to take all of this into account. You have to go where literacy goes. And chasing down that becoming, following it, pursuing it can leave you winded and tired.

I'm going to do something in this chapter that doesn't always happen in popular writing. I'm going to explain how I know what I've come to know about queer literacies.

How we come to know something is central to what researchers call *method*, by which I mean the processes, habits, and protocols that we use to create knowledge—or, in this case, the literacy learning of queer folk. In short, method is what gets you from questions and curiosity to claims and conclusions.

Research methods are not something that we often talk about in casual conversation because we tend to talk more about the results of research, the new and interesting findings. Think of the headlines that new research generates in the popular press. They tend to lead with shocking or interesting results. Behind those results though, behind that headline is a research method for producing that claim.

Different researchers have different methods for creating knowledge. Some go into the archives and create knowledge from past ephemera. Some go into the laboratory and perform experiments in controlled environments. Others go out into the world and observe life as it unfolds. There are many, many different methods—more than I can name. With all of these different ways of creating knowledge, methods can be the source of disagreement among researchers. It can divide an entire university into small, independent kingdoms. And it can

even split a single academic department down the middle, with researchers firmly planting their feet on one side or the other.

The reason that many researchers so vehemently disagree with each other is that each method is the outcome of particular understandings of how the world works and how knowledge is created. The word that researchers use for this is *methodology*, shorthand for why we use the methods we use. In other words, embedded within each methodology are ways of seeing—and ways of not seeing. Academics use the word ideology to talk about these ways of seeing, lenses through which we see and understand the world. And embedded within those ideologies are value systems.

So, when researchers disagree about methods, it's often because there are deep fault lines in the ways that they see and understand the world. Indeed, there are competing ideologies that are so different from one another that they can't be reconciled. At their worst, researchers with competing ideologies and methodologies break off into factions and retreat to their corners never to see or hear from other factions again. At their best, however, researchers understand these divisions as opportunities to see other points of view and encounter the world through a different set of eyes. Some researchers even use a mixed-method approach—or work closely with other researchers who are experts in other methodologies.

When I say that literacy learning is an important way that queer life is sustained in the South, those words are the outcome of years of work. They're also the product of particular ideologies, belief systems that inform how we understand the world. I'm going to pull back the curtain in this chapter and expose the work—the very hard, very personal, very intimate work of research—that these situated, temporary truths are dependent upon. Exposing this work means exposing the messy, unruly conditions on which we come to know each other as writer and written about, researcher and participant, interviewer and interviewee, queer and queer.

In his famous *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, an ethnography of the Trobriand Islanders first published in 1922, Bronisław Malinowski writes that the goal of the ethnographer “is to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (25). Malinowski, who would become one of the most recognizable and influential anthropologists of the twentieth century, believed that the best way to grasp the “native’s” point of view wasn’t to stay in the library. No. To understand his vision of his world, you had to go and live with him.

There’s this photograph in *Argonauts* of Malinowski sitting on a log. The photo is grainy and monochrome. He’s surrounded by dark-skinned Trobriand Islanders, dressed in loin cloths, skin exposed, barefoot. And there’s Malinowski, white, foreign, sitting in the middle of all of them in a button-down shirt, in boots. Looking back at the photograph with nearly a century between us, it taps into a bygone conception of ethnographic research, men and women traveling to far-off places and to study “natives.”

These are the roots of at least one branch of ethnography, the rose-colored beginnings of a social science of humans. If it isn’t clear from Malinowski’s use of words like “native,” though, let me say up front that ethnography has historically been caught up in a colonial enterprise. It was part and parcel of a value system and a convenient forgetting that enabled ethnographers and their readers to see their own culture as “advanced” and the “native’s” culture as “primitive.” In many instances, “natives” were thought to be earlier forms of human and by studying them in their natural environments, we could shed light on how humans have evolved. Or so the argument went.

This way of studying humans was aligned with other late 19th- and early 20th-century field sciences like zoology and botany. Except, instead of studying animals or plants in their “natural” environments, anthropologists took the “early” human as their object of study. Drawing on the work of Henrika Kuklick, a historian of the human sciences, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson write that “to engage in fieldwork was, in the beginning, to engage in a branch of natural history; the object to be studied, both intensively and in a limited area, was primitive humanity in its natural state” (6). In this sense, ethnography can be understood as a product of colonialism, yet another way to document, categorize, and extend dominion over the new world.

Slowly, the discipline of Anthropology, as well as those who borrow its techniques, have been dismantling the structures of its colonialist past, bringing its assumptions and power dynamics to light. Even with the vestiges of its troubled past, the basic activities of ethnography remain not only a viable method for creating new knowledge, but one that is particularly well-suited for understanding literacy learning.

Ethnographers call these basic activities *participant observation*, *interviewing*, and writing *field notes*. The goal of these activities is to understand the life and worldview of those that are studied, traditionally called subjects, participants, or informants (there’s a litany of terms such as these, mostly borrowed from scientific protocols that legitimize the social sciences). While conducting fieldwork, ethnographers also keep detailed records of their observations, called field notes, compiling what they see and hear around them for safekeeping. These notes are often voluminous and labor intensive and are later used as source material when the ethnographer returns home to write and publish their findings.

These basic ethnographic activities—participant observation, interviewing, and writing field notes—have proven quite useful for researchers interested in studying literacy. In fact, some of the most influential work on literacy as social action has been ethnographic work. If we understand literacy not as a uniform, universal “thing,” but as an outcome of particular

social, economic, and political forces, it only makes sense to go and directly observe communities as they develop literacies, talk with community members, and take notes. Put simply: to understand literacy, you have to put shoes on the ground. You have to go. You have to listen. You have to be with. You have to act with.

So researchers have been going, listening, and taking notes for decades now. Shirley Brice Heath's 1984 *Ways with Words*, for example, has become a landmark work on literacy learning and is perhaps one of the most influential ethnographies of literacy. During the time of Heath's writing, research in education was dominated by the language of business—input, output, accountability, management strategies. This is arguably still true today. And while this language opens us to certain ways of understanding learning, it often ignores social and cultural context. Numbers and statistics, in other words, will tell you something about learning. But they will never tell you everything. What's also needed is a deep, textured understanding of learning drawn from a life lived alongside those who are learning and teaching. Ethnography, done well, can provide exactly that.

In *Ways with Words*, Heath traces the literacy practices of two communities in the Piedmont region of the United States: a black working-class community that she calls Trackton and a white working-class community that she names Roadville. These two communities were located only miles apart, but her work within the communities is sprawling, covering a lot of social terrain—from churches to schools to factories.

“These ethnographies of communication,” Heath writes, “attempt to let the reader follow the children of Roadville and Trackton from their home and community experiences into their classrooms and schools” (7). In other words, Heath wants to transport the reader to Roadville and Trackton so that they too can experience life within the community. In a sense, Heath becomes the reader's experienced guide, introducing them to local community members, describing scenes, and focusing in on details—all with an eye toward helping them understand what literacy learning looks like in these communities.

Through her near decade of research within the communities, Heath came to understand that “in Roadville and Trackton the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in which each community structured their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization” (11). In short, the literacy expectations (and ways of learning) were dependent on a social and economic context, something that quantitative methods may point toward, but will never be able to fully account for.

Realizing the value of ethnography, many literacy researchers have, like Heath, put their shoes on the ground. All across the globe, literacy researchers have stepped outside the library to understand literacy in the wild. By understanding the perspectives and experiences of others and directly observing literacy in action, researchers are able to see literacy in context. In other words, ethnography helps researchers understand the roles that literacy plays in the lives of individuals and communities.

It is within these ethnographic traditions that I write. And I feel their weight and responsibilities as I’ve carried this history with me. As a queer writer studying in my own backyard, I’ve come to realize that the ethnographic tradition offers a compelling framework for better understanding communities. But foundational ethnographic concepts like the field site, participant observation, and interviewing have to be reshaped.

If Malinowski went to the Trobriand Islands to study culture and Heath went to the Piedmont to study literacy, then I went to Elsewhere to study queer experience in the South. But this

isn't exactly accurate. I started at Elsewhere, but didn't stay. I fired off in a thousand directions, following queer experience and literacy wherever it led.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2014, I drove an hour and a half west on Interstate 40 to work on the second issue of *I Don't Do Boxes*, sitting in traffic, squinting into the sun, listening to the radio. When I wheeled into town, I would park my car on a side street and then walk a few blocks to Elsewhere's doorstep. I would walk through the doorway, shelves and shelves of toys and fabric and everything else towering over me, floor to ceiling. A lot of my fieldwork was done inside of the building as we worked on the magazine together, as we cooked and as we cleaned. I spent months apprenticing myself to the community, learning to make a magazine alongside the other editors.

It's easy to say that my field site, the place that I performed research, was bounded by these walls, that the research stopped when I walk out the front door at the end of the night, walked to my car, and drove east for another hour and half. But literacy learning doesn't happen in isolation. It wasn't just the literacies they were learning while working on the magazine that I was interested in. It was also how those literacies were connecting with other part of their lives. Staying within the four walls of Elsewhere, I would never be able to see those connections.

The parameters and limits of my fieldwork had to be more expansive than a traditional ethnographic field site. Because of ethnography's early alignment with the natural sciences, the place where ethnographers conducted their research was often considered singular, stable, geographically bounded, and agrarian. If you were an ethnographer, in the traditional sense, you could pull out a map from your desk, point to a place on the map with your finger and *that* was your field site. You could draw a circle around it with your pen and know where your field site stopped.

This definition of the field site as bounded and stable was so ingrained in Anthropology that it can be called orthodoxy, to borrow Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's (1997) phrasing. By orthodoxy, they mean that this was the accepted practice, the authorized way of thinking—one that is rarely questioned. It's just how things are. But we should always remember that there is nothing natural about it, nothing that can be taken for granted. There were (and are) deep fault lines in the field, fault lines that shake and disrupt its orthodoxy.

While having a single, bounded field site would make identifying the site much easier, activities such as literacy learning are much more complicated than that. Ethnographers have begun thinking of the field site not as a singular, bounded unit—something you can draw a circle around—but rather as multi-sited—something you follow. In other words, the field site is a network of sites, connected and interdependent. It's constantly evolving and shifting, changing its shape as time moves on. As soon as you think you might be able to hold it in your hands, it changes shape and moves. You have to go and follow wherever it leads.

Anthropologist George Marcus (1995), in fact, encourages others to conceptualize the field site as multi-sited. Ethnography, in his words, is designed to trace “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establish some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography” (105). *Follow* is therefore the watchword and Marcus famously encourages researchers to follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor, follow the plot, story or allegory, follow the life or biography, follow the conflict.

In practice, this means that the ethnographer needs to be nimble, always looking for connections and influences. It means not sitting still, always chasing the thing you're looking for no matter where it leads.

In my case this meant chasing literacy learning as it intersected the editorial team at Elsewhere. When I was working with Matt, the 17-year-old drag queen, it meant following his performance schedule and driving to drag shows in different parts of the state. It meant sitting with him for hours, talking about what his life was like in his high school. It meant chatting while we were drying dishes about how he was learning how to sew.

For Elijah, the gender-queer designer, it meant tracing their movement all the way out west to San Francisco. It meant being ambiently aware of their life through social media. It meant sitting and talking on Skype for hours and hours about taking testosterone and finding work in a crowded city and using the bathroom at the grocery store down the street instead of the gender-binary bathrooms at work.

So, it's difficult to say where my field site began and where it ended. But Elsewhere was always at the center, a hub through which everyone passed—a starting point. All of my participants came through Elsewhere at one point or another as they worked on *I Don't Do Boxes*. The trajectories of their literacy learning intersected with Elsewhere at some point during 2013 and 2014 and then they continued on, splitting in different directions. I followed.

There I was, week after week, standing in the first-floor bathroom at Elsewhere furiously writing notes into my phone. We'd be working on a part of the magazine, creating a music video, or eating dinner, and someone would say something or do something that caught my attention. I'd make a mental note and when my brain became too full, I'd slip into the bathroom to write everything down.

As we began working on the second issue of the magazine, I drove out the Elsewhere every week to help out. We'd do workshops to build our skill sets and open us to different ways of thinking and making. We'd have editorial meetings where we worked through the logistics of making a magazine. We'd talk over dinner every week, joined by artists in residence, staff, and other community members. And then we'd clean—broom, dust pan, towel, plates, sponge. Week after week after week.

I was listening though all of this. I was learning. I was watching. I was trying to understand.

At the end of the night, I'd walk through the doors of the museum, step onto the sidewalk, cross the street, and find where I had parked. I'd climb into my car, roll the windows down to let the muggy summer circulate, turn the radio off, and write down everything I remembered. Every detail. Every thought. Every interaction. Sometimes I'd sit there for 45 minutes.

It was an admittedly strange thing to do, this retreating to the bathroom or a quiet corner of the museum to write in-the-moment field notes. But I didn't want anyone to feel self-conscious, like they had to play the role of being researched and give me what they thought I was looking for. More importantly, I also didn't want to be distracting. We had work to do and our hands were always busy making the magazine.

This was made doubly strange because I came to Elsewhere not as a researcher, but as a collaborator. I had heard about the magazine in 2013 through a call for editors and I contacted Chris to see if I could be of any help. That spring, I began working on the first issue of the magazine, driving out to Elsewhere, helping out wherever possible and I began developing friendships. At that point I had no thought of studying magazine. Frankly, I just wanted to meet new people and make something together—something that mattered.

This was one of the main reasons that I was hesitant to talk to Chris about studying the making of the magazine: I was scared that flipping the switch from friend and collaborator to

researcher might make my motivation for working on the magazine in the first place appear suspect. I was scared I would be perceived as enterprising and insincere.

To help negotiate my already-established relationship with those on the editorial staff, I embraced what feminist ethnographer Sarah Pink calls *apprenticeship*. In short, apprenticeship doesn't principally rely on the collection of data about others. "Rather," Pink writes, "it involves the production of meaning in participation with them through a shared activity in a shared space" (271).

Whether it was cleaning the kitchen at Elsewhere or editing a section of the magazine, I came to understand more about those around me as we worked alongside each other. Instead of standing across the room and observing at a distance, instead of looking *at* and collecting data *about*, my hands were dirty like everyone else's. During all of this we were creating a magazine, of course. But we were also co-creating what Pink calls a negotiated version of reality.

Matt and I were sitting in an alleyway just outside the backdoor of the museum. It was a good place to get away from the constant bustle of the museum to talk or just enjoy the sun outside. You'd think the building would be quiet, that all of the pillows and clothes and stuffed animals would absorb all the sound. But there was constant noise—laughing, hammers, sewing machines, creaking floors. To get away and collect your thoughts, you sometimes had to go out back. There was a table and chairs, an herb garden, a clothes lines for drying laundry and dish towels, and relative quiet.

We had met at the museum a few hours before one of our editorial meeting so that we could talk about his life. I had worked alongside Matt on the magazine and I wanted to know more about his life and what working on the magazine meant to him. As we sat out back, Matt told me about his life as a seventeen-year-old queer kid in rural North Carolina and how he came to start hanging around Elsewhere and eventually start working on the magazine. He told me about his relationship with his parents, his day-to-day life at school, and his aspirations of becoming a drag queen.

I don't know what I was expecting, but Matt didn't really know how to talk about what he was doing with the magazine and what he was learning along the way. Any time I explicitly asked about the magazine, I would get a really pithy answer. They were thoughtful, but pithy. For Matt, being at Elsewhere was just a thing he did, a place he hung out, a group of people he felt comfortable being around. He had no reason to be reflective about it.

When he started talking about doing drag, though, I couldn't get him to stop. I barely asked half a question and it sent him on long stories about doing theater make-up, watching tutorials on YouTube, and searching for a drag mother. The more he told me about his drag aspirations, the more I followed his trajectory, the more questions I asked, the more curious I became. In many ways, I became his uninitiated student as he taught me his world of drag in rural North Carolina.

Good lord it was hot that day. The sun beat down on us as we talked in the alley. And it beat down on my phone, which I was using to record the interview. Listening back to it all in headphones a year later, you can hear other people's conversations in the background, the hum of activity around us filling in spaces underneath our words. You hear the conversation being thrown back and forth between Matt and I, each of us telling stories about our lives, both of us asking questions. And then mid-sentence, the recording stops. My phone had overheated and shut off.

The more time I spent at Elsewhere, the closer I became with a small group of editors, most of the regulars like Matt. I would hang out with some of them outside of editorial meetings and, if they were willing to talk, we'd get together for more structured conversation. I sometimes write about these activities as "talking with" or as "conversations," but I don't want this to obscure the fact that these were, indeed, interviews. And at the end of the day, I was a researcher.

On porches, in kitchens, on Skype, in coffee shops and the museum, I spent most of 2014 and 2015 interviewing anyone who would speak with me. I found early on that walking was one of the best venues for an interview because we weren't staring at each other from across the table. And it gave us something to do. We'd interact with whatever was around us, going into shops, saying hello to strangers. All of these were occasions for discovery, incitements of memories. Just like our perambulations, we'd often circle back around in conversation.

In practice, interviewing is intensely human. It's intimate. It's messy. And no matter how much you've studied and read and prepared, it's unwieldy. You never know what's going to happen. "Interviewing," Ann Oakley writes, "is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets" (31, 1981). It's true of every researcher, of course, but it sometimes feels more pronounced for feminist and queer researchers as well as researchers of color. Even when we're interviewing someone "like us" in our own backyards, the relationship we form with them as we sit or walk can never be a detached one.

The impulse is often for research to be a clean, scientific process in which the researcher is unbiased, simply asking questions and listening. In traditional social scientific interviews, the researcher mustn't answer questions from the interviewee or engage with them personally. For Oakley, though—and for me—personal engagement isn't a shortcoming of research. It's the condition upon which knowledge is created.

I couldn't, in good faith, fall into a traditional mode of interviewing, especially since many of the people I was working with were significantly younger than me and were often curious about my own life. When you're young and queer, you sometimes look to others who are older because they hold perspective on the present and a glimpse of the future. We often need to know how others have done it because our own families and, often the communities we're raised in, can't offer guidance—and least from personal experience. Even when we are loved and protected, and this is not always the case, we have to imagine the lives we want to live.

During interviews, the conversation would often shift toward my personal life, either through pointed questions from the person that I was interviewing or just by virtue of the conversation drifting in that direction. Throughout the majority of my fieldwork, I was either about to get married or recently married. My now-husband and I had decided to make our relationship recognized by the federal government. We drove up to Washington DC, saw the justice of the peace, signed some paperwork, and drove back to North Carolina to continue our life together in a state that, only two years earlier almost to the day, had voted to make same-sex marriage unconstitutional.

So questions about why I was getting married, how was I getting married, how I met my husband, what my parents thought of all of this—all of these were at the forefront of our interactions.

During this time, I was also having a fallout with my own family. The reluctant announcement of my impending marriage and the radio silence that followed put all of us on edge. Most of my family is southern, deeply evangelical, and politically conservative. All of the progress that we had made as a family in years prior—that they had agreed to meet my partner, that they had visited our home, that they had even perhaps grown to like him—all of this was put on hold for a season. They had reluctantly gone along with him being a significant part of my life, perhaps because they thought it might end one day. But marriage was different. There was something about marriage that was sacred to them. And permanent.

In short, my personal life was mirroring many of the struggles that the people I was spending time with and interviewing were facing. It wasn't just that I had been there when I was their age, that I had already gone through what they were going through and could lend them some perspective. It was that, in many ways, I was still there. As queer people, we needed to share these moments. At the same time, my own experiences were shaping the questions that I was asking and how I understood their answers.

Keeping my experiences to myself in the name of objectivity, not being vulnerable with others when I was asking them to be vulnerable with me—it felt unfair. While it could be said that I was too close to my subject or too close to those I walked with, I echo Ann Oakley's that our personal involvement is the very condition of knowledge:

[A feminist methodology of social science] requires... that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (56)

There's so much that I can't know and so much that I can't—and won't—write about. As much as ethnography opens up intimate knowledge about communities, there are places that I couldn't go, stories that I can't tell.

Part of this is because there's so much red tape around researching what the university calls "human subjects" in any kind of official capacity—and for good reason. When working with youth, and particularly those who are considered minors under the law, it's important to be

very careful with how research unfolds, to carefully put the right habits and protocols in place. Without these, participating in research can do real harm.

Matt, for example, was seventeen for the majority of the time we worked together. As a minor, he couldn't legally consent to the research. His parent would have to do this for him. The problem is that queer youth sometimes have a troubled relationship with their parents or guardians and talking with them about participating in research about queer experience could cause friction, emotional distress, and even violence. At the same time though, denying Matt the ability to participate in research would deny him and other queer youth the benefits of participating in research. In other words, if we know nothing about the experience of queer youth, we can't intervene.

To protect both of us, I was careful to only interact with him in public spaces and only when there were other people around. This meant that I didn't have access to many of the experiences that Matt was having outside of Elsewhere. I didn't have access to the dressing room as he interacted with other drag queens as well as other spaces that would have helped me understand his literacy learning more fully had I been able to be there. I couldn't, in fact, follow Matt's literacy learning wherever it led.

But even when I did know more about someone else's life, there are still things that I can't—and won't—write about. There are aspects of their lives that won't be spoken because to take them and make them public—not matter how anonymized or abstracted they're made—speaking them makes them not theirs. Sometimes it's just not time for the story to be told. It's too close, too personal, too intimate.

So the stories that I tell in the next three chapters are necessarily and unavoidably incomplete. In Chapter 3, I follow the making of the second issue of *I Don't Do Boxes* as we learn how to tell queer stories from the South. And then in Chapters 4 and 5, I follow two editors as their lives and literacy learning continue around and beyond the magazine. I follow

Matt, wherever possible, as he learns to do drag in his rural county. Then I follow Elijah, a gender-queer designer, as they move from North Carolina and make a life for themselves on the west coast.

CHAPTER 3:
WRITING ELSEWHERE

Eight people stand in the window display of an old thrift store. Where goods and wares were once displayed for passersby, there is now a stage that opens onto the sidewalk, inviting others to gather around and watch. Surrounded by old buildings, cars passing on main street in front of him, a shy teenager stands on the stage wearing a striped dress that cuts off below the knee. The dress looks worn, like it's lived other lives and draped other bodies. He looks out onto the sidewalk, toward the camera, his hands clasped behind him, almost akimbo. There are seven others standing on the stage with him—in over-sized ties, long dresses, miniskirts, hats, and high heels.

These are all Sylvia Gray's clothes. She accumulated them—along with piles of other stuff, including toys, fabric bolts, ovens, and more—through multiple business ventures with her husband Joe starting in 1939. After his death in 1955, with three children to raise on her own, she continued doing business, mostly reselling surplus goods. Her businesses ranged from army surplus supply to furniture sales to fabric sales and, finally, to a thrift store. Her collection grew for decades and decades into a single yet incoherent collection within the building, mostly unorganized, narrow pathways carved through piles of stuff.

After Sylvia's death in 1995, the building was boarded up and her collection remained largely untouched until years later when her grandson George visited. Spending time in the building, he discovered that, as a writer, he could use the space as what he called a *thinking playground*. He found that he could use all of the ovens, fabric, toys, clothes—everything

that Sylvia had hoarded over the years—to incite creativity and help him think things he would have never thought otherwise.

So George moved to the city and, with the help of his collaborator Stephanie, began excavating and organizing Sylvia’s collection of stuff into something that was manageable. He eventually turned the enterprise into a non-profit organization and opened the building to the public once again, this time as Elsewhere, a self-described “living museum.” No longer a thrift store, people from near and far were invited into the space to play with Sylvia’s collection, to try something new, to think new thoughts, just as George had done when he first encountered the space.

So it is that these eight youth found themselves wearing Sylvia Gray’s clothes in the middle of their southern city, in dresses and ties and high heels. They were trying something new. They were thinking new thoughts.

The idea for the photo shoot came up during a weekly Thursday night gathering at Elsewhere called QueerLab, a youth-led media program exploring queer experience in the South. During the spring and summer, people from the community would gather each week at Elsewhere. It was part hanging out, part play, part creation. And it culminated in a magazine called *I Don’t Do Boxes*, a media project for telling queer stories from the South. Someone had the idea to do an “androgynous fashion shoot” where everyone would use Sylvia’s clothing collection—there are rooms full of clothes on the second floor—as costumes and props. They would do a fashion shoot as a refashioning of fashion, a re-purposing of clothing into mechanisms for thinking about what it means to be queer and southern.

They would publish the photography series in the magazine, calling it Fashion Is An X, Y, or Z. There’s a photograph in the series of someone sitting atop a chair, wearing a long, flowing dress. Another photograph features a twenty-something wearing a cowboy hat, a black vest,

boots, and a large button-down shirt. Sitting in a windowsill, she holds a guitar in one hand and tips the front of her hat with the other, covering her eyes.

These photographs are making a point, for sure. They're doing a lot of things with and to anyone who sees them. They are, in many ways, trying to get you, the viewer, to think outside the box about gender and fashion. They're trying to get you to think thoughts that can't be confined by traditional ways of thinking about gender. There are third ways of being and going through the world, ways that are much more in flux and experimental, ways of doing gender that can't be confined to the boxes that often define us: male or female.

At the same time, though, the work of these photographs isn't confined to viewers. They do work in the lives of the creators too. There's something about trying on Sylvia's clothes, playing with gender and performance, going this way and that. There's something about standing on a stage on main street in your town, creating something with your community, and releasing it into the world for others to see and experience. There too is an intimate inflection of experience. There too is a way to make room for yourself.

A few months before the photo shoot, on a Monday in February 2013 to be more exact, the weekly newsletter from my local GLBT Center showed up in my inbox like it has for the last four years. This time, there was an announcement at the top of the email:

I Don't Do Boxes is now seeking writers, bloggers, journalists, people, artists, makers, editors, storytellers to launch our first issue, exploring southern experience and collecting stories from a queer perspective.

It's difficult to explain exactly what caught my interest. It may have been the long list in the middle of the sentence: writers, people, editors, storytellers. I was all of those things (and more). It also may have been that I too had stories to tell, that I too was southern and queer and had things to say. It was probably all of those things (and more).

I had been living in Raleigh, North Carolina for a year and a half and, quite frankly, I felt a bit lost. I didn't feel like I was part of any community and, probably worse, I didn't know what community I was even looking for. I had found pockets of artists and academics, writers and designers. I had found "good gays" who seemed to live boring lives modeled after the straight people around them, and "bad gays" who only wanted sex and fun and spent their nights dancing and drinking and scrolling through Grindr. I'm being horribly reductive, of course, but it still remains: I didn't know what kind of gay I was—or if I was gay at all. Desire is an unwieldy thing. And labels can be sticky.

I didn't know where I belonged, but I knew that I wanted to be somewhere, with people like me: writers, southerners, storytellers—queers. So I responded to the call for editors. I wrote to the email address provided in the call, saying that I was a writer and editor living in Raleigh and that I was curious to know more about the project. I wanted to be involved somehow. I wanted to help make this magazine come to life and help it see the light of day. "This is something I wish I had when I was younger—I know what it's like to grow up queer in the south," I wrote.

The next day, Chris Kennedy, the lead editor from the magazine, wrote me back: *It'd be great to have a foreign correspondent in the east collecting stories to contribute. And we're looking for editorial board leaders to help guide one of four departments; (1) news and politics, (2) style, sports + popular culture, (3) streetside under-cover investigations—interviews, in the school, up close and personal, (4) health + tech(nique) (survival guide, advice, relationships).*

Chris and I began emailing back and forth, eventually agreeing to meet up on Skype at the end of the week so that he could tell me about the magazine and how I might help out. Chris's usual salutation read "see you on the internet," but that quickly turned into "see you elsewhere" and within a few weeks, we were meeting at a coffee shop in downtown Greensboro.

Later that day, Chris gave me a tour of Elsewhere, just a few blocks from the coffee shop. I could tell that Chris had given this tour many times over the years to many visitors. The tour was a mixture of histories. That is, it was a mixture of histories that had already happened and histories in the making. Chris saw the space as being full of possibilities, seeing the potential and making something new.

Chris showed me the remnants of projects past and how others had come back through and added their own twist to the work. There were spaces that had been carved out within the museum—a room full of fabric piled up in the middle of the room that you could nearly dive into, a tiny "alone room" with a wooden swing suspended from the ceiling in front of a window. Three floors of creaky wood, piles of clothes, stuffed animals, books, toys, art, music, and power tools.

But it was the way that people interacted with the space and the way that a community formed within it that turned the building—and all of Sylvia's stuff—into a *living museum*. As we walked through the building and encountered different artifacts, Chris would insert small ideas into my head: Think about how you could use some of this stuff in a project. As if he were thinking out loud, he pointed to the old-school confession booth, presumably taken directly from a Catholic church, complete with a partition and privacy curtains: *You could record interviews in there, like think of crazy questions and get people to tell their stories while they sit in the booth and talk*. Chris loved the idea of making up elaborate scenarios and then playing and experimenting within the constraints of the artifice.

I began driving back and forth from my home in Raleigh to Greensboro whenever possible for editorial meetings. There were six of us total—graphic designers, educators, artists, writers. We gathered around tables in a room on the second floor to talk about the direction of the magazine, what we wanted to include, how we could aggregate stories, and how we could get the word out. Each week, we also had dinner with everyone else in the building. All of the editors and artists-in-residence, all of the interns, and anyone from the community who wanted to join filled their plates with home-cooked food and we sat around long tables near the kitchen. We talked and ate and joked.

It looks chaotic from the outside. But there's a method for just about everything that happens in the museum. There are magnets on one of the refrigerators in the kitchen, each a task that needed to be completed after dinner—sweep, wash dishes, wipe down the tables. There was also the coveted role of kitchen DJ who got to choose which songs were played while everyone got the kitchen back in shape. The DJ sat next to the speakers in the corner of the kitchen near the industrial sinks and kept everyone moving. Everyone would take a task, do it, and move the corresponding magnet over to the completed section when it was finished. I swept a lot of floors, washed a lot of dishes, and wiped down a lot of tables that season.

Over the course of the spring and early summer, we published the first issue of *I Don't Do Boxes*. The issue was titled *School's Out* and featured stories and art that spoke to queer experience in school. *Fashion Is An X, Y, or Z* was printed alongside recommendations for the best queer hip-hop, advice on safe binding techniques, an alt comic about bullying, an interview with a gay public school teacher, and much more. All of these stories were created, aggregated, and amplified by the editorial team at Elsewhere and in the process of doing so, their experiences were inflected.

As one of the few writers on the editorial team, I was asked to write a Letter from the Editors that would be printed in the magazine. I messaged all of the editors and asked them, *What does being queer mean to you?* Soon, everyone messaged me back—everything from a few

words to a few sentences—and I took their responses, weaving them into a letter that welcomed readers to our pages and articulated our editorial vision for the magazine.

It begins, *Dear Readers*:

Being queer means composing our own lives in language, in images, in sounds. It means thinking critically and being open to experiences outside the norm, a radical way of being that is shared with small pockets of people. Queerness is an interface for ongoing curiosity, a way of living artfully with what you've got. It means asking new kinds of questions, and you don't need a big city, a rainbow flag, or currency to do that.

This chapter takes this idea of composing our own lives in language, being open to new experiences, and living artfully with what you've got and tells the story of how a community learns to tell queer stories from the South. It documents the making of the magazine's second issue, titled *Out Loud*, and invites you into the weekly meetings where the community gathered to play within the museum. It follows artists and writers whose stories were aggregated from afar and published in the magazine. It describes the sometimes imperfect and splintered process of making editorial decisions as a community and how the queer work of a community literacy project is fraught with desire and discontent.

At the beginning of our first editorial meeting, Chris gathered everyone in the middle of the room. We left our seats around pushed-together tables and stood hip-to-hip in a circle, shifting our weight from one leg to the other when we felt our feet growing tired. Chris brought over a stack of mainstream gay magazines and laid them on the ground in the middle of the circle. The covers of *Out Magazine*, *The Advocate*, and their like were spread out on the floor and the glossy, chiseled faces of men looked up at us. The magazines were laid out

in a grid and as we scanned the rows and columns, Chris asked us what we noticed about the covers.

People began calling out what they were seeing. *Faces are the most prominent visual. There are poppy headlines in bright colors framing their faces—The rising stars that should be on your radar, The 30 sexiest movies, ever!* We looked at the magazine covers more closely. *These were successful and conventionally attractive men, mostly actors and musicians. Look at all those white guys. Sex clearly sells.* We decided that these magazines looked like any other magazine you'd find in the checkout line at the grocery store—Cosmopolitan, GQ, Maxim. But despite their likeness to other magazines, these were supposedly made for a specific group of people: gay men. *Were they really any different from other magazines though? Did they really represent our experience in the world? Did we see ourselves in these magazines?* The answer was emphatically no, these magazines were not for us.

When Chris Kennedy talks about starting the magazine, this is exactly what he talks about: wanting to build something with others, something that actually spoke to our experience being queer in the South. After moving to the South a few years earlier, Chris found it difficult to find collaborators, other queers who wanted to do creative things. Chris's felt sense of isolation wasn't because there weren't other queer people around though. There were plenty. It was that, as Chris describes it, there just weren't a lot of comfortable spaces for people to come together and work on something. The community around him felt somewhat fragmented—there was the university crowd, the queer people of color group, the older gay community, the anarchist queer lady scene—and it was difficult to gather people from all of these different pockets in one place for a common purpose. There just weren't a lot of “vernacular, comfortable space for people to just hang out,” is how he phrased it.

So Chris started a local chapter of *The Queer Explorers Club*, as he affectionately called it, a group that he started in Brooklyn a few years prior. Just like when he was showing me

around the museum for the first time, you can see his playfulness with artifice in this project. He would gather queer artists together in his studio to work on projects together, calling it an explorers club. While projects like this had worked in other places, Chris quickly learned that things tended to move more slowly in the South. Gathering different people together, starting a project, doing it, finalizing it—everything moved at a much slower pace than he was used to and it made it difficult to get anything done.

Lots of things were happening in the community, though, and the importance of bringing queer people together became more and more evident to Chris. The effects of Amendment 1 had begun surfacing, with all of the discussion and debate and ultimate denial of marriage equality for same-sex couples. There were more local events too, like when an intern at Elsewhere was assaulted outside of a local bar near the university because he was holding hands with a guy he was out with. Chris knew that he needed to respond, that he needed to do something that asserted a different point of view or at least something that helped other queer folk navigate the city. His response was to create a collaborative report card that would rate different places in town. He wanted to map the city from a queer perspective, noting spaces of comfort and discomfort, safety and danger.

But like so many projects before and after, *The Queer Explorers Club* faded away from lack of movement and the difficulty of wrangling so many people and ideas. Talking about projects like this one, Chris observes: “It’s weird how these things come and die.”

While all of this was happening, Chris was a graduate student at one of the local universities and he was also working as the Education Curator at Elsewhere. This meant that he was responsible for all things educational at the museum, using his skills and background as a teaching artist to work with the community. The museum had started the coLAB project in 2011. A combination of “collaboration” and “laboratory,” co-lab was a framework for local youth to join media investigations on different topics. The “-lab” would be the common

denominator in terms of naming, and each project would append their topic to the beginning: CityLab, SoundLab—and QueerLab.

Chris imagined a way to bring people in the community together—and particularly youth—to ask questions about what it’s like to be queer in the South. In Chris’s mind, queer youth didn’t need more ice breakers or coming out stories or anything like that. There’s nothing inherently wrong with each of these. It’s just that plenty of these types of resources already exist in the world. What we all needed was to build something for ourselves, to tell our own stories, to tell queer stories from the South, whatever those turned out to be. You can’t do any of that, however, without some kind of tangible artifact and accountability to a community. For Chris, the answer was a magazine and an editorial staff—artifact and accountability.

In many ways, QueerLab and *I Don’t Do Boxes* are part of a larger trend in the United States to provide youth access to technology as well as media production skills. These media labs, as they’re often called, provide spaces and opportunities that intentionally foster digital literacies which may be lacking or missing in local communities and formal educational spaces. Much of this work is being done through non-profit organizations and museums. For example, Detroit Future Youth focuses on social justice education and multimedia creation, using digital media to “transform ourselves and our communities.” Similarly, the Hirshorne Museum in Washington DC engages local youth through ArtLab+, an open space where local youth are encouraged to develop media projects, share production skills, and even earn technical certifications.

There are countless examples of media labs such as these all over the United States, working in a variety of communities, meeting a variety of local needs. But perhaps the one most like QueerLab and *I Don’t Do Boxes* is The Center for Urban Pedagogy in New York. Through inquiry-led pedagogy, students work with teaching artists to investigate some aspect of how their city works. They begin by asking critical questions about their surrounding, questions like: why does city transit cost what it does and who decides? Students investigate the

question by conducting research, interviewing people, and making a media artifact: a video, a poster, a zine. It's a way of asking and answering questions by creating something tangible.

What makes *I Don't Do Boxes* distinctive from all of these media labs, however, is its focus on queerness. *I Don't Do Boxes* is a community-based, youth-led participatory media project focused on producing, aggregating, and distributing *queer* stories from the South. And the queer part of that equation is important. Our question was simple: what's it like to queer in the South? Our media artifact was the magazine.

So as we stood hip-to-hip at our first editorial meeting, we began to wonder: What kind of magazine did we want to make? Who was the magazine for? What did we want the magazine to do? Was it even a magazine we were creating? How could we make something that aligned with our experience in the world as queer southerners? And how could we do it in a way that people actually wanted to read it?

We broke the circle and went back to our seats in the middle of the room. But I couldn't help but think about the glossy, chiseled men still laying on the floor and what they might be thinking about us, a bunch of queer kids standing in the middle of an old thrift store, thinking we could make a magazine of our own.

"I guess we can start with some warm-ups, some little vocal warm-ups." Artist and musician Quilla (aka Anna Luisa Daigneault) was sitting on the floor with pillows beneath her. She was smiling, welcoming everyone to the QueerLab workshop.

We were a few weeks into making the magazine and we had been experimenting with different ways of using sound. There was a workshop on how to start a band, led by two musicians, one of which organized a queer camp for youth that focused on music. We talked mostly about song writing and learning to play music. They dragged a guitar, a keyboard, an electric bass, and drums into the museum for everyone to play around with. Most of us were terrible at making music, but we played the instruments anyway, every now and then chancing upon a rhythm and melody that clicked. We held onto those phrases as long as we could.

Two weeks later, I teamed up with a guy named Cyrus to lead a session on interviewing and audio editing. Cyrus worked at Elsewhere and happened to have a lot of experience with interviewing. He taught us how to ask good questions and keep the conversation moving. We talked about how to capture good quality sound, how to avoid noisy spaces and save the interview in an appropriate file type. We spent a good part of the evening with audio recorders in our hands interviewing each other about our experiences being queer in the South. We then gathered back around the table and dropped the files into editing software, just to see what audio waves look like on a screen and learn how to cut and splice a conversation together in a way that was interesting to listen to.

For the vocal improv workshop, we had pushed all of the tables to the edge of the room, gathered pillows and cushions from around the museum, and placed them in a circle in the center of the room. We sat knee to knee and an audio recorder sat in the middle of the circle, capturing all of the sounds, all of the noise. This week, we would use something that Sylvia Gray had not necessarily collected—our voices. We would explore the sounds we can make with just our voices and how those sounds can join with, respond to, or diverge from others' voices in playful ways.

Around the circle, we introduced ourselves, one by one. This had become a ritual of sorts, each of us saying our name, a little bit about ourselves, and our preferred pronouns. Introducing ourselves each week was important because so many people came and went through the workshops. There was a core group who came each week, maybe eight to ten, but the rest were transient, coming and going through the museum. The community that formed during these workshops was somewhat ephemeral, existing for a few hours and then disappearing. So these introduction, they were a way of making yourself known to others, especially if you were new.

“To warm up our voices a bit, let’s do some big Ah,” Quilla said, inviting us to join her. She made a big Ah sound and everyone around the circle echoed her, some of our voices a little unsure, others perfectly confident. “Alright. Let’s do Oh.” Again, Quilla took the lead and we all followed her with our voices. Everyone was a little nervous, but certainly eager and our voices rose and fell slightly until we matched each other. We were all glancing around the circle at each other, shifting our weight on the old wooden floor beneath our pillows.

“There’s no real format, there’s no real right or wrong. Everything is just what happens, pretty much. The thing that’s great about vocal improv is that you really can just let the sounds come out of you that want to come out. Whether it’s Gadsflkjadsfasc.” Quilla made this unidentifiable noise with her voice out of nowhere. The absurdity of it made us laugh. “You can do that,” she told us as the laughter died down, “if there’s no this is the right way of singing, the wrong way of singing, opera versus experimental. There’s none of that. It’s just human sounds.”

Every now and then someone new would walk through the door, a little disoriented, sometimes seeing someone they knew. Eventually they’d pull up a pillow to join the circle. The room wasn’t focused solely on Quilla per se and, as she spoke. She was constantly interrupted. At one point, a new guy from one of the local high schools walked into the room and looks around for the guy that he knew. He had heard about QueerLab from someone who

regularly attended the meetings and who worked as an editor on the magazine. They happened to be in drama and chorus together at their school. We hear bits and pieces of this story as the workshop moves on. Quilla was graceful, even welcoming of the distractions, making each person feel at home as they walk in and sit down. We all introduced ourselves again and, by the end of it, there were almost twenty people.

“So Linguistics 101. I’m just going to run through the English language sounds that we usually use. The first ones are the bi-labials... So, everyone, let’s hear a puh.” All around the circle, everyone made the sound: puh, puh, puh, puh, puh. “As you can see,” Quilla continued, “a puh is produced by a puff of air and the closure of the two lips, so that’s why it’s called the bi-labial.” Again we tried puffing air, producing the sound, this time acutely aware of the position of our lips.

“If you noticed,” Quilla says, “there’s no voicing happening in your vocal track. It’s just silent. There’s just air.” And sure enough, as we made the sound again there wasn’t any vibration on the vocal chords. We held our hands in front of our faces and felt the air hitting our palms. “If you add voice to it, it becomes buh,” Quilla said just before releasing the sound from her throat. This time, our vocal chords start to rattle as the sound traveled from our lips down toward our throats.

We started making our way from the front of the mouth to the back of the mouth, stopping and making sounds at various places. From bilabials to labial dentals to interdental, voiced and unvoiced, we moved through various sounds, pushing air from our lungs up through our throats and out of our lips. As we stopped at various places, Quilla reminded us of the physicality of speech. At one point she said, “It’s just to kind of acquaint yourself physically with the sounds that you’re doing all the time, but not necessarily thinking about what part of the body is producing them.” These noises we make every day are rooted in our bodies. “You don’t necessarily stop to think about how awesome it is that we make all those sounds all day long, but that’s what we do” she said. “We are sound machines.”

You would think it would be boring, this moving through linguistics, sound by sound. But between each movement of the mouth, there was laughter as everyone plays with the sound that we're learning. There was a method to it and a loose structure, but our talking was free ranging, going this way and that way as different people make connections to what we were talking about. There was a whole conversation that happens in the middle of the workshop about different people's experience learning second languages. Someone said they feel like a little kid when they speak French. Someone else told us that when he speaks Japanese, his voice gets deeper. There was chatter and joking and laughter as people demonstrate how they spoke in foreign languages. At one point, there was even discussion of animal languages, how prairie dogs and dolphins actually have complex languages that we may understand one day.

After making our way through all of the linguistic sounds, we began to use them in what Quilla called vocal jams. She meant this in the jazz and blues sense of the word, as in let's get together and jam. No sheet music. No memorization. Just get together to improvise with other musicians and see where the music takes you.

"We're going to go around the circle and I'm going to pass you a sound and then you're just going to sort of improvisingly change it and pass it on to the next person." Quilla began repeatedly making a strange noise with her voice and then turned her head to look at the person to her left. That person began approximating the sound with her own voice and when the sounds matched, Quilla dropped out. The new person began to change the sound, turning to the person next to her and, once transmitted properly, dropped out. It was slow and a little uncomfortable at first, but soon the pace picks up. The sound morphed and shifted as it made its way from person to person, traveling around the circle until came back to Quilla. It was a brand new sound when it arrived, completely different from what we had started with.

We continued with jams like this, improvising and laughing, growing more and more comfortable and confident with our voices. All of this culminated in a final vocal jam in which we would put everything we had just learned to use. We decided we would make an improvised theme song for the magazine. We figured we could edit whatever we came up with into something we could include in the magazine.

We split up into five groups and stood to our feet. We were still loosely in a circle, but we had bunched up as smaller groups, all facing inward toward the other groups. Quilla suggested that some groups would be the bass and rhythm section. Others would be focus on melody and back up singing. There was some negotiation based on our previous jams about which groups were better at rhythm and which ones were better at melody.

“You guys want to start us off?” Quilla asked, nodding at the group across the circle from her. There was a bit of silence as we all looked at each other. One of the rhythm groups started making a percussive sounds with their mouths: *ch ch ch ch ch ch*.

With that rhythm established, people started tapping their feet on the down beat. Then someone across the circle started saying *no* on the 1 count and *boxes* on the 2 count. Her group mates joined her. Another group started humming a rhythm in the background. Slowly, the song started to evolve as the different groups played off each other. Intuitively, the song started off relatively quiet and contained then rose in volume and confidence, eventually falling back to quiet as it faded toward its end.

If you listen back to the tape of this jam, there’s a lot of giggling. It is straight up silly at times, nonsensical and downright playful. It moves in these strange and unexpected directions, constantly shifting as we played off of each other.

From starting a band to learning how to podcast to vocal improvisation, what’s really striking about QueerLab is the skillsharing that happens. Telling queer stories from the South is as

much about learning skills as it is about having a story to tell. Being in a band means knowing how to play an instrument and set up sound equipment. Making a podcast means being able to use audio editing software and knowing how to use a microphone. If you don't know how to do these things, the stories—no matter how compelling they are—can't be told.

All of this is education, for sure. But it's a somewhat informal education, knowledge and skills passed from one queer to another, learned in social settings. So when Quilla joked with everyone in the room that we were going to learn linguistics 101, she wasn't actually joking. We were really learning linguistics. But we weren't learning linguistics for the sake of learning linguistics. We were learning linguistics for the sake of play. We were learning for the sake of possibility.

Whether we knew how to identify the difference between bilabial sounds or inter-dental sounds in the abstract wasn't really the point. Knowing all of the different noises and sounds that we can produce: that's what really mattered. Because knowing all of the possibilities means having a slew of sounds at your disposal. Gather other people in the room, figure out how different sounds can fit together, and you've just created something. Even if it's a completely silly creation with strange noises and off-brand laughter, you've still created something. *We* had just created something. And that one act of creation, silly and strange as it may sound at first, can resonate and make room.

From April through May, we met every other week for editorial meetings to make *I Don't Do Boxes* come to life. In a little more than three months, we had to move from concept to magazine, creating our own content, curating submissions from around the country, laying out the magazine, and going to print. These editorial meetings gave us a chance to make important decisions as a group about the direction of the magazine. From the size of the magazine to the materials used in production and our plan for distribution, there were a lot of decisions to be made: Would it be small and pocket size or the size of a traditional magazine? Did we want a glossy cover? What kind of binding could we have? How many copies could we afford? Could we get copies of the magazines placed in public school libraries?

But just as important, editorial meetings gave us dedicated time and space to actually *make* the magazine. The call for submissions was posted on the internet and we had been sending it to everyone we knew, hoping that someone would reply and send their work in. With the previous year's success, we had gained some credibility and traction. Word was catching on and more and more people were interested in contributing. When the submissions started rolling in a few weeks later, there were piles of submissions, more than we could have imagined: art, songs, poems, spoken word, short stories, photographs—everything.

One of our first tasks as an editorial team was to sift through the piles of submissions and choose what we could include in the magazine. We would give roughly equal space to each type of submissions and also include an online mix tape with the audio submissions. After doing some calculations, we estimated that there were almost 50 pages to work with. Page real estate was finite, though, and with well over 50 submissions in hand, we had to decide which submissions would be published in the magazine and which ones would be published online instead.

All of the editors, usually around ten of us, were gathered around a group of smaller tables that had been pushed together in the shape of a large square. The editorial team was pretty diverse group in terms of experience, age, gender, and race. The one thing that made the

group cohere, even if loosely, was that we all identified as queer in some fashions—or were at least curious about what it meant to be queer. That one aspect of our identities—being queer—wasn't enough for the community to stabilize in any way though. Our queerness was shot through with so many other aspects of our identities and that spun each of us off in so many different directions.

The thing about community—and this was something that Chris knew well from organizing other projects like the Queer Explorers Club—is that it's transient at best. It's ephemeral. Here one day. Gone the next. People came off and on of the editorial team throughout the season, starting at the beginning and then dropping off after one or two meetings. Others joined midway through the season and stayed on to the end. There was also a small group of people who were at almost every meeting, week after week. So as Chris imagined, the community needed something to *do* together.

We decided that the best way to organize ourselves was by type of submission: writing, music, and art. Chris had sent out an email earlier to all of us with a link to the every submission so that we could start wrapping our heads around what we had received, and now had all of the submissions printed out for us. Those who had experience with a certain type of submission, or just had an affinity for it, naturally gravitated toward that group.

I joined two other guys, both in high school, who also had an interest in writing. We decided to climb up into a part of the museum just above the large room where we had been meeting. There were plenty of cushions and pillows up there and plenty of space to spread all of the submissions out and organize them. The selection criteria weren't formalized ahead of time, so we had to come up with criteria for ourselves, a way of sorting the entries. If we gave the submission a 1, it meant that we should definitely publish it in the printed magazine. Giving the submission a 2 meant we should publish it in the magazine if we had room. A 3 meant we should publish it online.

We read through all the poetry, short stories, and essays, talking about each one of them and assigning them a number: 1, 2, 3. Some of the submissions were easy to decide on. They stood out so much that we all knew we had to publish them. There were some submissions that resonated with us and we'd read passages out loud—not to critique, but because we were in awe. We wanted to hear the language out loud and enjoy it. There were others that weren't as clear. With those, we would read a few lines out loud, talk through what we loved about it, whether the subject was a good fit for the magazine, and how it compared to others we had looked at.

We sat perched in the loft up above the main room for over an hour. Soon, with some debate, we had three piles of words, all numbered and placed in order of priority. We'd slot in each submission in order until we ran out of space. The rest would be published online.

With our decisions made, we climbed down and hung our recommendations on a wall in the main room. Someone had strung a few lines of string on the wall, one on top of the other so that we could see the recommendations from each group, numbered and side by side. There would be some additional choices to be made, pieces to switch out, text to be cut once everything was put in lay out. But we had taken a first pass at the magazine's content.

One of these, called *Same Love*, is a spoken word poem by Xander Long, a teenager from Vermont. The title is, of course, borrowed from Macklemore, Ryan Lewis, and Mary Lambert's 2012 song by the same name. The song was played all over the radio that year to the surprise of many, given that its message came out of the mouth of hip hop star. Its anthem—"I can't change, even if I tried, even if I wanted to"—crystallizes the modern gay rights movement into a single singable phrase that traveled far and wide over the airwaves, celebrating and normalizing same-sex marriage. It even won an MTV Music Award for Best Video with a Message.

But Xander finds this message troubling. His poem opens with these lines:

I am standing in the checkout line
with a bag of groceries for a romantic dinner
when the cashier,
noticing either the rainbow pin on my bag
or the thin silver ring in my nose
tells me:
“You know, I totally support the gays.
I think all love is the same.”

I want to ask her
if any of her ex-boyfriends
were dragged through the streets by their collars
and given black eyes and broken teeth
because they dared to kiss her.

Instead, I bite my tongue and keep quiet
because everybody knows that the gay rights movement
needs the support of straight, white, cisgender, journalism majors
swinging their star-spangled hips and their Bible belts
to the tune of Being Savior
who then turn their backs
whenever we decide to use the word “queer.”

What seems like a voice of support at first blush, much like hearing Macklemore’s song on the radio, turns out to be the disingenuous. Biting his tongue in the narrative moment of the grocery store check-out line, Xander is caught between knowing that the gay rights movement both needs the support of allies, but that these allies can never really know what queer experience is like.

In this lyrical, full-throated, thoroughgoing way, Xander follows this line of thinking, drawing a line between queer love and straight love. For Xander, queer love is forged in experience of violence and rejection, and also intense love. So, while this girl in the grocery store and Macklemore and all these allies can say that all love is the same and gain progressive cache, it elides the very real differences:

So our love? Is not the same.
My love is boys with skinny wrists
having their chests filled with the word faggot
who then still have the room to hide their boyfriend's heart
in their throats.

My love is girls who, after holding their breath
because they were told they were going to Hell,
were still able to find God in their lover's veins.
My love is kids with coyote genders so wild west they have to run rivers through their
bloodstreams
just to see the sun rise.

There's something different about queer love, and Xander seems to attribute this to queer embodiment, the experience of living in a queer body and experiencing violence and rejection. This impulse to normalize queer love by saying that it's the same as straight love—that love is love, that our love is the same as your love—only trivializes queer love and reduces it to something palatable for others. It ignores a queer reality.

If you moved down the clothesline of submissions, over to the right and down a bit, you'd see a short comic. Created by Lydia Henderson, the piece features a queer protagonist moving through life as a loner, who takes refuge in music. The panels are drawn as close ups of various parts of the character's body—her face, her torso. She's lying on a bed with her eyes closed and music notes are subtly laying on top of her, surrounding her. It's colored in these slightly watered-down tones, in a restricted palette that suggests somewhat faded memories and the past. The text reads:

When you can't escape your gloom
When you feel trapped inside...
The darkest person of your mind
Music can spark a tiny flame.
The shadows receded with a reverberating echo.
You are not alone.

This is adolescent Lydia, a character that's largely based on the comic artist's own experiences feeling uncomfortable in her own body when she was growing up. While the comics are slightly altered to fit the narrative that she's developing, her comics trace a period of time when, like a lot of other kids, she felt out of place. The way she tells it is that she remembers being flat-chested one day and then over night, she was full-chested. Just like that. She also got really tall and started feeling like a giant around other kids. On top of all that, she was dealing with "the whole queer thing," as she calls it.

Lydia grew up in a Christian household in east Tennessee. She even went to Christian summer camps for years. Even now, she says she "loved and adored" these camps. But she describes coming home from these trips feeling a weight of guilt, thinking that she had to keep being the person that she was *supposed* to be, not the person she felt was actually was. Lydia felt sick about it, not being able to live up to the expectations about her, feeling like she was pretending to be someone she wasn't.

Lydia describes herself as an internet kid, so while she didn't always find commonality in her immediate social surroundings, she was able to connect with others online who were more like her. One friend that she talked to online started calling herself bisexual. And Lydia started doing the same. But for her, this label was more of a stepping stone, as she describes it. She would eventually call herself a lesbian (which she still does) and then start using the word queer because of how inclusive it was.

When she finally came out to her parents at 17, she didn't mean to. It was a complete accident, the result of a stray book falling out of her backpack. She had borrowed a compilation of lesbian love stories from a friend and purposefully replaced the original book jacket with something more appropriate. When the book fell out of her bag with the book jacket off of it, the whole queer thing came out in the open. She was split between growing up in a conservative, Christian family and embracing a queer identity—all within a body that was changing and different from almost everyone around her.

As Lydia told me, drawing these comics are a way for her to preserve and remember who that girl was. At the same time, she hopes that the character transcends herself and, even if the reader's experiences aren't exactly the same as hers, that they'll identify with the character in some form or fashion.

Creating a comic is very labor-intensive. It's really the job of four people. This is how the major comic book publishers—DC, Marvel—do it, splitting the work between multiple people who focus on writing, inking, outlining. But Lydia does all of this herself. Working at a large, big-box craft store to support herself, it takes her months to create even a short comic. She barely has time to work on her own projects.

A lot of her work simply disappears on the internet. Sometimes, it gets little chatter on Tumblr, like the time one of her autobiographical comics starting getting attention. It racked up around 100 notes on Tumblr with people re-posting the comics and liking it. But most of her hard work —the months of labor, all of the writing, inking, scanning, resizing—simply goes unrecognized and stays in a black hole someone on the internet. This is why she tells me that creating things on the internet can be really unsatisfying.

This was the case for a lot of people whose work was published in the magazine, that being published by someone else—not just self publishing online—legitimizes their labor and their craft. It solidifies them as a creator. When I say that the work of the magazine, the things that magazine does in the world, is more than the work that it does for readers, this is partly what I mean: the magazine legitimizes the work of queer writers and artists. It gives them a sense that their work is *in* the world as a physical object, that it has an audience and hasn't been lost.

After months on working on the magazine, we were almost ready to go to print. Submissions had been chosen, pages had been laid out, music had been collected, the cover had been designed. Everything was falling in place. But just when the dust had started to settle on production, a dust storm all but knocked us over.

In our final editorial meeting, we were reviewing the final design proofs. The images were shining up on the wall after Chris plugged his computer up to the projector and we sat around the table taking in what we were seeing, talking about what we loved and what we wanted to change before everything was finalized. In many ways, we had come back to where we had started. We were, once again, staring at the cover of a magazine, asking ourselves if it was really any different from any other magazine, if what we were about to publish really captured our experience in the world, if we saw ourselves in the thing we had created. Except this time, it was *our* magazine we were talking about.

Chris had the cover image pulled up on the big screen. It was a painting of a woman, framed from the shoulders up sitting on a couch. She has short, dark hair and she wears a button-down plaid shirt. There are actually two of her faces in the frame though, slightly off from the other, a little blurry, as if it were a photograph that had been double exposed. She looks over to the right off into the mid-distance, out of frame. It's a little disorienting.

This is where it gets messy. After a few minutes of discussion, one of the editors started to question why we had chosen this image. She was a woman of color, a queer African American woman, and she expressed to the group that she just didn't see herself in the cover image. She wanted to know why that image had been chosen over any of the other ones that were submitted. She wanted to know why, if we were trying to make a magazine that was true to *all* of our experiences, had we put a stereotypical skinny white lesbian on the cover. Weren't we just doing the same thing as all the other magazines we had critiqued?

It wasn't only that she didn't see *herself* in the image though. She was also afraid that other queer people of color wouldn't pick up the magazine if they saw that cover. She was afraid that, if we left the cover as it was, that we'd be turning whole groups of people off, turning them away before they even picked it up. Why in the world had we done this?

The tone of the room was confrontational. Never before had this happened around that table. At no other time on the editorial process had there been conflict like this. We had spent months making decisions together, talking, eating, playing. And suddenly, there was tension and desire and disappointment, and even blame, all converging on a single image.

We had chosen the cover image a few weeks earlier as an editorial team. We looked through all of the images that were submitted and tried to find one that could work as a cover image. The one we chose—the one of the double-exposed woman—was the most compelling one of the bunch, at least in terms of execution and technique. It was vivid and striking.

We had made the decision as an editorial team though. It wasn't flippant or a single person making a decision for everyone else. It was a group decision and everyone was, in theory, able to contribute to. The problem is that the “we” I keep talking about here wasn't as cohesive as I've made it out to be. In some shape or form, we all called ourselves queer. But we had to face the fact that there were other aspects of our identities that mattered just as much as our queerness—our background, our race, our education, how much money our families made, where we lived.

On top of all that, the community was transitory, and getting everyone in a room together each week was next to impossible. Outside of a very small handful of people, most everyone came and went through editorial meetings and QueerLab sporadically, showing up one week and then disappearing for weeks on end. Despite the best of intentions, life happens—school gets busy, transportation is spotty, there are things to do.

If everyone had just been there when the decision was made, people around the table kept saying, this wouldn't have happened. But, of course, we all should have known. We had all stood in a circle around those chiseled men and we had decided that we didn't want to make a magazine like theirs. We wanted to make a magazine that *all* of us would feel comfortable picking up.

In that last editorial meeting, we realized that we were implicated in the very destructive behaviors that we had called out in mainstream gay and lesbian culture. We too had erased others by virtue of their not being on the page. We had failed, in some ways, to represent the lives of everyone who worked on the magazine, the lives of everyone in our community. We hadn't placed a chiseled-jawed white guy on the cover of our magazine. But we did put a prototypical white, skinny lesbian on there.

Coming to terms with this was full of tension. And, frankly, no one felt good about it. We ultimately decided to create two covers, one with the original cover and one with an image of an abstracted city. The decision was made as a community and the dialogue that got us to the decision fostered empathy around the table. Without the artifact and the omission, the dialogue would have never happened in exactly the same way. The community may not have had the opportunity to talk about a problem that was always silently underneath us, like a shark swimming in deep waters. We may not have had the agency to listen to others around us and do something about it.

Even still, talking with others about that editorial meeting in the months following, it was clear that we all had trouble coming to terms with it. I have trouble, even now, writing about it. I just don't want people to know this happened. The feeling of excluding a group of people, even if unintentional, was difficult to swallow. And it was all wrapped up in a deep and abiding fear that there are forces outside of us that we couldn't control—even *us*, even the outsiders, even the ones who live our lives outside the pull of normalcy. Even *we* were conscripted in the status quo.

And it wasn't just the cover of the magazine. It was other, mostly unspoken things that made us profoundly uncomfortable. It was that we could carry on in ways that other people in the city couldn't, spilling onto the sidewalk, parading down the streets, dancing to the beat of a drum line. We could take a six-person bicycle onto the street and the police wouldn't say anything to us. It was ok for us to be in public spaces and congregate and play. Truth be told, we weren't read as dangerous and overly disruptive to city officials.

It was much different for other groups though. Chris often tells stories about this, about how the police were called on a group of African Americans down the street from the museum. They weren't allowed to carry on like we did. We didn't have to clear out, move on, disband. But *they* did.

In the months that followed, there was a lingering feeling amongst the editors that we hadn't done right by ourselves, that somehow we were caught up in something that was bigger than us—and not in a good way. For all the pride we took in not doing boxes, the boxes sometimes did us. And it felt like we didn't have control of any of it.

There was this moment in the last Queerlab workshop where I was on the street in front of the museum wearing a dress. We were making a music video for the *I Don't Do Boxes* theme song we had recorded with Quilla and a group of us had rummaged through Sylvia's clothing collection on the second floor searching for costumes and props. A teal polyester dress with a wide lapel that opened onto the front caught my eye and I slipped it on over my clothes. It was hot in that unbreathable fabric holding muggy North Carolina summer close to my skin.

The idea for the music video was to get dressed up in crazy costumes and film a few of us singing in something they call “the surrey,” a vehicle that someone at Elsewhere had built. If you look up this word in the dictionary, you’ll find that it’s a “four-wheeled two-seated horse-drawn pleasure carriage.” There were no horses on this one, of course. Just two seats and four sets of pedals ready for a pleasure ride, ready for a music video.

Four of us peddled the surrey from the alley where it was stored and then around the street corner and up toward the front of the museum. Everyone else was waiting for us, video camera filming, us waving our hands, trying to steer the rickety contraption. The video was crazy and unpredictable and, frankly, didn’t make a whole lot of sense. That was the whole point.

Ultimately the music video never got made. The raw footage is probably on a hard-drive somewhere at Elsewhere or maybe it’s completely disappeared, erased to make room for another project, or lost in a pile of computers in the corner. But that didn’t matter. It wasn’t just about a completely finished product. It mostly about making something, experimenting with things we had never done before. Like everything else we did that season, the playing itself was enough.

By mid-June, the magazine was printed. There was a release party with bands and dancing and readings from the authors. And then, everyone vanished.

Chris left for New York to continue his career as teaching artist at a university. I went back to work in Raleigh. Megan moved back to Portland to work on the farm again. Everyone went back to school and summer vacations and work. As he left, Chris knew that the magazine needed to be more youth led—it was what he had always wanted. But, as it goes, sometimes you have get something started, gain some visibility, get lots of people involved, and then hand it off.

It was mostly a new group of people that came together a year later to publish the third issue of the magazine. An 18-year-old took over for Chris as Managing Editor. They continued to

hold Queerlab workshops and they published the third issue, called *Act Out*, about queerness, performance, and activism. Lots of other editors have stayed connected to each other by collaborating on other projects after they moved on. After working on *I Don't Do Boxes*, there was a sense that we could experiment on our own, that we could come together and make something completely new.

Making the magazine was never just about making a physical artifact. It was about making room for ourselves within our school, our families, our corners of the internet, our cities. We were, quite literally, making room for ourselves at local coffee shops, in the homes of people around us, and on bookshelves in local public schools. But we were also making room for ourselves by being with one another, by coming together.

In truth, I owe a lot to *I Don't Do Boxes* for these essays—not just for inviting me in as a writer and for allowing me to write about them. More importantly, I owe a lot of this project to them for helping me realize that I could make something with others that really spoke to our experiences in the world instead of waiting for someone else to hand my experience to me or sell me on a glossier, more chiseled way of life. If I dug into the possibilities of my voice, my words, I could make something of my own and release it into the wild for the world to experience. This was something that I heard over and over again from other editors. Some of them too were now making things of their own.

Of course, it's more complicated than that. Writing is hard. Collaboration is tricky. Communities don't cohere like they're supposed to. Learning takes patience and a whole lot of grit. But we had all gotten used to the idea that we could pick up enough knowledge from someone else and then just go for it, make something, and see what happens. And you don't need a big city, a rainbow flag, or currency to do that.

CHAPTER 4:

DRAG MOTHER

In the basement of a Methodist church, Magnolia, a 17-year-old drag queen, delivered her first public performance. Before the worn curtains opened and Magnolia stepped onto the stage, there were a few minutes of unexpected silence, a few middle school students running around trying to get the sound to work.

We were gathered at the church for an annual event called Queernival, a self-described “southern celebration of youth liberation.” We had spent the day on top of black asphalt, in the hot sun hoping for a good turnout. There were hula-hoops, spoken word performances, a talent show, carnival games, middle school students playing electric guitars on makeshift stages. After an announcement over the sound system that the drag show would begin in a few minutes (and a quick reminder to hydrate), we all filed into the church basement, past the kitchen, and into a multi-purpose room capable of hosting both potlucks and Sunday school.

As a preacher’s son and grandson, I had spent a lot of time in spaces just like this one throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. Like others present that day, the church was, for me, a community hub, a gathering space for fellowship and community. It was also a space for learning. In conjunction with formal schooling, it was through life in the church that I learned to read and interpret the written word, to speak publicly and form powerful arguments. In other words, it was through life in the church that I had developed what linguist James Paul Gee (1991) calls secondary Discourses, those that are learned outside the family through socialization, often as part of informal apprenticeship and social practice.

I would later spend most of my 20’s trying to reconcile the new secondary Discourses I was learning through an increasingly queer friend group with those I had learned through life in

the church. These two secondary Discourses did not always line up and it was increasingly difficult for them to coexist. I never went back to the church—not only to the church of my childhood, but to any other church as well. I just simply never went back. The tension was too much.

The church has been one of the more prominent sponsors of American literacy, to the benefit of some and the detriment of others. In ethnographic literature, the church's role in literacy development is well established in texts such as Shirley Brice Heath's 1983 landmark ethnography *Ways with Words* and, more recently, in Beverly J. Moss' 2003 *A Community Text Arises*. As queer experience in the church often illustrates, the literate acts that Heath and Moss document can cause communities to splinter and separate, not just to cohere and sustain.

The pull of extreme conservatism and evangelical Christianity in the American South is strong, and religious-based participation in (and perpetuation of) the so-called American “culture wars” is not only documented in academic literature and popular media, it is felt and experienced most piercingly by those who fall on the other side of “enemy” lines, even when those enemy lines are drawn through communities and sometimes down the middle aisle of the church sanctuary.

Churches in the American South are not traditionally spaces that queers and queens inhabit, at least not publicly *as* queers and queens. That these youth were openly celebrating their queerness, however, speaks to the shifting experiences of queer southern youth as they carve out spaces of literacy learning and performance, both individual and communal, public and private, digital and face-to-face, and all of the slippages in-between.

When Magnolia finally stepped out from behind the curtain, the audience's wandering attention shifted from smart phones and neighbors to the stage at the front of the room. Robyn's 2010 synth-pop dance anthem “Dancing On My Own” began playing on the sound

system and the room was filled not with traditional hymns or contemporary worship music, but with a beat carrying the patina of gay disco anthems like Ultravox's "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes" and Donna Summer's "Last Dance."

Magnolia wore a blonde wig that fell long below her shoulders and a patterned pink and green skirt that cut mid-thigh. Her sizable silver high heels moved her around the stage with a slim gait. Magnolia played with her hair, tossing it behind her, syncing her lips to the words of the song: "I'm right over here / why can't you see me?" She throws both of her hands back, pushes her shoulders forward and shakes them: "Ooh, ooh, ooh, I keep dancing on my own." She kicks one foot forward high into the air. The crowd cheers.

Her mother stands at the edge of the crowd recording the performance on her iPhone. Toward the end of her performance, her father takes out a few dollar bills and throws them on the stage. "That's what you're supposed to do at drag shows," he says to the rest of us.

Doing drag is a literate act. It requires a mastery over a particular visual language of gender and an understanding of how to read gender performance. Like secondary Discourses, literacies such as these are, as Gee (1991) reminds us, "apprenticed to as part of their socializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization" (137).

Although many drag queens, especially professional drag queens such as those detailed in ethnographies such as Leila J. Rupps and Verta Taylor's *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2003), make their performances appear very smooth and natural, learning to do drag takes a lot of work. In fact, learning to do drag is anything but a smooth and linear process.

Matt's performance as Magnolia is important precisely because he's not a seasoned drag queen—at least not yet. He hasn't joined the drag circuits that might carry him through sweaty gay clubs. He hasn't yet been taken under the wings of a drag mother and

experienced the familial benefits of part of a drag family. He isn't a featured performer at local drag bingo nights; instead, he walks through the crowds of straight men and women, taking up their used bingo cards and posing for the occasional photograph. He'll likely be and do all of these things in the near future, if all goes according to his plan. For now, though, Matt is learning. He is learning how to do drag. He is learning how to *be* drag within his community.

While traditional narratives of queer youth in rural areas typically center on isolation and trace a linear movement toward large urban areas, what we call *metronormativity*, Matt's experience learning what he can from YouTube videos, posting makeup tips on Facebook group pages, sneaking into clubs to watch drag shows, and negotiating the expanses and limits of his public identities within spaces like the church speak to a different momentum. The relationships, technologies, and spaces through which and within which these literacies are learned shape queer experience, at least in part. They speak to particular formations of space and time that give rise to a queer way of life.

In McLeary County, you can drive on county roads for miles and miles in any direction, past pine trees and the occasional stoplight, past strip malls and small churches. You'll pass your share of local haunts, of course—the barbecue restaurant, the beauty shop, the local bank. But you're just as likely to pass the same establishments you'd pass anywhere else in America—the McDonald's, the SuperCuts, the Food Lion. If you drive far enough, you'll pass the local high school, a one-story building made of concrete and gravel. The mascot's footprints are painted on the sidewalk leading to the front door and, if you look off to the side, water sprinklers zip back and forth on the football field in the evenings.

It's easy to make assumptions about what Matt's life must be like amidst these long stretches of roads or within the walls of the local high school. In the time that I've known him, his hair has been shaved close to skin tight on the sides and kept long on the top. He keeps his hair up in a way that's both purposeful and nonchalant. He takes dance classes in the evening and works on sewing projects at school. He doesn't dress outrageously on a day-to-day basis, but he also doesn't dress like most of his classmates. He's also a self-identified queer teen learning to do drag in a rural county. There are so many stories and experiences that pre-exist him, so many commonplaces about queerness and rurality that it's so easy to "know" what his life—his young, rural, drag queen, queer life—must be like in McLeary County.

This became evident in the way that Matt interacted with others, particularly those who were older than him. At a fundraiser for a local LGBTQ non-profit, I sat at a table with Magnolia (Matt was in drag that night) and about eight other community members, ranging from businessmen to clergywomen to artists. The dinner took place in a larger town located in the next county over from McLeary County, about 30 minutes south from Matt's hometown. As we all introduced ourselves to the others at the table, conversation turned to where everyone lived.

I told everyone that my partner and I were married and lived in Raleigh. Other than a brief conversation with someone about some of the gay clubs in Raleigh, no one thought twice about it. I was a 30-something white queer living in the second largest city in North Carolina, a city that was surrounded by universities and consistently voted Democrat in elections. In their mind, I was safe.

When Magnolia told everyone that she lived in McLeary County, though, the mood around the table shifted. *Oh, honey, you poor thing.* Most of us around the table—even myself—began asking questions. *Are you bullied at school? Do you have queer friends? Are you ok?* Magnolia explained to us that, sure, she'd been bullied, but nothing major. She did theater at

school. She had lots of friends. She did drag. It actually wasn't so bad. Despite these assurances, nearly everyone at the table had advice for her, people she should meet, and resources for help.

Even within the LGBTQ community, and maybe especially within the LGBTQ community, the narrative of the wounded queer teen waiting to escape her hometown is a strong one. *You just wait. It gets better, child.* That we expected Magnolia to fit this narrative, isn't surprising. Think about Mathew Shepherd, the gay college student who was beaten, tortured, and left to die tied to a fence in Laramie, Wyoming. Think about Brandon Teena, the trans man who was raped and murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska.

These stories have been told and retold on the stage, on the big screen, and in our daily lives. These events are real and very hard to shake—in many ways they are trauma to the LGBTQ community. Add them to countless other stories, maybe even our own stories, and suddenly projections about what Matt's life must be like become understandable. In our cultural and often very personal imaginations, rural places like Laramie, Humboldt, and McLeary County, if we think of them at all, are not places for queers to stay. They are places to be endured until you can leave them behind.

Matt describes experience within McLeary County as “uncomfortable.” Like many other queer youth, Matt knew that he was different from his friends at a young age, even if he could not point to exactly how he was different. At that time, he didn't have a language to speak about his difference. He just knew in an embodied, emotional, intuitive way that he was different. He recalls swinging on the playground with girls while most of the other boys

were playing football. Matt started to feel separated from many of his male peers. Though he admits that “it wasn’t the greatest experience,” he also says that he didn’t have a hard time with it—at least at a young age.

In the seventh grade, however, Matt began to figure out why he felt different from his classmates: unlike his male peers, he desired other boys and not girls. Matt figured out that it wasn’t just desire, though. More importantly, it was the ways that his desire was socially situated within his community: “[In seventh grade] was when like I started realizing like ‘Ok, I’m different, so... like, what is it about me that’s different, uh... What makes me feel different?’ And like that was around the same time I started realizing that I like boys instead of girls. Well, not really ‘realizing’ it, but ‘figuring it out’ I guess. Or figuring out that it was like, like I knew that it was weird. But figuring out that it was not accepted.”

It’s telling that Matt corrects his own use of the verb *to realize*: “Well, not really ‘realizing it’ [his desire for other boys] but figuring it out, I guess.” To realize something is too passive to accurately describe his experience, as if understanding sexual identity is something that simply happens to a person, not something that takes participation and negotiation—work.

In school, Matt began hearing other students “joking” with their friends, calling each other *faggot*. “You hear people like joking, being like, uh, like ‘joking’ with their friends like, ‘Oh ya, you’re gay.... faggot...’ You know... And it’s like, well, they make fun of their friends who aren’t even homosexuals, so...” He uses air quotes around “joking” when he speaks about this to indicate that these aren’t really jokes at all. Words like gay and faggot are performative. They do things. They bestow meaning. They name. And they name even those who don’t want to be named.

Those same “jokes” became pointed directly at Matt when he began high school: “... I can be walking down the hall and be called faggot like you know, nothing, nothing out of the ordinary.” Although Matt’s impulse is to respond verbally, to “run his mouth,” as he phrases

it, he recognizes that his relatively small body frame is no match for his aggressors and that responding appropriately to situations like this are a negotiation of safety. As he phrases it, “When they’re twice my size and muscular and rugged, running my mouth to them is not always a great idea.” Instead of running his mouth then, Matt changes the way that he walks through school hallways between classes, avoiding known problem areas such as underpopulated bathrooms, and carving out relatively safe and comfortable routes that will get him from one place to another. “You just learn to walk different ways and make your way to class in a different way...,” he says.

Similar movements and negotiations occur even within the more intimate spaces of family interaction. When Matt came out to his family in high school, his extended family reacted in very different ways. One side of the family was supportive and Matt credits this reaction to his cousin who came out to their family as bisexual a couple of years before him. By the time Matt came out, that side of the family had already gone through the experience once before and they were more prepared and opened to it. Although they didn’t expect Matt to come out as well, they did not view it negatively. “I mean, they did well with her. They did well with *me*,” he recalls.

Matt’s other side of the family, however, reacted very differently and his grandparents were most disapproving. In their view, his parents had not raised him correctly. In his grandparents’ minds, if Matt’s parents had done their job well enough, Matt would not be gay. His grandfather suggested reform, telling Matt’s parents that they should send Matt to military school. Matt says, “They were grasping for things, like for reasons why I might be this way. And it was all very ignorant and predictable and we don’t really talk to them anymore.” Taking offense to his grandparent’s reaction, Matt’s parents began a process of separating themselves from that side of the family, creating time and space between them to reduce interaction. Although it has been a few years since Matt came out to his family, the effects are lasting: “It’s been... probably... it’s been more than six months, but less than a year since I’ve seen them. And we used to see them every other week.”

In these two instances, those of school and family, Matt's experience in McLeary County can be characterized as mundane negotiations between and amongst comfort and discomfort, safety and danger, and the gradients in-between these poles. His experiential flows are routed and re-routed, negotiated and re-negotiated as he moves through his everyday life. Practically, it means knowing how to choose which bathroom to enter at school and which side of the family to spend holidays with.

The burden of these negotiations has caused Matt to feel lost, though, like he doesn't really belong in McLeary County. In fact, Matt describes himself as a "Lost Boy" in search of Neverland, an allusion to J.M. Barrie's classic children's book *Peter Pan*. While the popular narrative, the popular movement of the closeted queer teen from a hostile and homophobic small rural town to a large urban life filled with gay clubs and pride parades is one that has been taken for granted in both popular and scholarly writing, Matt's vision is different. In Matt's vision, New York City or San Francisco, those long-time meccas of sexual liberation and queer visibility, aren't necessarily Neverland. Rather, Matt's vision of Neverland is local and it's plural: *Neverlands*, multiple spaces of acceptance and comfort that are carved out and negotiated within his own rural community.

By emphasizing spaces of acceptance and comfort here, my intention isn't to minimize the very real and abiding harassment, bullying, and physical-emotional violence that is waged against queers on a daily basis, not to mention the more subtle and dispersed systemic injustices built into our social, political, economic, medical, educational structures. Suicide and self-mutilation, drug and alcohol abuse, rape, and homelessness are very real for many queers, and particularly for queers of color and trans* individuals.

In fact, a teenager that I was working with for this project, a teen who, at least demographically, was very similar to Matt, came out to his parents in the time that I was doing fieldwork and was promptly kicked out of his home. I checked with others I knew in

his social circle to make sure that he was safe and being cared for. He was. His boyfriend's family had taken him in. But I never saw him again during my fieldwork. For queers and other historically marginalized groups, oppression and injustice are real and, despite the now ubiquitous adage, sometimes it doesn't get better.

So, I don't detail spaces of acceptance and comfort in order to minimize all the bad things that happen. Rather, I write in order to understand the ways that individuals, and Matt in particular, forge a situated existence within and against these circumstances—how they make room for themselves.

In the social geography of Matt's life in McLeary County, learning to do drag is one of the most important Neverlands. Matt describes his drag performances in this way: "It's not really like me. Cause I pretty much disconnect and I've always had this like strong female persona and I feel like that's what's driven me to do drag and so it's like she just comes out and takes over. And I do like, I don't know, I feel generally more comfortable in drag than out of drag. Partially cause I feel like I can express myself completely through drag, like and... I don't know it's a whole other world."

For Matt, being a drag queen began while doing theater in high school. When he first started performing in theater productions, he had to rely on classmates and friends to do his makeup. However, Matt quickly became annoyed at having to depend on others to perform this task for him. He's got an independent streak in him and he became tired of having to ask people to set aside time to do work that he could very well be doing for himself.

Stage makeup is very much a craft and to be successful, it requires a studied technique that draws out or diminishes certain features of the character. And all of this must be done in such a way that is compelling to an audience, something you can see from far away. Hoping that he could learn how to do stage makeup for himself, Matt began looking at videos online. Stage makeup, as he soon learned, is very similar to drag makeup and search terms like theater makeup very quickly lead you to videos of professional and amateur drag queens teaching viewers how to do drag.

After watching queens online for a while, Matt found an inexpensive but gorgeous pair of women's boots. As he recalls, "I found those boots at Value Village, which is a thrift store, and I bought them and I think that's what really got me going: a nine-inch pair of platform boots." Buying those boots was a way of committing to drag, a material way of imagining new possibilities fostered by watching tutorial videos online.

According to Matt, getting ready for a drag show is a "hard, hard process." When speaking about the work of drag, Matt often contrasts it with the go-go boys featured at one of the local gay clubs: "For me, it's not putting on some little skimpy costume and dancing around. Like I do a lot more than that." For Matt, doing drag is not about taking off; it's about putting on. The process of putting on drag takes a lot of time, a lot of work, and a lot of learning. Matt phrases it this way:

It's all a big learning process. I've heard several queens say that you never stop learning in drag and like if you do stop learning that's when you need to stop doing it. Because there's always something to learn. There's always somebody doing something different than you.

Despite Matt's dazzling anthemic performance of *Dancing On My Own* in the church basement, he wasn't dancing on his own at all. And, even from the beginning, he never has danced on his own. There is, in fact, a rich community of drag queens within Matt's

hometown and in neighboring counties, all a short driving distance away. Even though the community is small compared to urban centers like New York or Miami, it cuts across ethnic and generational lines. There are African American queens, Latino queens, white queens. There are drag queens over the age of fifty and they run in age all the way down to Matt, who is seventeen. Like any other community, this drag community is splintered and incoherent at times, but they depend on each other for formal and informal learning opportunities as well as for access to material goods. It is, in part, through socialization and in/formal apprenticeship within this community that Matt is learning to do drag.

Informal social interactions play an important role in Matt's literacy learning and Matt's peers are integral to this process. In many of the stories that Matt tells, his friend Jamaal is by his side helping him and teaching him. When they first met, though, Matt didn't know that Jamaal did drag. In fact, they knew each other for many years before Jamaal told him. It wasn't until Matt expressed interest in doing drag himself that his friend told him. Once this commonality was established, however, they were able to help each other.

As Matt describes it, "...from there I had somebody on my side like helping me and giving me hints and tips and advice. And he's been doing it for four years. So, he was able to help a lot." It's significant that Jamaal has more experience doing drag and is more established in the drag community. Matt's relationship with Jamaal is important not only because Jamaal can teach him how to do things like apply make-up and properly dress a wig, but also because Jamaal can provide an entrée into a community where Matt can gain material goods and performing experience. Doing drag can be expensive and opportunities can be rare.

Something as integral to drag as a wig can cost a significant amount of money: "I mean, little shake-and-go wigs that I buy are just basically like you buy off of a manikin in the store, they're like... the least I've spent is \$40 and the most I've spent is \$60. But to get a styled wig, my friend who does drag, she bought a styled wig and it was \$120 for one wig. It was pageant hair, big pageant hair, like she doesn't wear it out cause it's pageant hair, so it's

pretty crazy.” Dresses and gowns can also be very expensive: “...for a gown or something, like a real queen gown, I would spend over a hundred dollars, easy, for like a cheap one. To have one made specifically for me, it would probably be \$500. Like queens spend \$1,000 or \$2,000 on a pageant, which is insane.” The expense of doing drag can be prohibitive for an adolescent drag queen like Matt.

In fact, Matt has had a difficult time finding a job because of his age and the general economic state of McLeary County. When I met Matt, this was one of our first things we talked about. He was very excited to have scheduled a job interview the following week at a dog grooming company. Although he wasn’t terribly excited about the job itself, he was excited to have money to do things with friends and to expand his growing drag collection—wigs, dresses, shoes, makeup.

In the end, Matt didn’t get the job, but he continues to piece together his drag collection from many sources. He often shops at thrift stores and other discount clothing outlets: “... most of the clothing I buy is not over, I haven’t paid over \$30 for a dress. And I’ve got 5 or 6 dresses that I love, like mini-dresses.” Matt also describes going over to an older drag queen’s house with Jamaal to purchase second-hand items. Although the older drag queen was famous within the community, she was selling a lot of her drag collection at a deep discount because she was taking a break from drag. She was selling what Matt called “signature wigs” for \$30 and \$40. Because of Matt’s small stature, he joked that the signature wig “would be hilarious on me. ‘Cause it would be like touching my shoulders and it would be so good.” Despite the potentially prohibitive expense of piecing a wardrobe together, Matt is able to consistently grow his collection through opportunities from his social connections.

These connections also help Matt gain access to other key social spaces that his age excludes him from, spaces that are integral to his literacy learning. Attending drag shows at local clubs, for example, would give him the opportunity to see to live performances and

potentially make connections with local drag queens. But he's 17 and can't legally enter the premises: by law he must be at least eighteen years old.

In a larger city near Matt's hometown, there are two small clubs that service not only local gay populations and students from several local universities, but also those, like Matt, who drive in from the neighboring rural counties. One of these clubs hosts a night of drag performances once a month that Jamaal sometimes performs in. Gaining access to learning spaces such as this are difficult for Matt and he sometimes sneaks into the club. At one point in my fieldwork, Matt asked if I had an old driver's license that I no longer used. There was a drag show scheduled for the following week and the only way that he could gain access to the venue was to sneak into the club using someone else's ID. He assured me that he wasn't going to do anything bad; he just needed a way to see the drag performances. As a writer and researcher, I had to say no so as not to cross any ethical boundaries. However, Matt still obtained access to the club that night by borrowing an eighteen-year-old friend's ID. "I went in drag so... I wouldn't normally go in drag, but just for like at [the club] if they were like 'This doesn't look like you...'"

Gaining access to learning spaces in this way speaks to Matt's tenacity and serves as a reminder that self-motivated literacy learning doesn't always look like traditional learning. This type of literacy learning sometimes looks unserious, and often downright playful. It looks like a Friday night at the club watching your friend Jamaal do drag.

Other times, however, literacy learning is more formalized, for example, when Matt is a dresser for a drag show. Being a dresser means that Matt assists other queens in getting ready for a performance and this opportunity not only allows him access to the venue to watch the performance, but also a behind-the-scenes experience. In many ways, it's like a backstage pass except that you're put to work. Matt describes it this way: "...like basically you help them get ready cause it takes a village to get somebody in some of those costumes. Especially if they're not as small as when they had the costumes made for them." Although

life in the dressing room, especially for a young queen, can be intimidating, it presents important learning opportunities:

I was in a dressing room with three queens, two of which had boob implants and it was all just hanging out and it was kind of intimidating to begin with, uh and these are like pretty well-known local queens like one has won or one has competed in Miss America? Miss Gay America? And she made it pretty far. And another one won Miss North Carolina Entertainer of the Year and went on to nationals and placed in the top ten in the nationals for that pageant which is insane. So I was surrounded by talent that night and I was just trying to learn as much as I could.

Formal opportunities like this not only allow Matt to observe more experienced drag queens getting ready for a performance; they also allow him to actively participate in the process. When he's a dresser, Matt learns the mechanics of getting ready for a drag performance. He summarizes what he's learning as "mainly make-up tips. And also just like how queens pad and use like waist cinchers to create the shape that they don't naturally have. How they style their wigs for the occasion. Stuff like that." In this way, the dressing room becomes a space for literacy learning, passed through formal relationships with more established members of the community.

Matt's excitement about this type of learning opportunity is difficult to overstate. Months of conversations were punctuated with offhanded expressions of desire, elation, and sometimes disappointment as connections were made, leads were chased, and prospects appeared or disappeared. He says things like: "Do you remember Jackie Tan? Unforgettable. I'm doing, I'm going to be a dresser for her soon, which I'm super excited about cause I really want to see her do her makeup because she can paint. Like her face is always beat for the back row." Following up on the reasons why he's so excited to be a dresser for Jackie Tan, Matt says, "Ya, and so I wanna, I wanna see it and like make mental notes because she like, if she does your makeup for like a pageant or a show or something she charges so I want to be able to watch and mimic that way I don't have to pay anything."

Formal relationships with older members of the community can become even more formalized than the dresser-queen encounter. Matt frequently talks about his desire to be part of a drag family, a formalized system of apprenticeship modeled after familial metaphors and relationship structures such as matriarch, child, and sister. A drag mother is typically a more established member of the drag community who takes a younger, less experienced drag queen under her wings, so to speak. The less experienced drag queen is referred to as a drag child. In taking the drag child into her care, a formalized apprenticeship is set up wherein the drag mother provides protection, advice, and performance opportunities. Matt compares the role of the drag mother to a real mother: “Your drag mother like is like a real mother in that they look out for you and teach you things but your drag mother is chosen, like you choose.” Like a biological family, we can trace family lineages and create family trees. Matt describes some drag families as huge and sprawling: “... they’re all like interwoven. Like it’s hard to see where one ends. It’s crazy.”

Often, a drag child will take the last name of the drag mother. Matt uses his friend Jamaal to explain this to me. Jamaal’s drag mother is a prominent drag queen in the area named Heather Sky. Jamaal has since taken her drag mother’s family name as her own and now goes by the name Autumn Sky. In this way, family traditions are passed down, techniques are taught, and the family name is carried on.

This mapping of normative family structures onto the master-apprentice relationship only extends so far though. As Matt point points, unlike biological family, drag family is chosen. This choosing of family is especially important for individuals whose biological family does not support or advocate for their way of life or have even disowned them. But even for Matt, whose immediate family is quite supportive, his chosen family serves an important function. Matt’s biological mother is present at his drag performances and proudly records them from the audience. His father tips well at drag shows. Both of his parents come to drag bingo nights. But they simply cannot teach him, connect him, or even empathize with him in the

same way that an experienced drag queen can. His parents can provide other types of protections, learning opportunities, and support. But not these.

The act of choosing a drag mother (and being chosen by a mother) is an important act. In some ways, it's a rite of passage for many young drag queens. Matt explains the process of joining a drag family this way: "... how you get into a drag family is like you either are asked by someone or you ask to be errrr like for me I would either ask for someone to be my drag mother or they would ask me if they could be my drag mother." Just like being a dresser at a drag show, Matt talks about the prospect of joining a drag family with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, desire and paralysis. At the time of writing this, Matt did not have a drag mother. But spending time with Matt, the topic of drag family came up often and he would keep me updated on his progress.

Jackie Tan, the queen whose "signature wigs" Matt considered buying, is a prominent member of the drag community in and around McLeary County. She wields experience, power, and influence like none other in the area. She is the queen of queens by most criteria. When Jackie Tan speaks, the crowd listens. It's not only what she says and the forcefulness with which it is said; it's her size. Jackie Tan is a *big* drag queen and she towers in stature over anyone else in the room. I've seen the spotlight hit her just right at a drag show and her dress sparkles like a disco ball, throwing specks of light in every direction. She's the center of any room.

That Matt actively seeks out Jackie Tan as his drag mother speaks to the ways that choosing a drag mother is as much a political move as anything else. It's about who you know and who you're connected to. "There are families that are more popular and get more attention and get more opportunities and I think if I was Jackie Tan's drag child I would get some opportunities that I wouldn't get as someone else's drag child." With great opportunity come great competition. If Jackie Tan chose Matt as her drag child, he would "be the winner of everything in McLeary County. All the queens would be jealous and they would hate me."

Getting in with the right drag mother, getting the right advice, having the right name recognition, gaining access to the right drag shows and the right dressing rooms—if you get all this right, you can move up in the local drag community. But if you want to move even farther up you’ve got to break through what Matt identifies as a will toward sameness in his hometown. “It’s like any other small town in the South,” he tells me. “Everything is the same. Same with drag: everything is the same.”

That felt sense of boredom and sameness pervades the ways that many youth in the area speak about their daily lives to an outsider like me, someone who lives in the state’s capital city and works at one of the state’s big research universities. When you ask youth about McLeary County, you’ll likely be met with another question in return: *Why would anyone ever be interested in our hometown?* When I told one of Matt’s friends, Ethan, that I really wanted to chat with him about their hometown, he assured me that he was expert, that he had lived in three counties in the area, but that, frankly, there just wasn’t much to tell me.

So, it’s not that there’s an absence of drag queens in Matt’s rural hometown as the popular narrative of isolation and queer absence would have us believe. It’s that, according to Matt, local drag queens can only offer so much. The will toward sameness that Matt and his peers characterize as synonymous with any small southern town leads him to look elsewhere in addition to his immediate surroundings—to YouTube.

Digital wandering, clicking from one link to another until you end up somewhere altogether different than where you started, unable to trace a clear or linear path back to where you

began—this is how Matt came to online drag tutorials. You’ll remember that he came to YouTube to learn how to do theater makeup. He walked away learning about drag makeup. Those drag tutorial videos that he discovered online, in combination with a nine-inch pair of platform boots that he discovered at a thrift store are a big part of what led Matt to do drag. And ever since his first wanderings on YouTube, Matt has come to rely on drag queens who broadcast advice and tutorials on the site to help him break through the perceived sameness of his hometown.

Matt often stumbles upon tutorial videos while looking for techniques that might work best for his body type or the look that he’s going for. But there are several drag queens that have been especially influential in developing his technique, performance, and general understanding of drag, ones that he returns to over and over again.

One of them is Miss Fame, who Matt tells me is “the super model drag queen.” Based in New York, Miss Fame has gathered a large following as a talented make up artist, singer, and model. By his own admission, Matt is “obsessed” with her. And he’s not alone. Miss Fame has acquired a strong following across social media platforms, including YouTube, where her videos have garnered over 6.5 million views from September 2013 to November 2015. This talent and fame would eventually propel her to the seventh season of RuPaul’s Drag Race, a popular broadcast television show that Matt binge watches. On YouTube, though, her videos range from music videos to drag make-up tutorials to behind-the-scenes footage from photoshoots.

In one of her most popular videos, Miss Fame shares her transformation process from beginning to end. The video begins with Miss Fame in full drag, looking directly at the camera. “Hi, everybody. I’m Miss Fame, NYC. Today is my very first make-up tutorial. Now, you’ve been asking daily, begging, pleading with me: Please, Miss Fame, give me your face. Well, I’m going to give it to you the best way I know how: In a step-by-step tutorial.” She punctuates this line with campy laughter, lifting her chin and throwing her head back

before she continues: “I hope you enjoy and really do hope you learn a few tricks of my trade. And I can’t wait for you to see everything that I do, obviously to a level of flawless.” The video cuts to an on-screen countdown: 3. 2. 1. The beat of the music rises, filling the space until Miss Fame returns to the screen.

When the video cuts back to her, we see Miss Fame with no make-up, no wig, no dress. Instead, she wears a tank top, revealing tattoos of flowers on her shoulders and chest. Her hair is short and dark, her bone structures without emphasis. She holds up a bottle of rubbing alcohol to the camera. “Let’s get started,” she says in a voice over. “I’m cleaning my brow with alcohol and a cotton ball.” She then holds up a stick of glue and begins applying it to her clean brow: “Against the grain, down toward the eye, and back out with the direction of hair.” The majority of video goes like this, moving from one step to the next with a voice-over that explains what she’s doing.

Slowly, she moves from working on her eyes to working on her skin, holding up a bottle of primer. “I’m prepping my skin with the photo-finish primer all over exposed skin.” Every so often, she shares advice, giving small pointers to achieve the best results: “To blend the contour of my nose, I like to use this wedge sponge. I got these at Alcone. They’re great. I cut the tip with a pair of scissors to get a little bit more width. And I just tap it along the highlight line. It gives you a beautiful, whittled tiny, tiny nose. It’s one of my favorite features in drag make-up.” From her eyes to her skin to her nose—in a twenty-minute video, Miss Fame transforms herself in front of Matt’s eyes.

Miss Fame is one of countless drag queens on YouTube that Matt relies on for advice about drag make-up. Different drag queens have different approaches and Matt picks up skills from multiple sources, perfecting and broadening his technique. There’s a Dallas-based drag queen on YouTube, for example, that helped Matt finally learned how to cover his eyebrows. “She is how I learn to cover my eyebrows. Nobody else, I tried so many other ways before I tried her way and I couldn’t do it. It was always patchy and bad. I wanted it to be perfect. And

until I found her, I could not do it.” Covering your eyebrows is a technique that every drag queen needs to master, but it’s quite difficult to learn. It’s a matter of finding the right technique, explained in the right way. It takes searching. It takes time.

In addition to makeup tutorials, YouTube is also a space for drag queens to learn how to transform their bodies in other ways. Videos made by queens like Misty Maven, who goes by Petrilude on YouTube, offer advice and how-to videos on topics such as how to create cleavage, how to secure wigs without glue or tape, and how to tuck your genitals so that your “male parts looks more female,” as she describes it in a video. The work and technique of drag, in other words, is as much about augmenting or hiding particular parts of the body—boobs, hips, genitals—as it is about make-up. And like make-up, learning how to augment and hide the body means experimenting with different types of props and techniques until something clicks.

When she begins her video on tucking, for example, Misty Maven is in full drag. She looks directly into the camera and in a very conversational tone explains that she’ll be speaking in very PC language, which means that she’ll be using clinical terms like “genitals” instead of more colloquial terms. “To successfully tuck,” she explains, “there are like two ways that I know of, but I only know of officially one way, so that’s going to be the only way that I explain, only cause it’s the only way that I’ve done it...” She then invites anyone who knows how to do the other way to make a video and she’ll link to it in the video description.

Misty Maven begins walking the viewer through a step-by-step process that begins with hair removal. “What you need to do is first remove hair that’s down in that region—front, back, in between,” she says, “pretty much, you don’t want body hair down there.” Hair removal prevents a lot of pain when the tape is ripped off at the end of the night.

The basic idea of tucking is to move your genitals out of the way—basically hiding them—so that the front part of your body looks more feminine. To do this, Misty Maven explains male

anatomy to viewers: “There’s actually two little pockets next to your penis. A lot people don’t know they’re there, but they’re there. Trust me. Your body has natural pockets right on each side of your penis.” These natural pockets are used to hide the testicles, and you can easily put one in each pocket. “So, your testicles actually go in right next to your penis” Misty Maven explains. “They just go right up there. You can just push them right in those pockets and they fit perfectly.”

With “the majority of the ‘goodies’ out of the way,” as she phrases it, the next step is to pull the penis and scrotum back and fasten them in place using a gaff or tape. If you’re using the tape method, this is done by wrapping the penis in toilet paper. “Just wrapping it loosely,” she advises. “It doesn’t need to be super tight.” To keep the toilet paper from slipping, she fashions a triangle out of duct tape. “Make it look like a tulip,” she explains. You then place the triangle where a bikini cut of underwear would be and then run the long strip of tape down the penis. You then pull everything back: “Pull them back, toward your anus, between your butt cheeks.” You then attach the bottom of the tape wherever it will hold. “If you’re not sure, you can extend it all the way to the bottom of your back.” With everything securely tucked away, you’re free to move with confidence.

Knowing how to tuck isn’t enough though. Similar to applying make-up, if you don’t have the right tools—the right primer, the right wedge—you won’t be able to do it successfully. If you don’t want to use tape to hold everything in place, Misty Maven provides other videos with instructions for DIY tools like gaffs, “something that holds your man business in place while tucked in drag.”

“I’m going to show you how to make a gaff, very quick, very inexpensive, using stuff you probably already have at home and it’s using a pair of old tights or panty hose and then also using a tube sock.” Petrilude (he’s not in drag for this video) then cuts the waistband off of a pair of tights and sets it aside while he cuts off the elastic part of a tube sock. Next, he pulls the waistband through the elastic part of the tube sock and holds it horizontally in front of the

camera, one hand on each end of the waistband with the tube sock in the middle. This creates two spaces, one on each side of the tube sock for you to step into. “And there you go. See, I told you it was very easy, very inexpensive. Even if you don’t have a pair of panty hose, you can go to a drug store and get them for like \$3 or something like that, and tube socks you can probably get a pack for very cheap at Target, Walmart, anywhere like that.”

Videos like these, made in bedrooms and kitchens with a certain home-made quality, connect Matt to drag queens outside of McLeary County, to New York City, Dallas, and farther. The quality and accuracy of the videos, the usefulness of their tutorials, and the large number of followers—all of this adds up to queens like Miss Fame and Misty Maven being seen a professional, someone that a young drag queen like Matt would trust and find helpful. Speaking about Miss Fame, Matt tells me “...lately I’ve been basing my makeup on what I see on her and that has helped me learn a lot, because she is a professional.”

Tutorial videos like these are so integral to his literacy learning, in fact, that Matt displaces the role of drag mother from a single, local drag queen like Jackie Tan and onto to YouTube as a whole. While he finds certain drag queens on YouTube to be more helpful than others, he understands YouTube as an aggregate of tutorial videos that ultimately provide him with the learning experience that is traditionally espoused by a drag mother like Jackie Tan. “Ya, YouTube. YouTube has been my drag mother,” he tells me.

The displacement of the matriarch from a singular, embodied-in-flesh drag queen to a dispersed aggregate of many has its benefits. Matt tells me that it’s “great in some ways because you don’t learn how to do things one way. You take all these different people’s perspectives and find out what works for you.” Matt contrasts his own learning experiences on YouTube with one of his friends who didn’t do her own make-up for a year. “She did not do her own make-up for a whole year,” Matt tells me, “and when she was on her own, she was like, ‘What do I do?’” Matt is proud of the fact that he’s learned how to do everything for himself because he’s more knowledgeable now. This not only benefits him, but he’s able

to share his skills with others around him. He tells me that he's learned techniques that he's taught people who are more experienced and skilled than him. He calls out painting his brow strap as an example: "Cause in the drag community, as much as you have to do it, queens aren't very good at it. But I just learned the techniques that work for me."

I've been writing about how Matt learns to do drag in his rural hometown. The lines that I've draw though, separating Matt's face-to-face interactions within his local community and his interactions with drag queens online, are false. These clean distinctions between online and offline simply don't exist in Matt's life and the only purpose they serve, at least in this chapter, are structural—they provide a clear way to categorize his literacy learning. So these lines, these distinctions between face-to-face and online, are false even as they may be useful.

It's much more in line with Matt's experience to say that he moves fluidly between and amongst these spaces. Indeed, the assemblages that come together so that Matt can learn how to do drag are various, but they always include both online and offline interactions as well as various technologies, increasingly mobile and integrated into his offline experience. When we talk about literacy learning, it's important that we pay attention to the ways that online interactions often influence our face-to-face interactions and vice-versa.

The slippages between the offline and online are difficult to see though because there's not always (or ever) a clear delineation between them. For example, Matt sometimes uses his

biological mother to try out the makeup techniques that he's learning online. Every now and then, Matt and his mom sit in her bathroom while Matt paints her face. And this becomes of shared experience of literacy learning, one that has the potential to strengthen their relationship and bond. So, while his biological mother can't necessarily teach him drag makeup, she's folded into his literacy learning in other ways. For Matt, this learning began online, but in moments like this, or when he advises other drag queen how to paint their eyebrows, his online literacy learning is slowly infuses itself into face-to-face interactions within his hometown.

What's clear is that Matt's drag performances as Magnolia, such as the one described at the beginning of this chapter, is a fleeting culmination of both the offline and the online. That performance, like every other drag performance, is the temporary outcome of all that I've described above—the sneaking into clubs, the Youtube tutorials, the search for a drag mother. These are how Matt learns to do drag in the rural South.

Through all of this, learning to do drag helps Matt make social connections that ultimately carve out spaces of comfort. In other words, literacy learning helps him create the Neverlands that sustain his queer life in McLeary County. By learning to do drag, Matt isn't just making room for himself on the stage. He's making room for himself within his school. He's making room for himself within his family. He's making room for himself in his hometown.

CHAPTER 5:
KIDS WITH COYOTE GENDERS

At some point, Elijah packed up their car in North Carolina and flung themselves out west, into the land of high rent, into the tech industry, into a new life that looked very little like their old one. The way that Elijah tells it, they drove their car across the country, saw the Golden Gate Bridge, and immediately went broke.

Elijah freely admits that their rural sensibilities are coming through when they say these things like this, but they say them anyway: “People dress like blog posts out here.” The guys with the designer button-up floral shirts and salmon colored pants, the girls with the camisoles and the mod outfits, the other guys with the rockabilly aesthetic—it seems like everyone’s style is so informed, so developed. They are real-life doppelgangers of fashionista corners of the internet.

And then there’s Elijah, fresh out of the car, wearing the same two sweaters every day. They have no clothes to speak of, no options to choose from. This is a problem because, for Elijah, getting dressed in the morning is about checking in with their body and figuring out what they have the moxie to wear.

“Ok, today I have enough self confidence to wear *this* pair of pants,” they say. “The next day, emotionally I know I need to wear this or that.” Sometimes they wear a baggy t-shirt with a pair of jeans that doesn’t emphasize their curves. Other days, it’s a super fem dress that goes all in on femininity. What they wear is an outcome of how they’re feeling that day, and how they want to present themselves to the world. Their *self* doesn’t sit still though. So Elijah doesn’t wear clothes. Elijah wears costumes.

Leaving their closet in North Carolina was a bigger problem for Elijah than it would be for most other people. Without much sartorial variety within reach, Elijah was forced to wear

things that didn't always feel right. They would wake up in the morning, know they needed to wear something particular, and it just simply wasn't there. Elijah would need time to build up their collection on a tight budget, mostly from thrift stores. Until then, there were days when they had to wear clothes and they were like "I feel super uncomfortable in this." But you do what you have to do because you have to go to work.

Being uncomfortable was to be expected, though, when moving to a brand new city and setting up a brand new life. Knowing this, Elijah gave themselves a somewhat arbitrary (though fairly calculated) amount of time that they would stay out west: two years. Elijah heard that this is the amount of time it takes to become enculturated. In that time, you start getting used to the place and everything starts to feel normal. For two years, they would stick it out. And after that, they told themselves, they would see what happens.

We had both worked on the first issue of *I Don't Do Boxes*. With all the coming and going that both of us were doing, though, we had strangely never met in person. I had read their work in the magazine—an article offering safe binding tips to make yourself more androgynous. I had also seen Elijah in the androgynous fashion shoot, dressed in pants and boots, a t-shirt and a scarf. But we were never in the same room at the same time. When they were at editorial meetings, I wasn't. And when I was there, they weren't. I knew Elijah only by name.

A year after we had worked on the first issue of the magazine, our paths finally crossed for a night at a fundraising dinner. People were starting to go home after an exhausting and successful night, but we both stuck around to help clean up the kitchen, putting extra food away in plastic containers and wiping down dirty tables with rags. We talked and joked around, of course, and did that polite choreography of words when you meet someone for the first time. That was the first and last time we were in a room together. Elijah moved out west after that night.

With almost 3,000 miles between us, the time we've spent together was in front of a screen, the visual window into each other's lives the size of a smart phone or sometimes a computer screen. Elijah would frame himself in front of the computer. Their shaggy dirty blonde bleached hair, their shirt with the word BOY plastered on the front in all caps. The couch and the wall in the background. The web browser tabs closed beneath them. The notification pop up in the top right corner. This was my view into their world.

Even so, our conversations were immediate and human. The screen, for all of the books and articles written about how it makes us less social, can forge a mundane closeness. The digital dance of finding times that we could meet online and talk—the text messages back and forth, the Facebook messaging—all of these tiny, brief encounters made Elijah present with me. These interactions folded Elijah into my daily life and surroundings in a way that everyone else I interviewed wasn't. I would be at work or at the grocery store, and suddenly Elijah would be inserted into the middle of it: “Ya we can try google hangouts... Works just like FaceTime. Hold on a second—let me find a quiet place.”

When we were together in front of our screens, I was sometimes invited into a much more intimate and personal space than my other interviews as well. Most of the interviews I did with other people were done in public spaces—in the museum, in coffee shops, on a sidewalk. Even when they were done in people's home, they were done in the more public parts of their homes—at kitchen tables and on porches. Perhaps because we weren't face to face, Elijah sometimes spoke to me from their bedroom, which at one point, happened to be a couch.

Elijah was still waking up, getting their day going when we started one of our longest interviews. They were sitting on the same couch that they had slept on. Renting a couch was cheaper than renting a room. It was also easier to pick up your belongings and move on from, move to another room or couch in another apartment across the city, especially when you were renting it from a friend. But there we were at the beginning of the interview, Elijah still

a little groggy, drinking tea, barely ready to talk. Sure, there were almost 3,000 geographical miles between us, but our words were so immediate.

That call trailed on for four and half hours, Elijah stopping to grab tea in the middle, sometimes changing how they were sitting on the couch, this leg over here, now that leg over there. Their new housemate, whom they were renting the couch from, would sometimes overhear our conversation and pipe in from the background. Every now and then the roommate would send Elijah a text message from another room, sometimes correcting a story Elijah was telling, sometimes making a joke. The messages would interrupt Elijah, pushing their story in a whole other direction, but they were welcomed distractions. This was Elijah's life, cramped and crowded.

Most of our interviews went down like this, both of us sitting in front of our screens, talking for long stretches of time. I would ask Elijah questions, get them started on something I was interested in understanding and then they would trail on, making their own connections, telling me stories, dragging me along on a tour of their life, narrated in words.

I was relying on Elijah in these interviews for so much. *Being there* is important for ethnographers: you have to experience for yourself as much as the environment as possible and you have to *stay* there. The ethnographer's experience is so often dominated by seeing and hearing—you're observing and listening. It's certainly not the same as being there face to face, but these things *could* be done in front of a screen. But so much of what you know as an ethnographer though also comes from feeling, tasting, and smelling. So much of what you know about a person and what's going on around them is informed by *all* of your senses. Screens don't give you any of this. Glass is too smooth and cold. So I was relying on Elijah to do all of this for me, trusting that they would be my proxy.

So, while we couldn't be in the same room, creating something together, walking and talking, we could build this story with each other. The screen would be our shared space. And

creating this narrative would be our shared activity. Elijah would guide me. I would listen and learn and put their story into words.

As it turns out, getting to San Francisco, seeing the Golden Gate Bridge for the first time, going broke, and building your closet from scratch is as much about queer experience in the South as staying in North Carolina your whole life. It's easy to draw a line around a group of states and stay within those bounds—*this* is the South. But queer experience of the South transcends geographical borders. It's as much about queer experience *in* the South as it is southern queer experience *out* of the South.

I first interviewed Elijah in December 2014 and wrapped up the final interview in January 2016. Over the course of that year, a lot had changed in their life. Elijah had gone from renting different rooms and couches across the bay area, spending time at Lake Tahoe, getting a stable job, flip flopping between the day and night shift. All of this movement—out west, across the bay, down the state a little bit—all of this movement is part of Elijah's queer experience.

Queer experience in the South is as much about leaving as it is about staying. Queerness is about movement.

This essay asks what happens when you leave the South and head toward the coast, like so many queers do. What happens when you pack up your car in North Carolina and drive west until you land in San Francisco? What happens when you go broke and have no clothes to wear? How do you make room for yourself? How do you learn to negotiate a new city as queer person?

We have to get something out in the open before we go any farther: our pronouns. I've been using the pronoun *they* to refer to Elijah. And this is very much on purpose.

Asking someone about their preferred pronouns is the right thing to do. It gives them the power to speak themselves into existence in a way that's right for them. But when I asked Elijah which pronouns they use, I hesitated for a second—sometimes it can feel like a loaded, heavy question because you're forcing someone to identify, to put something into words that might be fleeting at best. But there was the very practical matter of writing this essay. I needed *something*, anything to use as a pronoun.

Elijah has this way of deflecting questions like this one. Not in a defensive way, but in a way that signals that they think the question is fundamentally flawed, even unanswerable. One of the first times we talked about how they identify, Elijah all but brushed the question aside, saying, "I currently identify strongly with the fact that gender is dumb. Like really, really enormously, monumentally dumb. Like big, huge sans serif 72 pt font."

When you ask Elijah how they identify, they'll often say things like, "At this point, the most accurate thing is..." and then they'll start telling a story about this one thing that happened or this other thing they did. Somehow all of this is Elijah's way of explaining who they are, as if the way they experience gender is *in* those stories, created out of their interactions with other people. There's nothing about their gender that transcends the particular. Their gender *is* what it *is* as it's lived. And their relationship to gender changes with each day, week, month, and year.

So while lots of people feel very certain about their gender, Elijah isn't one of them. Elijah is on what they affectionately refer to as "a gender adventure."

During the most sustained conversation we had about how they identify, Elijah did this other thing that they do when you press them even farther with a question: they just don't answer. Instead, they threw the question back at me. "Well, I have another question for you,

actually,” they said. “If I dropped dead tomorrow and I’d already written a release form, but you were like ‘Crap, I didn’t ask the gender question,’ what would be most obvious to you?”

I told them that I would simply use all the pronouns, sometimes using *he* sometimes *she* sometimes *they*. Lots of people do it this way and it’s fundamentally confusing in all the right ways. It can be quite disorienting, making gender feel really unstable. You never *really* know their gender. And that’s the whole point. Doing it this way, you’d never really be able to pin Elijah’s gender down. The pronoun would always be moving.

You can see Elijah taking all of this in while I was explaining it. It was almost like Elijah was just as interested in my perception of them as anything else. Elijah prides himself on being a keen observer of human behavior. They find the process of other people trying to figure out their gender to be intriguing. My floundering trying to work around their non-answer was exactly what they were looking for.

Eventually, Elijah let me in: “I actually *love* the pronoun *they*.”

While the pronoun *they* may be devoid of gender, it’s loaded with a lot of baggage and it can be difficult to adapt to. If I’m being perfectly honest, my fingers have sometimes hovered over the keys while writing this essay, not knowing what to type: *If they is singular do I conjugate verbs accordingly?* I’ve meticulously combed through this essay more times than I want to admit to make sure all verbs are conjugated correctly. I’ve found myself hitting ctrl F and plugging in *he* and *she* just to make sure I haven’t accidentally typed the wrong thing, an accidental slip of a toughly trained tongue.

Language can be tyrannical. It holds a grip on even the most open among us that’s difficult to break. But break it, we must.

“When I was 16 taking like introductory English classes,” Elijah remembered, “I had an instructor who was like, ‘He and/or she... or just pick one... but *they* is a plural pronoun.’” It’s one of the strange things about the English language, that we don’t have a singular

pronoun that isn't tied to a gender. To be a singular pronoun, you must be *he* or you must be *she*. You must be *male* or you must be *female*. And even when you don't know the gender of the person you're referring to, you have to do linguistic acrobatics and include *both* pronouns to be grammatically correct—he and/or she. It's always been an inelegant solution to the problem, but if you don't know the person's gender, or can't know the gender, or gender is “really, really enormously monumentally dumb” for that person, this is the way you have to do it.

Elijah's experience with this teacher came up multiple times during our conversations, this whole “he and/or she... or just pick one...” conversation. The memory of this teacher obviously stuck with them years later. But “just picking one” wasn't easy, or even possible for them. “At the time,” Elijah told me, “I was like ‘I don't fit either...’ I knew at that time that I didn't identify as male or female. And like I felt like super androgynous. My physical body didn't represent that but...” Elijah is saying here that during that point in life, their physical body read as female to most people—their body was curvy, their voice was pitched higher, their face was smooth. Because of all of these telltale cues, most people just assumed they were female and therefore *she*. Despite their outward appearance, though, Elijah felt androgynous. They knew themselves to be neither he nor she.

This is the problem with the English language: If we're speaking “properly,” there's really not a singular pronoun in the English language to denote this androgyny. To not have a gender-neutral pronoun, you have to break grammar or create new words, you have to use *they* incorrectly or use another pronoun like *zhe* or *hir*. What's considered proper is on shaky ground though and the rules are starting to shift. Increasingly, the singular pronoun *they* is used to refer to a known person.

A big part of this shift is due to those who identify as gender-queer claiming the word as their own and teaching others how and why to use it. The singular *they* has caught on so much, in fact, that the American Dialect Society made headlines when it voted for *they* as their 2015 Word of the Year. Ben Zimmer, chair of the society's New Words Committee and language

columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, explained it like this: “In the past year, new expressions of gender identity have generated a great deal of discussion, and singular *they* has become a particularly significant element of that conversation. While many novel gender-neutral pronouns have been proposed, *they* has the advantage of already being part of the language.”

Zimmer is referring to the fact the singular *they* is already ingrained in much of our spoken language as a singular pronoun, so much so that lots of people don’t even realize it’s there. Think about when you say things like “Somebody accidentally left their bag behind.” Or when you say things like “Every time I text someone, they get annoyed.” Unless you have a ruthless English teacher like Elijah’s or a strict grammarian friend ready to call you out for being sloppy and too relaxed with language, you probably never even realized what you were saying. Almost silently, the singular *they* has crept its way onto our tongues and become a habit. So, part of this is to evolve our grammar rules—language is alive and constantly shifting. But more importantly it’s also an affirmation of gender-queer lives.

So, I’m writing Elijah as *they*. I’m not picking one or the other, he and/or she. Elijah is they. Because that is who Elijah is.

Dressing up is just a normal part of getting dressed for Elijah. When they were young, there were closets full of costumes in their house—everything from civil war uniforms to sequined capes and tea dresses. But no one ever questioned why these costumes were in the house. Not Elijah, not their siblings, not anyone who came over. They had always just

assumed their parents wanted them to play and use their imaginations. Kids just need costumes.

So Elijah would just wear whatever they felt like wearing. “It’s not matter of well, this cape is pink and that one is green. There was never ever talk of that,” they told me. So if you wanted to wear a hot pink sequined cape any day of the week, you could. If you wanted to put on a civil war costume and run around outside, you could do that too. Elijah was encouraged to use their imagination and the costumes were an important part of that. It was just a part of their family culture.

Elijah describes a childhood so unencumbered: “There was wearing shit and going out and playing in the woods.” This life, running around in the woods wearing whatever they wanted, was sometimes met with consternation though because sometimes, Elijah just didn’t want to wear a shirt. Of course, they were young, they were in the woods and it was southern hot. But more than that, they didn’t *feel* like wearing a shirt. It just wasn’t right sometimes.

Their parents wouldn’t allow it. They would tell Elijah that they *had* to wear a shirt because, obviously, they were a girl. As Elijah tells me this story, they emphasize the word *obviously*, their voice getting deep and exaggerated. Their parents said this as if it was plain as day— *you’re a girl*. To them it was easy to see. To Elijah, though, it was clear as mud. “What’s a girl?” they would ask.

Elijah’s family wasn’t exactly religious. They were, as Elijah describes them, “southern-style spiritualists.” To this day, I’m not sure exactly what Elijah means by this, but I’ve tried to get them to explain it. What they told me was that it meant laying hands on people and speaking in tongues. At first first blush it sounds like they were part of a Pentecostal church. But Elijah never talks about any particularly strong denominational ties, any allegiances to any kind of formal religion. The best I can suss out is that it’s a kind of folk spirituality that’s informed by Pentecostal-like Christianity, but not quite. Which is probably why Elijah just calls them “southern-style spiritualists.”

The way their parents thought about education is equally difficult to fit into a box. When Elijah talks about them they sometimes sound like modern-day hippies, but again... not quite. There was a stint when Elijah took math classes at the local community college because they realized they didn't know algebra, but other than that they were home schooled until they went to college. They believed that the best way to learn was through experience, not sitting in a classroom.

At one point, their parents paid a college student to drive the family RV across the country and drop it off in San Francisco. The whole family would fly out west, meet the RV there, and then they'd drive back to North Carolina, taking their time winding through the country. Learning was all about experiencing and they needed to experience America.

Elijah's family never quite clicked with most of the home school cliques in the South though. There were the home schoolers with socks and jean skirts and long hair, as Elijah describes them. There was the conservative Amish brand. And then there were was Elijah's family. They were the weird ones. They were ones who ran around in the woods wearing costumes. They were the ones who piled into an RV and spent 3 months driving across the country, because seeing the world was important.

When their family arrived in San Francisco, Elijah remembers doing all of the touristy things, like visiting the Ghirardelli chocolate factory. But there were parts of San Francisco, the parts with rainbow flags, that Elijah knew something wasn't quite right. It wasn't that their parents or anyone else said anything out loud—they weren't explicitly homophobic or anything. They just intimated that these weren't places that you should go. These weren't people you wanted to be around. Even at such a young age, Elijah could read between the lines: You don't want to be a rainbow person.

Even with their family's fairly non-traditional life, Elijah was uncomfortable about some of the feelings they were having—not necessarily because they thought something was wrong in and of itself, but because of how other people would react to it. The same reading-between-

the-lines that Elijah was doing, like when their family visited San Francisco, started to reinforce that what they knew to be true about their gender wasn't normal. It was something to be avoided. You don't want to be a rainbow person, after all.

Elijah noticed this in an acute way when they started getting into anime. There were whole stretches of time that Elijah would sit in front of the TV at the YMCA in Asheboro, watching cartoons after swim practice while the older kids were finishing up. They didn't have TV at home, and definitely not one with cable, so watching these cartoons was out of the ordinary—and fascinating. Something about the art captured their attention, the way the characters were drawn, the way that they moved. The concept of moving art really excited them. “I thought it was the best thing ever,” they told me. If you look at Elijah's art and design work now, you can sometimes see the influence.

Elijah got more and more into anime as the years went on. It became a staple in their life, something they studied on their own, something they shared with friends. There was one comic in particular, *Gravitation*, that floored them. What caught their attention was that it had boys in it that looked like girls.

Elijah warns me that the relationships presented *Gravitation* aren't exactly what you'd consider healthy relationships. But it was something that Elijah had never experienced in the area they grew up in. There's this scene where two of the characters—the boys who look like girls—kiss. Scenes like this one would become really significant for Elijah and stay in their mind. There was something about gender bending that was so familiar, even if they couldn't name it. “That right there,” Elijah said when they were telling me about this scene. “Whatever that *is* is touching on something I'm connecting with.”

There was another one called *Wandering Son*, a story that Elijah describes as “a very realistic, respectful interpretation of kids growing up being divergent gender and sexualities.” It's a totally different storytelling than the typical anime, with the magic powers and fighting.

It stuck with them so much that Elijah insisted that I read this one. It holds up, even when you aren't a teenager.

The more and more that Elijah got into anime, the more and more they connected with the gender bending that was happening in front of them. Anime was Elijah's first introduction to "the queer end of the pool," as they phrase it. And yet all that reading-between-the-lines that Elijah was doing meant that they knew something wasn't quite right. When it was just them and the anime, everything clicked, but Elijah had a feeling when they looked up at their surroundings that they were mostly alone. "There certainly wasn't anybody like talking about art or divergent sexualities," they told me. So it was Elijah, on their own with the anime for a while.

And then the internet happened. When you ask queers of a certain age about their life story—and Elijah is toeing this line—there's almost always a moment when they say something to the effect of "And then the internet." There was queer life pre-internet and then there was queer life post-internet.

Elijah often describes themselves as an "internet kid." Born in the early 1990's, they were born on the heels of widespread internet use and personal computers. For Elijah, the internet was pre-smartphone, but it was still during a time just after it had become perfectly mundane in some ways, something you could do without thinking about how amazing it actually was. Elijah has a deep respect for the internet's ability to connect you with people outside your immediate surroundings, which is why they aren't keen on the way it's come to be used by most people these days:

Now, it's kind of gotten to this point where there's so many people online and they don't even think of it as online. They think of it as social media. I'm just on Facebook or I'm just on the video site or whatever. They're not from the internet, like there's a very clear delineation there. There are people who use the internet and people who are from the internet.

Elijah puts themselves squarely in the *from the internet* camp and takes a lot of pride in this. Some of the most important relationships in their life were forged on the internet as they started hanging out in anime chat rooms and cosplay sites. A lot of these new acquaintances would become folded into their life and the lines between online and offline would become blurred.

Soon, Elijah discovered that there were groups of people who came together at conventions and dressed up as anime characters. "...in the anime community there's actually a big culture of costuming um... costume play, so *cosplay*." Elijah has to explain what all of this means to me and you can sometimes hear them slowing down, explaining portmanteaus when I'm clearly not tracking. Getting together with other people who enjoyed the same things as them, wearing costumes—all of this was incredibly appealing to Elijah.

The crazy thing for Elijah was that gender didn't seem to matter to anyone around them. Girls dressed up like boy characters. Boys dressed up like girl characters. And no one seemed to care. It all felt so familiar, like the days of dressing up as a child and running around in the woods. "Ya, I was costuming and playing dress up as a kid far before I found the anime community... I've already been doing this."

Hanging out on anime sites and going to cosplay conventions, Elijah was building a queer life for themselves, making room for themselves between the lines of their immediate surroundings. Elijah was forming a network that would sustain them as they got older, providing opportunities and support. In fact, the housemate that kept chiming in during our last interview—Elijah met her on an internet anime site when they were 12.

About a year before our first interview, Elijah started taking testosterone. They had started thinking about things like hormones, even in high school—and while surgery wasn't on the table because it was too expensive, there was a time when they thought about it seriously. Even without gender confirmation surgery though, taking testosterone would at least help them feel more balanced, Elijah thought, changing some aspects of their physical body, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in very obvious ways.

Deciding to start testosterone and perhaps even start living as a man was a very logical decision for them (Elijah refers to themselves as a “vulcan” in this respect). Elijah says this somewhat flippantly and laughs about it, but they're very serious. For them, it was a checklist of things they wanted and things they didn't want:

Did they plan on having children? No. The thought of bearing a child couldn't be farther from the life that Elijah wanted for themselves. Just the thought of getting pregnant kept them celibate through their teenage years.

Did they need their chest? No. “They're freakin annoying... They're heavy and they hurt and they bounce. I don't need that.” They could just go, Elijah told me nonchalantly. They wouldn't miss them.

And then there were the benefits. Elijah really wanted the option of chin fuzz and sideburns. They didn't necessarily want stubble all the time, but they definitely wanted the option. Not bleeding anymore, which is how Elijah talks about menstruation—bleeding—was also really attractive to them. That was something they would not miss.

Perhaps most importantly, though, was Elijah's voice. They really wanted a deeper voice. When Elijah would wear androgynous clothes and bind, they could easily pass, meaning that most everyone would just assume Elijah was male. But their voice would always betray them. “I could pass until I opened my mouth and then they heard this obviously feminine

voice.” As soon as they opened their mouth, they were pegged as a butch lesbian. Which didn’t make any sense to Elijah. Butch lesbians liked their boobs and were generally ok with their bodies. They were generally confident in their sex. But Elijah wasn’t.

It wasn’t exactly that Elijah felt like their body was supposed to be male though, that they were born male in a female body. It was partly that explaining what transgender to other people was much easier than explaining to them what gender queer is. At the time, Elijah was thinking, “I’m not going to blow their minds yet with the whole you don’t have to identify as either gender.” They felt they had a better chance identifying as male and getting hormones than saying, “Hi, I don’t identify as either gender.”

It seems contradictory, but Elijah knew when they started taking testosterone that they didn’t identify as male or female. They already knew that they felt super androgynous. But taking testosterone was a way of exploring masculinity, a way of balancing back out. And it worked. Elijah felt much more balanced as an individual than before they started taking hormones.

They took testosterone for a year and then one day looked in the mirror and thought, *I don’t recognize this person*. It was the same feeling that Elijah had when they accompanied a friend down to Florida for top surgery, a bilateral mastectomy that removed both breasts and shaped the chest with a male contour. The doctor had done so many of these surgeries for trans men that it was virtually all he did. He’d become famous within the trans community and trans men flocked to him from around the country. Elijah had accompanied their friend to Florida to support and care for him.

There was Elijah, sitting in the waiting room. “I was looking around the room,” they described, “and it was full of trans guys and I was looking around and I was like *I remember feeling like you at one point in my life as a teenager* but now I wasn’t connecting with them anymore.” Of course they shared some experiences and values, but on a deep level, Elijah just couldn’t bring themselves to identify as male. The thought of passing as a man just wasn’t

appealing to Elijah anymore: “I went on [testosterone] with the intention of one year and let’s see how it goes. And it’s like phenomenal in most regards. I just figured out ‘Alright, I’m done for, you know, however long’ and that’s kind of where I’ve been at.”

The effects of the testosterone had already taken, most noticeably in their deepening voice and their facial hair. After they began working in a new office, Elijah wondered how long it would take their coworkers to become confused by what was going on. When the stubbly five o’clock shadow began to appear, everyone started gendering Elijah as male. “He/him” they started saying, as if they knew exactly what gender Elijah, so nonchalant.

Elijah was dumbfounded by this immediate will toward gender identification: “Despite the fact that I don’t bind. I’m not on testosterone. And I’m waiting to see how long it’s going to take for me to start bleeding.” There were so many other things going on, both visible and invisible, but somehow facial hair was the detail that tipped everyone off. “I’ve learned so much about gender,” they told me. “Facial hair is a trump card for anyone who wants to pass, apparently. It doesn’t matter how big your rack is.”

Elijah’s coworkers had gotten fairly comfortable with Elijah’s gender. And this made Elijah incredibly uncomfortable. That anyone was certain about Elijah’s gender was exactly what Elijah didn’t want.

It’s the same reason that when they looked in the mirror after being on testosterone for a year, Elijah didn’t recognize themselves. It was as much about physical appearance as it was as not recognizing a particular way of being in the world. Elijah didn’t feel comfortable being so resolutely gendered male by those around them. “I find myself like so self-conscious about like passing as like the perceived role of how I’m supposed to pass,” Elijah told me. There’s so much pressure to wear this or do that or walk this way or pitch your voice a little lower—all of the outside pressure to always perform in a particular way was just too much.

“I’m sick and tired of the whole everybody just being like assuming things about gender,” they told me, “and now I’m like ‘Ok, I’m done with this.’”

The day that we were talking about all of this, Elijah book-ended our conversation by talking about this new “fem-fabulous” outfit that they had just gotten. It came up right away at the beginning of the interview, lingered in the background while we talked about other things, and then came back in full force at the end. They had bought this incredible dress and they were going to wear lipstick to work the next day. They were going all in on fem.

As Elijah talked about *actually* doing it—when it had become less theoretical and more *I’m going wake up, put on lipstick and wearing this fantastically fem outfit tomorrow*—their tone, which had mostly been full of excitement, was cut with a bit of curiosity. There was no telling what their co-workers would do, no telling how they would react.

I’ve been writing this whole time about Elijah’s gender and this makes it seem like gender is always at the forefront of Elijah’s mind, like Elijah is always doing something to buck the system, always doing something to make people think about gender, like their life is consumed by gender. But this simply isn’t true.

In one of our final interviews, I asked Elijah “What is it like being queer going through all this?” We hadn’t talked in a few months and Elijah was catching me up on everything that had happened since we last talked. They were telling me about their daily life, what they do at work, where they were living—the mundane stuff that no one actually wants to talk about. And for two and half hours, Elijah hadn’t said much of anything about their gender. I was happy to go wherever Elijah took the conversation, of course, but like a “good” interviewer, I

felt like I needed to keep Elijah on track, like I needed to steer the conversation back to where *I* wanted it to go.

Listening back to the interview, I hear how obnoxious I sound, how reductive and naive the question actually is—as if Elijah’s life is *just* about gender, as if Elijah never gets to do other things and not be self-conscious about their ungendered body. But Elijah just shrugged the question off with a simple, “It means a whole lot of nothing!”

At that point in their life, gender just wasn’t in the foreground like it once had been—there were so many other things going on to occupy their mind. The truth is that living in the Bay area is really hard and just simply *living*, just *getting by* day to day is what they’re thinking about.

For most people, being in the Bay area means being in debt. It’s just a way of life for most people in the area. Elijah describes the logic of debt to me through the idea of self-improvement. To get ahead, the logic goes, you have to invest in yourself. If you want to work in the tech industry or in graphic design, as Elijah does, investing in yourself means spending a few years in a big city like San Francisco. You can get experience there that you would never get in North Carolina.

Paying rent and buying groceries is no small financial feat in San Francisco though. And that’s not to mention all of the car wrecks you’ll get in if you’re lucky enough to own a car. Since living in the city, Elijah has gotten in three wrecks. The latest one messed up the car’s bumper and Elijah desperately drove to the mechanic at 6pm right before they were closing, pleading with the mechanic to do a smog check on their car and fasten the bumper back on. A temporary fix would work just fine.

“Just the concept of being in debt makes me uncomfortable,” Elijah admits to me. It wasn’t how they were raised and Elijah sometimes feels like they have disappointed their family.

Being in debt also means that Elijah can't travel back to North Carolina whenever they want. "I would be at the mercy of someone in my family purchasing that for me or putting myself further into debt to do that, which makes me really uncomfortable." This is the price you pay, both financially and emotionally, in order to invest in yourself and get a leg up on other designers.

To pay for their life and to get this experience, Elijah has been doing a contract gig as a production designer at a tech company that specializes in, among other things, customized wedding invitations. The company feels like a start-up, even though it's been around for a number of years. Once the customer designs their invitation on the company's website, Elijah's job is to go in and clean the design up and make everything consistent. It's a contract gig at an hourly rate, but at least Elijah is working in their field and getting paid for it.

At some point, though, Elijah has become unsatisfied with the monotony of the job. By Elijah's calculation, they spend about an hour per two orders, about six items per order, averaging 20–30 orders per day. Their day is full of mostly rote tasks, the same thing over and over again. This typically means putting in earbuds and plowing through podcasts, one after the other as they fulfill ticket after ticket after ticket.

Elijah does this two days a week and after the second day they start going stir crazy. They knew that living and working in the city would be difficult, but they didn't really know how unsatisfying it would be. Their job has the glimmer of the creative life that Elijah aspires to, but at the end of the day, Elijah tells me that they're just using creative tools to do really monotonous things. To top it off, Elijah knows that half of their job would go away if the company would just fix the coding in the website.

"Knowing that I'm here by cheating, by putting myself in that debt, makes it feel fake or dirty somehow," Elijah tells me. It's the same with finally catching a glimpse of the life they once aspired to—it no longer glimmers the way it did from a distance. It feels empty.

There's this coffee shop that Elijah tells me about, one of these coffee shops where, yes, the coffee is good, but it's ultimately more about the space itself. Everything was clean, minimal, and purposeful. There were concrete floors, beautiful bags of coffee lined up perfectly. It was, as Elijah tells me, as if Apple designed a coffee shop. There was a time when Elijah would have aspired to be one of those people, sitting in this staged environment, Macbook Air open, hammering away at the keyboard. Really, it's gorgeous. But increasingly, they've found themselves wondering if it's all worth it.

Gorgeous coffee shops and Instagram feeds are the metaphors that Elijah uses to tell me what their life is like right now. Both have the allure of a perfectly curated life, a life of taste and purpose. But it all feels so empty sometimes, like you've finally found the fashionista corner of the internet and you look around and it's all just staged.

Like so many other twenty-two-year-olds of a certain economic class and background, Elijah mostly worries about money and work and feeling unsatisfied and figuring out what they hell they're going to do next. All of this is so consuming that, to focus on anything else, like being queer, seems impossible.

While Elijah tries not to make a big deal out of the whole queer thing, brushing it aside with "It means a whole lot of nothing," they also speak about it as if it's always there, a constant reminder of their socially gendered body. "Everyone thinks *oh your life must be so hard*," Elijah tells me, "and it's like... it's not on easy mode, but it's not for any of the reasons that anyone thinks. It's the tiny things." These tiny things are the very things that are so easy for so many others—like going to the bathroom and buying clothes.

Elijah will tell you that they know all the gender-neutral bathrooms at the community college they went to. There's an app called Refuge Bathrooms that crowdsources the locations of gender-neutral bathrooms so that you always know where you can safely and easily go. Elijah is basically this app, but in human form. They know all of the gender-neutral

bathrooms in or near any location they spend any amount of time in. It's just a matter of survival.

At Elijah's current office, for example, there are gender-binary bathrooms, a bathroom for men and bathroom for women. "Depending on how much facial fuzz I have that day determines how confident I feel going into which bathroom," Elijah tells me. Sometimes, Elijah feels confident using the men's restroom. But other days, it's just too much. Having access only to binary bathrooms at work means that Elijah often goes down the block from their office to a grocery store, a Safeway that has single-occupancy bathrooms that lock. Elijah goes to the counter, asks for the key, and goes on with their day.

Shopping for clothes carries its own set of challenges. When you don't identify as either gender, where do you go? Elijah would go to places like Plato's Closet and go through the entire store—both the men and women's section—trying to find something that will fit a female form and then not emphasize the curves. It's hard to find the right fit, one that doesn't emphasize your femininity too much. Elijah calls finding the right pair of jeans "chasing down a unicorn."

Or people ask your shoe size and what do you tell them? Elijah's always wants to say that their shoe size is 9—because that's the size shoe they wear. But that's in men's sizes. The confusion that follows is never a big deal, but it's something you have to live with, a tiny wrinkle in a conversation that, for most other people, would be smooth. It's a look that says *You wear men's shoes?* And you have to take all that in.

It's all these tiny little things that add up to something much larger. As much as Elijah sometime brushes these little things off in conversation, going on about their life as a twenty-something in San Francisco, it's difficult for them to ignore them completely. When they go to the bathroom, when they try on clothes, when they do any number of perfectly mundane tasks—all of it is a small reminder that much of the world just isn't built for the gender queer.

Stepping outside the gender binary, resisting the gravitational pull of normal, as Elijah does, jams the circuit. And it's unspeakably difficult to communicate.

Although less obvious than other literacies that Elijah continues to learn, talking about themselves is just as important. Elijah will tell you that talking about themselves is different than a drag queen talking about herself. It's different than a transman talking about himself. Not that any of those are particularly easy to talk about, it's just that they reinforce something that lots of people take for granted: that gender is binary, *he and/or she or just pick one*.

In a lot of ways, they've been spending their life learning how to tell this story. The stories above are the stories that Elijah has been telling their therapist for years. They've been constructing this story to explain who they are to others, especially to others like me who want to know about their relationship to gender. To tell this story, Elijah has to leave some things out. They have to remember events in a certain way, focusing in on certain details. They have to interpret and make sense of the past in way that explains the present and future.

In a lot of ways, this story is rehearsed—and told slightly differently, depending on the audience. As much as Elijah sometimes trails off on seemingly unrelated stories, there are certain plot points that they hit when telling their story—the internet, the anime, the high school teacher, the costumes. All of it is how Elijah has learned to talk about themselves. Or, at least, it's how Elijah has learned to talk about themselves to a cisgender person like me, someone whose experience of their gender agrees with the sex they were assigned at birth.

These are teaching moments for Elijah, the outcome of years and years of learning, time after time testing something out, seeing what works, and doing that again the next time. For Elijah, making room for themselves within their community is about making themselves known as *they* want to be known.

CHAPTER 6:
A FAILED ETHNOGRAPHY

Up until now, I've been writing for a public audience. From research methods all the way through Elijah's life on the west coast, I've made my writing as accessible as possible to a general audience. The ideas are complex, for sure, but you don't need a PhD to understand them—narrative carries the reader along, background knowledge isn't assumed, and, at the sentence level, the language is pleasurable. Or, at least, that was my intent.

I believe, like many other scholars, that knowledge shouldn't stay within the walls of the university. The fruits of academic labor should not only *benefit* the public, but should be *accessible* to them as well. There's a time and place for scholars to speak in a specialized tongue, to a disciplinary audience. But that should not be the only—or even primary—form that ethnography takes.

Since I began writing this ethnography, I've felt a tension between my subject and my audience. Writing within an academic context, as I was in the beginning, I felt obliged to write for an academic audience. A dissertation is, after all, an academic artifact. If it were anything else, it wouldn't be called a dissertation. It would be called a book. Or a series of essays. The longer I spent in the field, though, interviewing others and talking about my work with people I met on the streets, the more I realized how important the work was. I saw their eyes light up when I recounted the stories for Chris, Matt, and Elijah. I saw empathy for them.

To be completely honest, this tension nearly caused me to stop writing. I left academia about a year into my fieldwork and began working as a full-time writer. My contact with the university became more sporadic and my concern with disciplinary conversations began to dissipate. I came very close to just stopping. I began thinking that perhaps I shouldn't be

writing ethnography at all. Perhaps this work did not belong in an academic setting at all. Perhaps the best way to improve the lives of those I was writing about was to tell their stories, in detail, to a broad audience.

There's this passage, written by Ruth Behar, that has haunted me for years. It's worth quoting at length:

Why call yourself an ethnographer unless you are seeking to obtain or maintain a position in the academy? ... After all, the general public, even when well educated, has never heard of ethnography. And there is good reason for that. With few exceptions, ethnographies are rarely memorable to anyone but those within the field being described. Why? Because in the end, they are works for the academy, and so they must explain rather than show, tell rather than narrate, cite rather than imagine, justify rather than dream, and most tragically, turn vigorous flesh-and-blood people into ponderous slugs of theory. 482–483

It haunts me because it gets to the heart of this tension I've been feeling. And I can't help but think that what I want to do—what I really want to do—is not ethnography. Because I don't want to speak to the academy about queer experience. What's needed in this moment is for me to speak to the public. When justice and equality and life itself are at stake, as they are right now, we need to speak in the streets, not inside walls.

So I find myself in a very precarious place. I've been asked to conclude this dissertation by writing about the implications of my work for academics. In other words, I've been instructed to address academics directly. The question was first asked during my dissertation defense and it kept resounding into the night as we celebrated over drinks. It was clear that my academic audience was a bit baffled by my work, perhaps because it had increasingly little to do with them, at least explicitly.

Everyone had suggestions about how to make my academic contributions more explicit. I could take the angle of critical geography. Queer space, in my writing, is figured as an archipelago, not as a singular, unified space. The same could be said of the South. There was also the methodological angle. How did my work help other scholars think differently about

ethnographic methods? In other words, I was being asked to contribute to on-going scholarly conversations, all of which I was a reluctant participant. I had no stake in them and I believed wholeheartedly the most meaningful and productive conversations about queer experience were happening elsewhere.

Don't get me wrong: All of these questions about academic implications are well meaning. It's what academics are supposed to ask. It's what they're trained to see. I believe each of these questions came from a place of deep curiosity, of wanting to make sense of what I had written in order to carry that forward into their own practice.

I could write about all of these insights and more in this conclusion. But, in doing so, I would be taking the question for granted, as if it were a perfectly natural question to ask: What are the implications of your work for academics? Rather, I want us to see the question as the product of a particular set of values and priorities.

So, my response to the question was consistently simple: I'm not much of an academic these days. The statement was true in so many ways. I no longer work in academia and I have little desire to return. But more importantly, as I wrote above, I feel a responsibility to speak to a broad audience about the experiences of queer southern communities. By responding that I'm not an academic, I wasn't shirking my responsibility. Quite the opposite: I was putting queerness into practice. Like the lives of those I've detailed in this dissertation, I was jamming the circuit and, in the process, make the invisible visible.

So what should academics take away from this dissertation? It may be as simple as this: Sometimes academics need to talk to other people, on other people's terms, in other people's language. Because sometimes, change depends on it.

In the same article that the devastating passage above appears, Ruth Behar very delicately honors the "fathers" of ethnography—mostly Malinowski—while searching for the genre's future. There's great potential in ethnography when its practitioners understand the genre's complicity in colonialism and power, its "legacy of shame," as she calls it. The radical

movements of the 1960s, with their anticolonialism, feminism, and reflexivity, have since placed ethnography in a unique position. Instead of bolstering power structures, ethnography has the potential to undermine them. This, I believe, is the future of my own work. This is the future of my dissertation.

Behar continues, "... I believe that there is a unique role that ethnographers can and must play as mediators, ambassadors, translators, and commentators within, across, and between cultures" (481). Nowhere is translation and mediation more needed than in addressing some of the biggest social problems of our time: Police brutality, poverty, systemic racism, queer rights—I could keep going. With all of these problems, what's needed, more than anything, is empathy. Because empathy creates intimate connections that undermine prejudice and injustice. Ethnographers possess a skillset that is particularly good at creating empathy.

My hope is that the previous chapters have begun to do this queer southern experience—and that other ethnographers will do the same with other topics.

In the end, I fear that this ethnography may have failed in speaking to a broad audience. Its failure has something (though not everything) to do with the genres of both ethnography and the dissertation as well as the systems that create and sustain them.

I feel a deep responsibility, however, to the queer communities I walked alongside to be a mediator, ambassador, translator, and commentator to a broad audience. So, I've begun writing creative non-fiction essays drawn largely from source material in this dissertation. Again, Ruth Behar: "It is my sense that if ethnography is to have any life beyond the academy, it will need to move closer to the arts..." (483). These essays will be created and released serially on the internet in partnership with Elijah, who has begun illustrating them. By writing and publishing in such a way, my hope is to mediate and to translate in the streets, with and for those who need empathy the most.

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